

Powys Notes

Fall and Winter 1996

Featuring a new essay on *Homer and the Aether*
and a selection from the correspondence of
John Cowper Powys and Merlin Wolcott

The Powys Society of North America



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Powys Notes

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Founded in December, 1983, the Powys Society of North America seeks to promote the study and appreciation of the literary works of the Powys family, especially those of John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), T. F. Powys (1875-1953), and Llewelyn Powys (1884-1939). The Society takes a special interest in the North American connections and experiences of the Powyses, and encourages the exploration of the extensive collections of Powys material in North America and the involvement, particularly of John Cowper and Llewelyn, in American literary culture.

Aether and Ocean: Two Uses of Homer After the Empire

Gregory D. Alles

*"The Classics, it is the Classics and not Goths nor Monks
that Desolate Europe with Wars."*

—William Blake, "On Homer's Poetry"

It would be difficult to endorse Blake's dictum completely. The classics are not entirely to blame for the martial desolations visited upon Europe century after tedious century, and certainly neither is Homer, my specific concern here. But at the same time, we can hardly deny altogether the complicity of the classics, and more specifically of Homer, in Europe's bellicose and imperial past.

Through Homer's eyes (the irony is intentional) Herodotus taught Greeks to see the antiquity and inevitability of conflict between Greeks and Persians. Invoking the same heroic struggle, Isocrates called on the Greeks to invade Asia. If Plutarch is correct, Alexander began his conquests of the East with a text of Homer under his pillow.¹

True, Homer had little influence on the Crusades. Medieval Catholics could not read Greek, so Homer did not influence them much at all. But the Crusades were minor skirmishes compared to the later, mature imperial adventures of the Spanish and Portuguese, the Dutch and French, and above all the British. As Matthew Arnold (among others) attests, Homer was a formative feature in Britain's aristocratic ethos.² As a result, it was partly in heroic terms derived from Homer that Britain's conquerors joined their battles. And it was according to a classical paradigm in which Homer figured prominently that British victors sought value in the cultures of the conquered. For example, Sanskrit learning was revived as a classical tradition in India because British rulers needed an analogue to their own classical traditions.³

In political terms, the European empires are largely past, but their cultural and economic legacies remain. In what

follows I juxtapose two postimperial appropriations of Homer, John Cowper Powys's novelistic re-presentation of the *Iliad*, *Homer and the Aether*, and Derek Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros*.⁴ I do so in order eventually to address a broad question. We know, at least in rough outline, what use Homeric poetry was during the empire. What use, if any, is it afterward?

Homer and Omeros

Let me concede from the start that my comparison is unfair. For any number of reasons, current tastes are likely to favor Walcott's poem. First, our sympathies generally incline to the colonized, not the colonizers. Walcott is West Indian, Powys British. (Walcott is actually of mixed ancestry, and Powys was Welsh, but close enough). Furthermore, Walcott's relationship with Homer is the more ambiguous and complex; in other words, it is more nearly what for aesthetic reasons we might wish our own to be. And then there are the myriad ways in which Walcott's poem, published in 1990, indulges current (read "postmodern") tastes, while Powys's novel, published a generation earlier (1959), violates them.

Powys paraphrases and summarizes the *Iliad*; given a choice, I will read the original. Walcott quotes Homeric names, motifs, and themes in a rich interplay of allusion. Powys's prose pretty much matches Matthew Arnold's prescriptions for Homeric verse: it is straightforward, simple, and unadorned.⁵ The few occasions Powys becomes inventive—for example, the occasional sentences in dialect—seem flat and out of place. By contrast, Walcott's *terza rima* is rich, lush, indulgent, brimming with word play, pungent with meaning; his many dialects, both English and French, only add to the effect. In morals, too, Powys seems archaic. He goes out of his way to emphasize a strict heterosexuality: for him Homer contains not "the least suggestion of homosexuality or of Lesbianism" (p. 19). Powys also glorifies Virginity (*sic*), as if the way to eliminate sexual conflicts were to eliminate sex altogether.⁶ Walcott is not nearly so squeamish. He depicts the ambiguous powers of sexuality, and he does not apologize.

The list continues. Powys's attitude toward Homer strikes me, at least, as too reverent. His very first paragraph recommends the questionable delights of Georg Autenrieth's *Homeric Dictionary*. Walcott's attitude is more cavalier. He even has the gall to tell Homer himself—I imagine him as a rather

dirty, smelly fisherman—that he has never read the *Odyssey* completely.⁷ Powys is also overly devout. He delights in Homer's gods,⁸ and his single imaginative contribution to the *Iliad* is a pantheistic narrator, the all-pervasive Aether, who strains postmodern, postfoundational credibility. In Walcott's version, even Homer himself is not half so devout: "The gods and the demi-gods aren't much use to us." "Forget the gods," Omeros growled, 'and read the rest'" (p. 283). Furthermore, Powys is pretentious. He attributes his own parochial views and judgments to the eternal and all-knowing Aether and indulges in self-praise that comes off as crass: "I, the all-knowing Aether, have resolved that three thousand years hence in a far-off Western Isle, a great Bard [presumably Powys] shall be inspired to chant a memorable dirge [presumably *Homer and the Aether*]." ⁹ To be sure, Walcott's self-references are more frequent,¹⁰ but he never indulges in self-praise. Instead, he plays a major, at times self-critical, role in the poem.

Are these contrasts not enough? Contrast Powys's distasteful nationalism ("we Britishers have appreciated Homer more than any other race in the world" [p. 16]) with Walcott's multinationalism, Powys's deliberate delight in Homer with Walcott's struggling recognition that, despite his best efforts, he cannot rid himself of the classical model. Pick up *Omeros* with the right hand; put down *Homer and the Aether* with the left.

Now, it would be possible to argue that the distance separating us from *Homer and the Aether* is precisely the reason to consider it; the mirror of distance reflects back to us our own ideological limitations.¹¹ But that is not the approach I wish to pursue here. Despite the differences between Walcott and Powys, and despite at least my differential evaluations, the two authors do share significant traits. The broader *oeuvres* of both of them are filled with Homeric allusions, the result, one supposes, of a classical British education. Both prefer the ordinary and commonplace to the elite, and both prefer to see the ordinary and commonplace not as a homogeneous whole but as "a wild, chaotic series of exhausting contradictions."¹² Both boldly engage questions of death and healing. Both cultivate narrational complexity that they identify with a primal element of nature, Powys with the aether, Walcott with the ocean. What is most telling here, both exemplify ways to use Homer after the empire. Aether and ocean stand for those ways.

Homer and the Aether

Aether is the most subtle of elements. According to Aristotle, it is incorruptible and unchanging, filling the superlunary regions and making up the luminous bodies of the sky: the sun, the moon, the stars, and the planets. Powys's Aether, however, is more like that of the Stoics. All-pervasive, it fills the sublunary regions as well. For the Stoics, not to mention physicists up to the twentieth century, ether conveyed light the way air conveys sound, and it mediated gravitational attraction. Powys endows this subtle element with the further properties of discernment and unitary consciousness. Most important of all, Powys's Aether is a voice. (The process by which its statements were transcribed is no clearer than the transcription of Homer's verses.) And because the Aether, abhorring a vacuum, extends to the ends of the universe, it speaks with a probing near-omniscience.

In *Homer and the Aether* Powys sets himself the task of re-presenting the *Iliad*. He recounts Homer's tale faithfully enough to thank "the Professor of Classical Literature in Stanford University, for permission to base my own work upon the prose translation opposite the Greek text . . . in the Loeb Classical Library" (p. 9). But on top of a rote reproduction, Powys superimposes the Aether. As a subtle sense, the Aether detects and reveals what eludes ordinary perceptions, what each of us hides in our hearts, our inmost thoughts and feelings. As a subtle agent, the Aether claims responsibility for Homer's inspiration. The parasitical relation of the novel to the original is unavoidable. The title may be *Homer and the Aether*, but Homer does not attract much attention here. The real questions are: What does the Aether say? How does its presence alter the story?

Like its physical analogue, Powys's Aether fills in cracks and empty spaces. It appears primarily at narrational joints, so that it contributes a perspective, not events. Apart from some additions at the beginning and some important omissions along the way, few events surprise the reader with a reasonable knowledge of Homer. Chryses still retrieves his daughter, Agamemnon still seizes Briseis, Achilles still sulks, Agamemnon's dream still leads to the ill-fated test of his troops, Odysseus still berates Thersites, and so on. But Powys invites us to view these events differently. (Did he believe he was rendering Homer's true intentions?) Parallel to the external

world of empirical reality that a blind Homer masterfully managed to describe, Powys's Aether reveals an invisible, internal world of conscious reality that is just as complex and important.

Like certain German idealists, Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, and above all Jakob Friedrich Fries, Powys attributes a peculiar epistemological value to feelings and intuitions as well as complete cognitions. Prophets such as Calchas and Helenus, heroes such as Agamemnon and Ajax, the god Apollo, women in the presence of the divine—all at one point or another intuit the truth instead of perceiving it. Their intuition mirrors the Aether's own: "I, the Aether, looking down with extreme difficulty, and feeling rather than seeing what was happening on earth—for my element is light, not darkness— . . ."¹³ At the same time, Powys seems inclined to extend conscious experience indefinitely. He hints at a general animatism, attributing at least rudimentary consciousness to all physical objects. At times this consciousness seems little more than the significance human beings attach to their possessions,¹⁴ but occasionally it reaches higher: "The spear itself at this moment felt a satisfaction not very different from what Diomed and Athene were feeling." And: "[o] *popoi* is] the sad, wise, helpless refrain of rocks and stones and pebbles, when they contemplate the excited goings-on of men and animals and birds and fishes and reptiles."¹⁵

Intuition and animatism help characterize a world infused by Aether, but their contribution to the narrative is minimal. In other ways, however, the Aether's revelations from the beyond of consciousness do contribute substantially to the narrative. For example, a typical *locus* in Homeric criticism speaks to Homer's penchant for overdetermining events.¹⁶ Often the strictly human provides sufficient motivation for an act, but Homer is not content. He introduces a world of divine agents whose causal roles are redundant (from the perspective of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe). Unlike the critics, Powys has caught Homer's fever. When he introduces the Aether, he creates causal chains that are even more complex. For example, when Zeus's attention is diverted in Book Thirteen, Poseidon intervenes in battle to ward off the charging Trojans from the Greek ships. Powys does not seem to have liked this book very much; he devotes only two pages to it. But the first page is intriguing. It consists almost entirely of a distinctively Powysian theme: the Aether as the ultimate source of Poseidon's

idea. "Silently and invincibly I descended upon him, emphasizing, with an irresistible though inaudible whisper, the danger to the ships if Hector's slaughtering were not checked" (p. 197). The rewrite drastically changes the scene's character. In Homer's version, Poseidon intervenes in an act of insubordination; in Powys's, he acts at the intimation of a higher if more timid power. Powys establishes in effect an opposition between Homer's all-important "plan of Zeus" (*Il.* 1.5) and the desires of the all-knowing Aether. The question is, does Powys intend that opposition to some purpose, or is he merely playing for complexity? I cannot say.

The Aether's revelations alter another significant feature of the Homeric poems, the high density of direct address. I do not have figures readily at hand, but I would guess that speeches comprise perhaps a full half of Homer's poems. At the same time, Homer does not seem (to us) to have a well-developed apparatus for expressing internal thought and emotion. Bruno Snell's idea that Homer did not conceive of persons as wholes but only as loose aggregates of components is almost certainly wrong. (It is a pretty good account of the teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama.) But Snell was right to point out that in portraying thoughts and emotions, Homer makes heroes publicly address organs such as their livers or their hearts. As we know, internal events of consciousness are the Aether's forte, and Powys needs no similar mechanism. In fact, *Homer and the Aether* makes a general shift away from public speaking to the narration of unspoken, internal thoughts and emotions.

Part of the shift occurs because Powys truncates or eliminates speeches that are crucial to Homer's poem. The most drastic example may be Book Nine, the pivotal account of the embassy to Achilles. In Homer's version Odysseus's speech to Achilles is a masterpiece. In Powys's, it occupies a mere twenty-one lines of prose; worse yet, Odysseus never offers Agamemnon's promised gifts. (Earlier, Powys had condensed Agamemnon's recital of the gifts, too.) Achilles replies vigorously, as is fitting, but his reply is relatively short. The *Iliad* follows with a speech by the aged Phoinix, one of the longest in the entire poem. But Powys allows Phoinix only a word more than six lines; he quickly summarizes the rest of the speech. The third member of the delegation, Ajax, is an unimpressive public speaker even in Homer, but at least he has a say. In Powys's version he is mute. Finally, when the embassy returns to the

assembled heroes, Powys does little with the Achaian despair at the embassy's report and Diomedes's resolute response. He is obsessed instead with sleeping arrangements: "Achilles and Patroclus slept on opposite sides of their large inner chamber. Nor did either of them lack a girl with whom to sleep" (p. 167).

Besides truncating public speeches, Powys provides a much fuller account of the mental and emotional life of the characters. When the troubles begin in Book One, Achilles suggests that the Achaians consult the seer Calchas, so Calchas stands up to speak. Homer gives Achilles's and Calchas's speeches in full (*Il.* 1.59-67, 74-83), but not Powys. He gives an exact account, in extremely un-Homeric phrases, of something Homer knows nothing about: "and so with one accord, though Agamemnon glowered and gloomed at the thought of appealing to [Calchas], 'for he knows about it all, he knows, he knows!' it was decided by the whole body of them . . . to appeal to Calchas" (pp. 35-36). Similar reports of internal events, often with more detail, pervade the work. To those raised on novels, such passages smack of an attempt at psychological characterization, but that attempt, if it was indeed an attempt (cp. Powys's Introduction), can only fail. Anyone who has read the *Iliad* knows that events of consciousness are unnecessary to a convincing narration of the plot, or even to a convincing characterization of the participants. Indeed, Powys's internal asides occasionally seem to do nothing more than indulge a quaint psychological voyeurism. At the beginning of Book Eighteen, Achilles learns of Patroclus's death.

I, the immortal Aether, had restrained myself from giving him the least hint of what was coming, because I was very anxious to watch just how Antilochus would tell him the terrible news and just how Achilles would receive it from him. Well, I must confess that my mania for watching heart-rending emotions was more than satisfied on this occasion. (p. 226)

But the largest contribution that the Aether's revelations make is the manner in which Powys uses the additional narrational voice, the reports from the inmost realms of consciousness, to transvalue the events of the *Iliad*. Sometimes the Aether preaches. On occasion it is a partisan of the Greens, perhaps because it recognizes the rudiments of consciousness everywhere. "I [the divine Aether] feel very strongly with my

whole being that it is a monstrous and wicked act to spoil the beauty of any grand and sublime landscape that from the beginning has roused the spirit of awe and reverence in the hearts of both gods and men" (p. 191). But perhaps the Aether is actually a conservative at heart, since it advocates family values, strict heterosexuality, and sexual abstinence.

Inevitably, though, attention comes to rest on Achilles and his deeds of wrath, and it is in describing Achilles's person and recounting his deeds that the Aether works its most powerful transformations. Clearly, Powys does not like Achilles much. Of all the books in the *Iliad*, the books of Achilles's greatest triumph, Books Thirteen to Twenty-Two, have lost the most in the re-creation. It is also in the second half of the novel that the Aether speaks its mind most freely.

Homer's Achilles is a complex figure. We would certainly never praise him in moral terms. People whose judgments we respect, people like Phoinix in Book Nine, Patroklos in Book Sixteen, Zeus in Book Twenty-Four, tell Achilles his anger has gone beyond bounds. What began as a reaction to a legitimate grievance has turned into a nightmare that violates every accepted paradigm. (Contrast Achilles with the placability of Apollo and Chryses in Book One and the story of the Calydonian Boar Hunt, which Powys names only as evidence of an old man's garrulity [p. 166].) At the same time, we cannot simply dismiss Homer's Achilles. He is, after all, "the best of the Achaians," the person whose skills and strength are most needed if the Achaian enterprise is to succeed, in fact, if the Achaians themselves are to remain alive. The tension between the two, which is nothing less than Homer's exploration of the problematic implicit in Achilles's untameable "great soul," is in fact what makes the *Iliad*'s overarching narrative compelling.

Powys's Achilles is very different. In downplaying Achilles's rejection of Agamemnon's gifts and virtually excising Phoinix's speech, Powys removes the point at which Achilles's behavior first becomes interesting because it first violates established norms. In reducing the proportion of space devoted to Achilles's greatest triumphs, Powys decreases their climactic significance. Above all, the Aether's special abilities, so much in evidence in the last half of the book, alter Achilles's character irreparably.

Yes, although I, the immortal Aether, have known

human brutality, meanness of mind and hardness of heart for millions of years, I have never known any human being less kind, less considerate, less philosophical, less indulgent, than this pride-besotted son of Peleus. His secret thoughts are much more easy to read than those of Agamemnon or Ajax or Diomed, and twenty times easier than those of Odysseus. And why? Simply because, at bottom, this man is unbelievably stupid.¹⁷

When Achilles rages against Hector, he is no longer seeking a wild-eyed revenge for his best friend's death. He is acting entirely out of brute self-interest.

The transformation of Achilles makes, to my tastes, for a much less powerful production. Powys's contempt transmutes the greatest of all Achaians into an anti-hero of Aristotelian stamp. But to be fair, the Aether's utter contempt for Achilles is mitigated as the novel proceeds. When Achilles speaks at the death of Hector, the Aether confesses: Achilles's "speech now did confound me; for I, who know all that goes on in people's souls, *did* catch—yes, I confess it!—a genuine quiver of emotion as he uttered these words about Patroclus."¹⁸ But the damage has already been done, and the concession only helps to make Powys's character assassination more convincing. It removes the single, gnawing doubt that had remained: had the condemnation of Achilles been too one-sided?

What lesson or philosophic truth does this story teach, Powys asks at the end of his novel. His answer: "The greatest poem in the world leaves behind no lesson at all" (p. 297). Does he mean what he says? At the end of its introduction the Aether had stated programmatically: "What I am going to help you do . . . is to accept and enjoy to the limit all the ordinary events in that human life of yours, which, wherever it is played out, is always a magnified view, or a minimized view, of some kind of Trojan war."¹⁹ Earlier, Powys had in his own voice identified the acceptance and enjoyment of the ordinary as the proper way to appreciate Homer.²⁰ And the novel concludes: "Thus . . . it was, it is, and it will be." And so we have seen the last of Hector, the tamer of horses" (p. 298). Can there really be no lesson in the remake?

When Odysseus, Phoinix, and Ajax arrive at Achilles's hut to offer Agamemnon's apology, Homer shows Achilles delighting his heart singing the famous deeds of men (*Il.* 9.189).

In the *Odyssey*, these deeds are sung publicly not only by the professional bards Demodokos and Phemios but by Odysseus himself. Within the poem, reciting the "glorious deeds of warriors" has a profound moral effect. It glorifies those who conquer in battle, loot, and enslave. It consoles Achilles in his haughty grief. The characters view past deeds as paradigmatic, and they act on the basis of the praise or opprobrium that their deeds will evoke among their descendants, that is, among later poets. As a result, the *Iliad* exemplifies an aristocratic mentality and, we might add, an imperial one, too. For the distasteful dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon that begins the entire poem concerns the distribution of booty. There was some justice, then, when William Blake diverted blame for civic evil from the Goths and the church, whom the Enlightenment liked to blame, to the classics, whom it liked to praise.

The Aether's revelations of the world of consciousness seriously undercut the *Iliad*'s moral effects. Homer had not attributed Achilles's rampage to a personal deficiency so much as to the inability of society to keep its strongest and most needed members in check. Powys is much less generous. He makes the greatest warrior the object of neither admiration nor awe but contempt. Achilles has "nothing in his brain but a frantic lust for getting glory through slaughter."²¹ In place of Homer's celebration of a martial elite, the Aether deliberately celebrates the ordinary in life. It even gives commoners what is unheard of in Homer, an occasional, respectable voice. Instead of recommending the pursuits of conquest and glory, the values of *timē* and *kleos*, riches and fame, Powys recommends the virtues of family life. His true hero (and he is quite explicit about this) is the loyal Patroclus, with whom Briseis, he says, was deeply in love.²² A close second is "sweet war-man Hector." Perhaps the transvaluation of the *Iliad* ultimately derives from Powys's fundamental cosmology. In any case, the two are certainly compatible. For Powys deliberately portrays life as a "multiverse," not a universe. In doing so, he suggests that there is a better way to conceive of and order the human world than as an empire.

Seven Seas

Water, like aether, is a fluid. It pervades all living things and forms the very basis of life itself. But unlike aether, water is a gross, not a subtle element. It is not uniformly distributed

throughout the universe. Instead, it concentrates into bodies and masses. The largest and most impressive of these masses is Walcott's image for epic poetic activity: the ocean. In Walcott's craft that image does not connote an all-pervasive, inmost, Powysian omniscience. It does not even hint at the process of sedimentation, depositing one stratum atop another, like the Aether's voice superimposed upon the *Iliad recepta*. Instead, Walcott recalls the churning, wearing, cleansing, transforming, recombining motion of the ocean's surf and, to use a word that is itself worn out, the *bricolage* of its coral reefs. The ocean represents Walcott's view of the distinctive character both of writing epic poetry and of writing poetry in America generally and in the West Indies specifically. It conjoins fragments, since all epic is based upon ruins. It also mimics, since American art inevitably mimes the Old World, whether European or African or Asian.²³

Several figures embody the oceanic poesy in *Omeros*. The most baldly named is a sort of blind, West Indian Everypoet, Seven Seas. Walcott's own peregrinations and reflections make him a character in the poem. We hear vague hints of other traditional bards, "the chanterelle, the river griot, the Sioux shaman" (p. 318). But the premier poet in *Omeros* is the one for whom it is named, Homer, deceased but not quite dead. Homer's name is more subtle, compelling, exotic, and rich in allusion than the prosaic "Seven Seas." It also links him directly with the ocean's poetic work: "O was the conch-shell's invocation, / mer was both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes / and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore" (p. 14). Toward the end of the poem, Homer himself even emerges from the ocean to engage Walcott in conversation (pp. 279-280). What attracts attention in Walcott's use of Homer, then, is not a voice that the author has deposited atop the Homeric stratum. It is the fragments of Homer's voice—the grey bones—that we still hear rumbling after 3,000 years.

The first rumbles that a reader is likely to hear are names, but not every name. Major and Maud Plunkett, the representative former colonial rulers, have names that lack any obvious classical reference. (The poem is set primarily on the West Indian island of St. Lucia.) Walcott himself appears as Derek. Ma Kilman is the proprietress of the No Pain Café, Maljo a fisherman turned politician whose campaign earns him the nickname "Statics." But four characters of African descent do

have Homeric names, and they are the most prominent characters of all: Achilles, Hector, Helen, and Philoctete. Given to persons of African ancestry, these names do not evidence the continuous cultural memory that Europeans associate with Homer. They evidence a cultural amnesia brought on by imperial imposition. Achilles's ancestor leads a group of African slaves in raising a large cannon up a cliff and secures a British victory against the French. "It was then that the small admiral with a cloud / on his head renamed Afolabe 'Achilles,' / which, to keep things simple, he let himself be called" (p. 83).

The St. Lucians with Homeric names lead fragments of Homeric lives. Achilles's wife, Helen, leaves him for Hector. Later, overcome with sunstroke, Achilles makes a dream-odyssey to his ancestral land, the Bight of Benin. Philoctete is banished from productive activity by a gaping wound on his shin. In effect, these and countless other Homeric elements make a pointed cultural statement: under conditions of imperial domination events are inevitably seen through the dominant cultural paradigms. "When," Walcott asks, "would I not hear the Trojan War / in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop?" (p. 271). Walcott displays none of Powys's excessive reverence for the letter of Homer's text. In fact, he displays a certain pluck before his "Master." As mentioned already, he tells Homer to his face that he has never read the *Odyssey* all the way through. Imperial paradigms, it seems, continue to dominate perception even though the political empire has dissolved, one's familiarity with the paradigms is secondhand, and the correspondence is loose.

One trait seems to be especially typical of poetic mimicry in the Western hemisphere: inversion. The Homeric fragments in the lives of black West Indians invert the Homeric melody in a manner reminiscent of Powys. They transpose it from the key of privilege to the key of ordinary life. In Homer Achilles, Hector, Helen, and Philoctetes belong to the best "class." Their West Indian counterparts are plain people: a fisherman (Achilles), a shuttle-bus driver (Hector), a domestic servant/waitress (Helen), and a man who is chronically unemployable (Philoctete). But in transposing Homer, Walcott does not debase him. In a modern, mass society, Homer's heroes would in fact look extremely plain. Achilles would not be much more than a prominent local tough, Agamemnon's army hardly more than a small, roving band of rapacious marauders. And like West Indians today, Homer's heroes lived on the margins of

greater, city-based empires: Egypt (then already 2000 years old), Assyria, Hatti, the ruins of the earlier Minoans.²⁴

The lives of European West Indians, the former rulers, invert Homeric fragments, too, but they cannot transpose them from the privileged to the ordinary. Instead, they play an elaborate counterpoint in contrary motion. Major Plunkett is an anti-Odysseus. He foregoes wandering to settle down on Circe's isle and raise pigs. His wife, Maud, is an anti-Penelope. She sews a magnificent quilt that depicts the wealth of the island, indeed, of the empire. Then she weds the suitor whom no one can resist, death. It is as if events at the twilight of an empire were sentenced to repeat the events at its beginning, only upside down.

Walcott himself provides another major locus of Homeric allusion. As a character in the poem, he does not invert Homeric motifs the way either African or European West Indians do. Strictly speaking, he is neither African nor European but both at the same time. So instead of inverting Homer, his life, like his poetry, quotes and creatively reorders Homer's poems. Jilted by a Greek beauty, Walcott seeks out his own beauty, the beauty of the islands.²⁵ He makes two odysseys, two *nostoi* or journeys home, one through memory and time,²⁶ the other through space—Lisbon, London, Ireland, the Aegean, and the Great Plains—that finally culminates in Maud's funeral, the final death of the Raj.²⁷ As a traveler, Walcott claims to play Telemachus to Plunkett's Odysseus (p. 263). It is tempting to read this relationship in terms of two allied strategies for serving Helen, the island of St. Lucia. A member of the older order, Plunkett writes history; a member of the younger one, Walcott writes literature (pp. 270-271).

Omeros, then, is replete with glimpses of Homer. But it does not try to pass those glimpses off as simple descriptions of West Indian life. They are correlations that arise not so much in West Indian experience as in Walcott's mind.²⁸ They seem to arise spontaneously and involuntarily. A lighthouse is a cyclops (p. 13); so is a hurricane (p. 51). They also make Walcott uncomfortable. Like a mystic, he has visions of escaping into a purely noumenal realm. "Why not see Helen / as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow . . .?" he asks. "When would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" (p. 271).²⁹ But *Omeros* admits no heaven on earth. Even in the poem such expressions seem exaggerated and extreme. Once expressed, Walcott's longing quickly dissipates. He admits that the correlations are

not, for all that, completely involuntary and determined. "It was mine to make what I wanted of it, or / what I thought I wanted" (p. 272).

Once again Walcott's practice elucidates Homeric precedent. The difficulties that Homer poses for Walcott would not have been entirely foreign to Homer himself. Homer may now sit at the head of Europe's literary feast, but his place of honor hides a significant feature of his poetry. Developed in a traditional setting (would it mean anything to say "formulaic" anymore?), Homeric epic was itself essentially a poetry of quotation, of mimicry. It reworked fixed, inherited themes to address the dilemmas that immense socio-cultural changes posed for the Greeks of the eighth century B.C.E.³⁰ Still, Walcott is more self-reflective than Homer. Homer depicts bards like Phemios and Demodokos and heroes like Odysseus singing. But he does not consider what it means to sing a poem that begins a new tradition at the same time that it is dominated by the past. That enigma is Walcott's particular concern. He quotes Homer, then, not so much because he wants to address Homer's problematics. He quotes him because Homer is himself problematic.

A thoroughly Homeric image emblemizes the difficulty: the wound. "Philoctete / waved 'Morning' to me from afar, and I waved back; / we shared the one wound, the same cure" (p. 295). But the wound is not just Walcott's and Philoctete's; it is pandemic. "This wound I have stitched into Plunkett's character. / He has to be wounded, affliction is one theme / of this work" (p. 28). Plunkett received his wound from a bomb that exploded in North Africa during World War II. But his old-world war wound is not only physical, or even primarily physical. It impells the Plunketts to migrate to the West Indies in search of Eden, innocence, utopia—in Homeric imagery, an enchanted Circean island on which to escape life's grim demands (*ibid.*).

The theme of affliction is central to the *Iliad*.³¹ Some scholars even hear it echoing, as *achos*, at the beginning of Achilles's name. But Walcott finds that a different struggle than that between Achilles and Agamemnon emblemizes his affliction: the intercultural struggle between Achaians and Trojans, between Achille and Hector (rather than Homer's Menelaus and Paris) for Helen. In Walcott's own case, the affliction causes the joint between tradition and creativity to ache. An independent West Indian poet, he still finds it

impossible to see and sing about the world apart from the old, imperial models. In the case of the (other) characters in the poem, the affliction invokes less cultivated but hardly unrelated tensions within West Indian cultural life.

Abandoning Achille, her legal and proper spouse, Helen "sell[s] herself like the island" to foreign tourists and imported American culture.³² Hector abets both Helen the person and Helen the island in this infidelity. He receives Helen when she walks out on Achille. He also abandons fishing, his traditional source of livelihood, in order to facilitate an amorous liaison with the island, that is, to taxi foreign tourists.³³

Achille, like his Homeric namesake, experiences this affliction with resignation. On "the night Achille dreaded above everything else" (p. 110), the night Helen sells herself, he sits far up the beach amidst the canoes. His jealousy over her mingles with his pain over "what was happening to the village" (p. 111): the youth lack interest in traditional lifeways, African lifeways (p. 112). Plunkett reverses this affliction. He does not represent the jealousy of a jilted tradition but the affliction of those for whom the wounds of the old, imperial, colonial traditions, the social demands and the personal lies (cp. p. 269), are too painful to bear. He and Maud are not tourists, looking for a brief respite. They are Europeans reliving a fateful myth, looking for a New World, a tropical paradise, under the Homeric aegis of Circe rather than the biblical image of the promised land.

The poem attempts several solutions to these intercultural afflictions. One fails miserably. Politics holds little promise of healing the wounds and uniting cultures. Maljo campaigns on a strategy of mediation. St. Lucia, he proclaims, is heading for disaster. Like Philoctete, it is limping, wounded by two factions, Communist and Capitalist, "one Greek and the other Trojan, both fighting for Helen" (p. 107; cp. 104). He advocates a United Front and a strategy of United Love. Despite the good intentions, his campaign is, quite literally, rained out. In the end Maljo writes from Florida "to say his woman now is the dollar" (p. 317).

This interlude illustrates Walcott's belief that the problematics of postcolonial cultural affliction are best addressed by cultural, not political means. Furthermore, although *Omeros* envisions solutions to the problematic of affliction, it does not envision paradise. In an especially memorable scene of lush sexuality, Helen suffers the agony of separation. Later, she returns home to Achille, pregnant, but

with whose child? Hector's fate is different. He pays for his cultural infidelity with his life. The fate of both characters underscores a cardinal tenet of Walcott's outlook: he rejects every return to utopia and Eden. The solutions *Omeros* presents are more akin to the cleansing, churning activity of the ocean.

Plunkett decides Helen needs a history and spends much of the poem trying to write her one. (His efforts are often associated with recovering a sunken ship from the sea.) But history turns out to be almost as unsatisfying as politics. For one thing, it fashions a "factual fiction" that completely misses the complexity of reality.³⁴ For another, it reveals an attitude that is no longer tenable in the postcolonial world, a world in which Plunkett has recognized and surrendered emotionally, if not physically, to Helen's charms: "My thoughts are pure. / They're meant to help her people, ignorant and poor." What European or American historian would (not) voice these protests today? "But these, smiled the bracelet"—a bracelet that Plunkett could not prevent his housemaid Helen from pilfering—"are the vows of empire" (pp. 96-97). In the end, history and memory do not solve Plunkett's affliction; time and forgetfulness do, and they do so slowly.³⁵

Poetry is the younger generation's counterpart to history. It is the discourse not of the former masters but of the recently freed.³⁶ Clearly, Walcott has more hope for it. At the head of an earlier prose article he cited James Joyce: "History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake." In his Nobel lecture he completed the thought: "For every poet it is always morning in the world, and History a forgotten insomniac night. History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of History."³⁷ Poetry is the vehicle in which Walcott himself traverses the bastions of European civilization that, he tells us outside the poem, were initially so hazardous for his development as a poet.³⁸ Through an oceanic, fragmenting mimicry, poetry also becomes the instrument by which Walcott not only reflects on but also begins to negotiate the conflicting demands of tradition.³⁹ Nevertheless, poetry as a solution to affliction belongs only to the second rank. In one way, *Omeros* himself reminds us of Plunkett's inability to resist Helen when he shows more interest in life than in his own poems. "A girl," he comments, "smells better than a book" (p. 284).

For both Walcott and Homer, there is a yet higher means to redress profound socio-cultural affliction: the means of

ritual and religion. In the *Iliad*, the Achaians celebrate the games of Patroklos's funeral (*Iliad* 23), then the gods intervene to engineer the return of Hector's corpse (*Iliad* 24). In *Omeros* Ma Kilman uses a traditional herb to heal Philoctete's shin. But to find it she must first heal her own wound of time; she must remember where it is.⁴⁰ Then, in a setting of numinous joy, the carnevalic celebrations of Boxer Day redress the afflictions of the island's divisions and cultural loss. For Walcott carneval epitomizes cultural creation. It conjoins fragments, overcomes distinctions, and mysteriously keeps the past alive.⁴¹ Philoctete and Achille dance in drag, "not because of Christmas, / but for something older; something that [Achille] had seen / in Africa" (p. 275). When they are done, Philoctete is overcome with the memory of his wound, which has since disappeared. He "sat down. Then he wept" (p. 277).

In a final instance of inversion, Walcott transposes the beginning of the *Iliad* to the end: "I sang of quiet Achille, Afolabe's son" (p. 320). He has already explained why. "Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture / is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor, / . . . slowly but sure, / it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time" (p. 296). Both carnevalic ritual and poetry lead back to the churning, creative capacities of ocean, the source of Walcott's poetry and, in a metaphorical but profound sense, its subject as well. Neither eliminates affliction finally and completely. Walcott's models are "static" rather than eschatological, Greek rather than Israelite or Iranian—in African terms, healing rituals or cults of affliction rather than messianic movements. Nevertheless, they contain an assurance that, although it will never be possible to eliminate affliction entirely, it will always be possible to heal it in time, for the time being. As the poem ends, night falls, and Achille places a piece of fish that he saved for Helen into a tin over which he had once fought with Hector. "When [Achille] left the beach the sea was still going on" (p. 325).

Alternatives to Otherness

Louise Bruitt Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel open their fine book on Greek religion with these words. "Greek society was fundamentally different from our own, and the concepts that we employ to describe contemporary religious phenomena are necessarily ill adapted to the analysis of what the Greeks regarded as the divine sphere."⁴² In one sense, it is difficult to

disagree. The differences between ancient Greek religion, predominantly orthopraxic, locative, and cosmotropic, and contemporary Christianity in Europe or North America, predominantly orthodoxic, utopian, and soteric, are evident for all to see.⁴³ But in another sense Zaidman's and Pantel's statement is problematical. In fact, it is highly problematical. The classical and the anthropological, the Same and the Other—these are the categories of empire. They transpose imperial distinctions between us and them, conquerors and conquered, onto the score of scholarship. There is no better example than British classical studies at the height of the Raj.

The British conquered by fashioning themselves in a classical image, in part a Homeric image. But the British also came to see the ancient Greeks, including Homer, in the image of the peoples whom they conquered. James George Frazer wanted to explain the tale of Diana's priest at Nemi. He digested the fruits of imperial knowledge—missionary accounts, travelers' tales, administrative reports—into the twelve grand volumes of *The Golden Bough*. The Cambridge ritualist, Jane Harrison, hypothesized two major sources for Greek religion, one classical, the other anthropological: an invasive Olympian patriarchy and an indigenous agricultural matriarchy. This paradoxical union of the classical and the anthropological, the self and the other, received paradigmatic statement in the widely influential writings of H. J. Rose.⁴⁴

Over the last three decades, various writers have shown that the distinction between the Same and the Other has not lost its usefulness. That is true above all of Michel Foucault. Readers may recall that his book, *The Order of Things*, begins with an invocation of "the Same" and "the Other," sparked by a quasi-anthropological encounter with an unidentified passage from Borges. In that passage, Borges "recalled" "a certain Chinese encyclopedia" which classified animals in a manner that Foucault found laughable, because it was a manner he found impossible to think. The experience inspired Foucault to draft an account of the "fundamental codes" or, more technically, "epistèmes" that made Renaissance, Classicist, and modern thought possible. By the end of the preface, Foucault had dropped the Chinese example for another Other, more readily recognizable as Foucaultian: madness. The history of order is "the history of the Same." "The history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to

exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness)."⁴⁵ In a context that emphasizes understanding as identification and banishes the temporarily unintelligible from centers of power, there is both cognitive and moral force in emphasizing difference.

Nevertheless, an underlying problem remains. It is the problem that emerges whenever others become the Other, when differences become Difference, when challenges to understanding become alterity and incommensurability—in other words, when an ancient Greek like Homer, or anyone else, for that matter, becomes an anthropological object.⁴⁶ The language is similar to—indeed, it indirectly derives from—some traditional Christian language about God.⁴⁷ It is also subject to the same criticism: the truly Other lies beyond human thought and experience. We should simply be unable to label it human or divine, “thing” or “it,” much less talk about it in any meaningful way.

The Same and the Other, the classical and the anthropological—these terms do not help with the question, what use is Homeric poetry after the empire? They define the use of Homer during it. Today it would make little sense to identify Homer with the cultural self. To start with, Homer's poetry no longer defines North American cultural self-consciousness, if it ever did. Homer as Other holds just as little promise. Previously colonized peoples may try to reject Homer as a primary cultural emblem of British domination. That move would fit comfortably within the program of *négritude* expounded by, among others, Aimé Césaire, a program that essentially defined black as Other in reference to the Sameness of white.⁴⁸ But that definition demarcated very narrow boundaries, and what came to be celebrated as distinctively black qualities actually bore an eerie resemblance to European stereotypes. *Négritude* became little more than a negation inseparably linked to the assertion of European superiority. In response, thinkers such as Edward Braithwaite and Wilson Harris emphasized the necessarily hybrid or creole character of Caribbean civilization.⁴⁹ Their attitude informs Walcott's work, including *Omeros*.

Hybridization, creolization, or cultural syncretism are not, however, answers to our question. They do not identify some final solution that results from applying a Hegelian dialectic to the Same and the Other. They do not name a telos of cultural identity achieved through the double negation of the

classical self. “Syncretism,” to quote a scholar of ancient religions, “describes the problem of understanding,” not its resolution.⁵⁰ It identifies a cultural situation whose complexity violates the simple binary oppositions that empires erect (Self/Other, Same/Different, us/them, rulers/ruled). But it says nothing specific about the particular dynamics that animate actual situations. As a result, it tells us little about how one might actually use Homer's poetry after the empire. Here is where Powys and Walcott come in.

There is no uniform, prescribed answer to the question of Homer's usefulness after the empire. That is to say, the old image of the “classical” no longer works. In a pluralistic environment such as ours it no longer makes sense to identify a single poetic tradition as classical. It perhaps never made sense to claim eternal value for any poet's work, whether Homer's or Valmiki's or someone else's. That claim simply begs the question of time, as Hans-Georg Gadamer does when he makes the classical “a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and is independent of all the circumstances of time, in ... a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other age.”⁵¹ And simply as a practical matter, no one can be expected to be conversant with every ancient tradition. So if Homeric poetry is of some use after the empire, the reasons it is so will inevitably be more specific and various than the old European myth of cultural origins: that Homer is the *fons et origo* of poetry, that he stands at the beginning of civilization.

At the same time, past culture inevitably shapes the present, and both Powys and Walcott recognize Homer as one of the most significant features of their own cultural pasts. If we are to believe what they tell us, this is no voluntary matter; it is a cultural given. Homer inescapably shapes the way they construe quotidian reality.⁵² For them human life is fashioned in Homer's image. That is one mark of a classical tradition: it fashions life in its own image.

Powys's and Walcott's Homers share another quality, too: they are postimperial, but not deimperialized. Powys's and Walcott's Homers are postimperial, because neither Powys nor Walcott simply identifies the received Homer with the ruling self. But they are not deimperialized, for domination remains a crucial issue with which both authors struggle. Powys struggles with the domination of the internal by the external, the private by the public, the cooperative by the competitive. Walcott's

struggle reflects cultural plurality; it is a struggle with the general cultural hegemony of Europe, as emblemized by Homer. Thus, both Powys and Walcott present ways of using Homer in a postimperial world. In reflecting on these ways, it is helpful to preserve the images of aether and ocean. They prevent two ways of using Homer from becoming the two ways to use Homer, that is, from precipitating as a fixed, closed, comprehensive system.

Powys's Aether makes possible a genuine rarity in European literatures: a retelling of the *Iliad* itself, as distinct from a retelling of stories from the Homeric cycle or of Odysseus's homecoming. It is almost as if in the case of the *Iliad* Homer's narrative voice were too strong for a simple retelling of the tale to be sufficient. So Powys replaces the recitative of the *Iliad* with a duet: *Homer and the Aether*. The second voice speaks with the force of a narrator who can claim greater authority than the blind Homer, because its gaze is all-seeing. Thus, the Aether becomes an instrument of correction and criticism. It is the means for transvaluing Homeric values. Pervasive and subtle, it is ideally suited to render the internal, private, intuitive, emotional, cooperative realm that Powys opposed to the exterior world of Homeric combat and plunder. But like consciousness itself, at least on some views of consciousness, the Aether has no location in space. It invites us to retire to a private, decultured world of natural emotion where the largest effective social unit is the family or perhaps simply the couple, united either sexually or in friendship.

By contrast, Walcott's Ocean admits no aethereal utopia. In fact, geographical location is what makes the image compelling. Not only does the ocean beat out the rhythms of life on Walcott's Caribbean islands. It also links those islands with the islands of imperial domination (Britain), with west Africa, and—over the distance of time—with the Achaian forces camped on the Ilian shores. This very linkage is responsible for the cultural and ethnic intermixture that so dominates the population of the islands. (The indigenous Caribbean peoples were largely exterminated.) At the same time, *Omeros* is no duet. The ocean is not an alternative voice that drowns Homer out. Instead, Homer is the ocean's most prominent avatar. The ocean continually washes up fragments of his epics, not shipwrecked fragments shored against cultural ruin but beautiful new creations of coral, creations that grow from the bones not of Phlebas the Phoenician but of Afolabe the African.⁵³ These

creations do not transvalue Homer's values. Instead, Walcott accepts Homer's images in order to celebrate a new cultural heritage, to create a new, culturally composite poetry.

One might say, then, that Powys rewrites the *Iliad* in order to reread it, while Walcott rereads Homer in order to rewrite epic poetry. But what response can we give to our guiding question? What use is Homer after the empire? If Powys and Walcott are any indication, the usefulness of a classical tradition does not derive from moves to retrieve or conserve the past. It does not see, as Gadamer does, the classical as the irruption of the eternal into the temporal, the infinite into the finite, or less optimistically, as "preservation amid the ruins of time."⁵⁴ Nor does it derive from a deliberate, voluntary retrospection, "an awareness of decline and distance" that consciously takes the past as paradigmatic.⁵⁵ As we have seen, Powys and Walcott do not choose Homer. They use him because he is for them a cultural given. Homer becomes useful to the extent that, although he is himself given, he becomes a vehicle for transforming the given. In Powys and Walcott, at least, Homer becomes an instrument for overcoming the imperial limitations that his work helped so much to create and shape.

Here, then, is a more profound mark of a classical tradition. Once having fashioned the world in its own image, it provides a means to change it.

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Notes

¹Isocrates *Panegyric* 159; Alexander *Plutarch* 15. For a fuller account see Gregory D. Alles, *The Iliad, the Ramayana, and the Work of Religion: Failed Persuasion and Religious Mystification* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1994), pp. 124-130.

²Matthew Arnold, *Essays Literary and Critical* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), p. 220.

³It also helped that Sanskrit learning could be presented as a once grand, now senescent civilization whose guardianship the British claimed it was their duty—their "burden"—to assume. For a specific example, see the chapters on India in Garland Cannon's biography, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On traditions of non-Sanskritic literary criticism, see Ganesh N. Devi, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1991).

⁴John Cowper Powys, *Homer and the Aether* (London: Macdonald, 1959), hereafter *Aether*, and Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990).

⁵Arnold, p. 250.

⁶"If only Virginité had prevailed, we should not now be enduring all this misery!" (*Aether*, p. 28). If Virginité had so prevailed, would we be at all? On the alleged lack of homosexuality in Homer, see also pp. 46 & 167.

⁷"I've never read it," I said, "Not all the way through" (*Omeros*, p. 283).

⁸"My own favorite book in the whole of the *Iliad* is Book XXI, wherein the gods and goddesses fight among themselves . . ." (*Aether*, p. 14). In the tradition of Cambridge Ritualists such as Jane Harrison, Powys also discusses the gods as elemental ghosts (p. 178).

⁹*Aether*, p. 176; cp. pp. 224, 234, and 258.

¹⁰There is a technical difference between the narrator and the author of a poem, as has been made clear long ago by both Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), and Michel Foucault, "What is an author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 141-160. Nevertheless, *Omeros* invites us to equate the two. For example, the narrator, as well as the author, is named Derek (cp. p. 166).

¹¹This position has been developed in Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 157-158.

¹²*Aether*, p. 20.

¹³*Aether*, p. 156. See also pp. 34 (for Calchas), 37 & 57 (for Agamemnon), 74 (for women), 117-118 & 133 (for Helenus), 132 (for Ajax), and 252 (for Apollo). For instances of telepathy, see pp. 150 & 155.

¹⁴"I shall make him feel that things like swords and shields and spears and axes and pitch-forks and shovels . . . have the power, if associated closely enough with human persons, of acquiring a sort of individual life for themselves—yes, a peculiar identity of their own, an identity that implies the possession of a kind of self-consciousness, a special sort of self-consciousness I admit, but none the less self-consciousness" (*Aether*, p. 24; cp. p. 231).

¹⁵*Aether*, pp. 96 and 213; cp. pp. 45, 198, and 256.

¹⁶For this and most other topics in Homeric criticism, perhaps the best ready introduction is Mark W. Edwards, *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

¹⁷*Aether*, p. 245; cp. what follows (pp. 245-246): "The wild grief of Briseis over the corpse of Patroclus was a real revelation to me. With a woman's subtle instinct she divined at once that Achilles's feeling for her was just pure unmitigated masculine lust; whereas a thousand subtle magnetic currents indicated to her what an extraordinarily

happy life any intelligent and discerning girl could have had with Patroclus. I saw it all in a flash when I saw her wailing and moaning and rending and tearing her own flesh by the side of that unconscious form. Briseis was deeply in love with Patroclus.

What a tedious and uninteresting life the wife of Achilles would have led! The sole purpose of his existence was to win glory for himself. He was not interested in science like Hephaestus. He was not interested in the government of men like his father. He was not interested in all the magical secrets and under-sea mysteries familiar to all the Nereids in the caves of the Old Man and of the Sea. To be known by everybody a hundred thousand years hence as the swiftest runner and strongest spearman who ever lived, that was all he wanted! Glory, glory, glory! And to gain this he was ready to soak himself in blood."

Cp., too, p. 258: "For there was in Hector, though not nearly as much as there had been in Patroclus, a vein of kindly human nature such as Achilles had never known and would never know."

¹⁸*Aether*, p. 260; cp. p. 263.

¹⁹*Aether*, p. 29; cp. p. 15. Another possible lesson appears sporadically: "that the most tragical thing that can happen in the whole cosmos is this union of mortality with immortality" (p. 224; cp. p. 176).

²⁰*Aether*, p. 15.

²¹*Aether*, p. 255. In fact, in *Iliad* 9 Achilles explicitly rejects this motivation, and Patroclus must die before his friend will return to the fray.

²²See the extended quote in n. 17 above.

²³For Walcott's views, I have relied especially on three of his essays: "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 16, no. 1 (February 1974): 3-13; "The Muse of History: An Essay," in *Is Massa Day Dead?: Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. Orde Coombs (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974); and Walcott's Nobel lecture, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," *The New Republic* (December 28, 1992), pp. 26-32. On mimicry, cp. *Omeros*, p. 319: "I followed a sea-swift to both sides of this text; / her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking / basins of a globe in which one half fits the next / into an equator, both shores neatly clicking / into a globe; except that its meridian / was not North and South but East and West. One, the New / World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain, / or the beat of both hands rowing that bear the two / vessels of the heart with balance, weight, and design."

²⁴Walcott's Homer, a fairly common old seaman, is an equally compelling demythologization.

²⁵Later, *Omeros* himself seems to legitimate this choice; he tells Walcott, "Love is good, but the love of your own people is greater" (*Omeros*, p. 284).

²⁶In a nursing home he encounters a mother who no longer remembers him (*Omeros* p. 166); outside he encounters a culture he himself no longer remembers (p. 167); then back on the beach in Boston he meets

the ghost of his father who, Teiresias-like, reveals to him the way he should travel (pp. 186-187).

²⁷Walcott makes this journey on his father's advice: "Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere, / cherish our island for its green simplicities, / enthrone yourself." The cultural dynamics involved in this advice are made quite explicit: "I longed for the streets that History had made great; / but the island became my fortress and retreat" (*Omeros*, p. 187).

²⁸"Omeros," she laughed. 'That's what we call him in Greek,' / . . . and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek / of drying fishnets" (*Omeros*, p. 14).

²⁹*Omeros*, p. 271. The entire passage deserves attention: "All that Greek manure under the green bananas, / under the indigo hills, the rain-rutted road, / the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners, / glazed by the transparent page of what I had read. / What I had read and rewritten till literature was guilty as History. When would the sails drop / from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War / in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop? / When would my head shake off its echoes like a horse / shaking off a wreath of flies? When would it stop, / the echo in the throat, insisting, 'Omeros'; / when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?"

³⁰See *The Iliad, the Ramayana, and the Work of Religion*, pp. 58-63.

³¹Affliction is also a central theme in African religions. There it refers to diseases caused by spirit possession. See, e.g., Victor W. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968).

³²Consider the entire passage: "She was selling herself like the island, without / any pain, and the village did not seem to care / that it was dying in its change, the way it whored / away a simple life that would soon disappear / while its children writhed on the sidewalks to the sounds / of the DJ's fresh-water-Yankee-cool-Creole" (*Omeros* p. 111).

³³Because Philoctete's wound prevents him from going to sea, it forces him to a certain complicity in the same process. As the poem opens, he explains to photo-eager tourists how dugouts are made.

³⁴*Omeros*, p. 95. Compare further: "He had no idea how time could be reworded, which is the historian's task. . . his book-burdened heart found no joy in [the histories he had borrowed from the library] except their love of events, / and none noticed the Homeric repetition / of details, their prophecy. That was the difference. / He saw coincidence, they saw superstition" (pp. 95-96).

³⁵*Omeros*, p. 309; cp. 319: "Plunkett promise me [Seven Seas] a pig next Christmas. He'll heal / in time, too.' 'We shall all heal.' The incurable wound of time pierced them down the long, sharp-shadowed street." And Seven Seas dies.

³⁶Consider the following from "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?": "History, taught as morality, is religion. History, taught as action, is art. Those are the only uses to which we, mocked as a people without

history, can put it. Because we have no choice but to view history as fiction or as religion, then our use of it will be idiosyncratic, personal, and therefore, creative" (p. 13).

³⁷"The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," p. 31. Mircea Eliade, too, spoke of the "terror of history" and the need to heal the ravages of time. He credited his awareness of the terrors to his experiences as a southeast European. See esp. his *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1959).

³⁸"The Muse of History," p. 26. Cp. his father's instructions above, n. 27.

³⁹Cp. *Omeros*, p. 323: "Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure, / its radiant affliction."

⁴⁰Ma Kilman needs much of the poem to remember where her grandmother used to find the herb. She first expresses her forgetfulness on p. 19.

⁴¹See "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?," pp. 9-11. These functions of carnival fit well with Eliade's analysis of ritual overcoming the ravages of time; they fit even better with Victor Turner's ideas about the *communitas* that rituals create. See his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969).

⁴²Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 3.

⁴³The contrast between orthopraxic and orthodoxic religions—religions that emphasize right practice and right belief, respectively—was introduced by Frits Staal; that between locative and utopian religions—religions tied to a specific place and religions that claim validity everywhere—by Jonathan Z. Smith in *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978). On cosmotrophic and soteric religions, see *The Iliad, the Ramayana, and the Work of Religion*, chap. 5.

⁴⁴James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911-15); Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), and *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921); and H. J. Rose, *Primitive Culture in Greece* (London: Methuen, 1925), *A Handbook of Greek Mythology, including its Extension to Rome* (London: Methuen, 1928), and *Ancient Greek Religion* (London and New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1948).

⁴⁵Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. xv & xxiv.

⁴⁶See esp. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and more recently Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythology in the Pacific* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷The anthropological Other is in many respects a secularized divine—or demonic—Other. Consider Rudolf Otto and Rudolf Bultmann, who speak of God as *Das ganz andere*, “the completely different:” Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), and Rudolf Bultmann, “What Does It Mean to Speak of God?,” trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (London: Collins, 1987), pp. 79-90. Inspired by Kierkegaard, Karl Barth celebrated the “infinite qualitative difference” that separates God from human beings; see “The Humanity of God,” in Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (London: Collins, 1989), pp. 46-65. More recently, Mark C. Taylor has identified religious resonances underlying postmodern visions of otherness. See *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), *Tears* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990), and *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴⁸Bill Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 20-22, cp. 123-125.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 145-154.

⁵⁰Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 10-11.

⁵¹Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p. 256.

⁵²As we have seen, Powys saw all of life as replicating the Trojan war, while Walcott found it impossible to ignore the echoes of Homer in the ordinary lives of West Indians.

⁵³Contrast T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” lines 47-48, 125, 312-321, & 431, in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1971), pp. 38, 41, 46-47, & 50.

⁵⁴Gadamer, p. 257.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 256



Letters from John Cowper Powys to Merlin Wolcott at Colgate University

Edited and introduced by Constance D. Harsh

The Special Collections Department of Colgate University has recently received a bequest from the late Merlin D. Wolcott (1920-1993) of Sandusky, Ohio, who was for many years head librarian of the Stark County District Library. Wolcott carried on an interesting and often revealing correspondence with John Cowper Powys from April 1948 to April 1961. The collection consists of forty-six letters: forty-three from Powys himself and three from Phyllis Playter. Five letters from 23 January 1952 to 25 January 1953 were dictated by JCP to Phyllis Playter because of problems with his eyesight; they therefore appear in her neatly controlled handwriting rather than Powys's own distinctive hand, which is sprawling and irregularly sized with frequent emphatic underlining.

Powys's letters contain interesting references to the progress of his writings, particularly *Porius*. He is an enthusiastic friend to Walcott, entering sympathetically into the latter's schooling at Bowling Green State University and his subsequent work at several libraries. He also accepts Wolcott's praise and frequent presents of books with pleasure and even a certain complacency. On a few occasions a letter from Wolcott seems to have stirred JCP to particular heights of passionate enthusiasm; it is these letters that are most revealing, and so I quote them at length below. From the evidence of the letters, Powys and Wolcott met only once, shortly after 23 February 1954; a visit planned for the summer of 1950 had not come off. JCP seems to have anticipated and greatly enjoyed their 1954 encounter. Shortly before this visit he observes, "Except for Henry Miller who came and went about a couple of years ago there is no one from America neither Man nor Woman whose visit is more exciting & pleasant to me than thine. Hurrah! Hurrah! Merlin 'his wone self' as they say in Dorset is coming!" [letter of 18 January 1954].

Below I have excerpted some of the most interesting passages in Powys's side of this correspondence. All contribute

something to our understanding of Powys's particular interests and preoccupations, as well as of his emotional generosity to a young disciple. In the transcriptions below I have tried to give some sense of the look of the letters by indicating the number of underlines where appropriate (e.g., "4 und" signifies quadruple underlining). JCP did not generally use paragraphation within his letters—the beginning of a new paragraph within a letter below denotes the beginning of a separate marginal comment written sideways. Material JCP struck out is indicated with overstrikes; where the underlying text is illegible I have placed a question mark for each apparent letter. I have roughly indicated the length of dashes through the differential use of numbers of hyphens. I have supplied the text in brackets to remedy obvious deficiencies.

The correspondence begins with a letter responding pleasantly to an apparently unsolicited note in which Wolcott petitioned to visit him. What seems to excite JCP most about his new acquaintance is his name; he writes at the end of his response, "And now I beg you to tell me my dear Mr Wolcott how you got the name of Merlin? [4 und] That you should be called Merlin interests me because I am at this very hour [2 und] writing a chapter in my new Romance about the original Merlin!! And your name Wolcott interests me too for near t[he] town of [very light und] Ludlow [5 und], on the way here [very light und], in the village of Bitterley there is an old Manor of the Walcotts! [2 und] & I met one of them once" [25 April 1948]. (On the envelopes that have survived, JCP almost always misspells Wolcott's name as "Walcott.") Powys would refer with wonder to Wolcott's given name on more than one other occasion; for instance, he remarks on 19 October 1948 that "It really is amazing that I should be writing to [2 und] Merlin in the afternoon and in the evening about Merlin...." On 30 January 1949 he enthuses over the physical properties of a volume of Poe's poetry that Wolcott has sent him and then adds in a smaller hand at the end, "in fact I am thrilled by it only I wish you'd writ From Merlin in it!"

Their friendship seems indeed to have been anchored by Powys's almost mystical sense of their affinity, of which Wolcott's name was one token. JCP repeatedly enjoins the visit to "Bitterly where the manor-house and fine park belonged to the Walcotts & where inside the little Parish Church there [are] lots of tombs of Powyses—so both our ancestors mingle their

bones in the soil of this little village or hamlet for there's hardly anything there but the manor-house & the church!" [15 January 1950]. Later in their acquaintance JCP incorporated Wolcott into the rituals of his morning walk by first dedicating a rock to him and subsequently naming after him "that long long long long faded tree trunk lying across that wall which it broke down in its collapse. And as that is the way I go every morning . . . there is no day at that early hour when I don't think of my friend Merlin W." [20 July 1954].

[1 Oct 1948] Apparently Wolcott has just written to JCP with a combination of flattery and self-deprecation. His letter seems to have excited Powys's capacity for sympathetic affinity: he responds emotionally and proceeds to provide more detail than usual about his current literary project. (As an incidental note, Wolcott did serve in the U. S. Army from 1942-1945.)

Good Lord no! By the most terrific oath I know . . . [sic] i.e. "the head of my Father".... [sic] I swear I don't or ever could [4 und] think of my friend Merlin. D. W. as a "frivolous individual"! I am already in league with you, Merlin D. W., as an old friend & not only wouldn't I refuse to take any living person's judgment of you save my own [3 und] but and this exclusion [2 und] of contrary opinions (to mine) would even include your own, my friend, if you ever turned on yourself—as some have been known to do— especially young veterans! [3 und] I am simply thrilled Merlin D by every word of this lovely letter [3 und] of yours which I shall put in my special treasure-box to keep as a Pick-me-up & Restorative for whenever I get down-hearted. I have not finished yet my dear Merlin D. the last chapter of this ~~222~~ Romance of Corwen in the autumn of 499 AD [3 und] 50 years after St Patrick left Wales to convert Ireland and 30 years before the Welsh Monk Gildas finished his fierce Jeremiah-like denunciation of Britain from a monastery in Little Britain now Brittany. And while the two elegant very-late-latin letter-writers Cassiodorus in Italy and Apollonius in Gaul were polishing their aesthetic degenerate art for arts sake styles in their descriptions of ——— Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Huns, Vandals, Lombards, Franks, & Saxons!!

When I've finished it ~~it~~ it'll need all of 3 months I fancy to correct [2 und] the type script [3 und] & so there's no hope no hope my dear friend of its reaching my present Publishers ~~the B~~ John Lane the Bodley Head till after Xmas—&

then more delay—

yrs as ever
J C Powys [3 und]

[10 Jan 1949] In response to Wolcott's offer of a present, JCP has requested the poetry of Poe and the prose of Whitman. Wolcott apparently is about to send a used copy of the Poe, but wants Powys to reassure him that secondhand volumes are acceptable.

O! my dear friend don't 'ee worry in the very slightest about the Poe (or the Whitman either) being used copies [2 und] for I like [2 und] indeed in some ways prefer [2 und] used copies & I wanted [2 und] you to get second-hand books from some second-hand book shops for the people who sell those are in my experience far nicer & much fonder of what they sell than the people in new book-shops!

[4 April 1949] This letter apparently responds to a discussion of Wolcott's college classwork. (Four of the underlinings have been made by a pencil rather than by the pen otherwise used throughout. It is conceivable that JCP reread the letter and added these marks before mailing it.)

My
dear
friend

Corwen
April 4
1949

O how entirely I agree you are right about Macbeth!— But you must do as Shakespeare clearly always did as we can read between the lines again & again I mean by the general tone temper [pencil underlining] mood atmosphere & all those imponderables [3 und] you cannot logically explain or even [pencil] exactly put into words but of course "Profs" [2 und] have to earn their living, as we writers do, by putting into fairly clear & rational words what really in poetry & psychology and imagination & feeling and humour is outside the power of words—yes you must do as Shakespeare clearly had to do learn the great art of sympathetic & kind (tho' just secretly to yourself [3 und] a tiny bit ironical) "submission" [4 und] to our logical and rational teachers. Ironical [2 und] submission is [3 und] the word but the "irony" were best kept to ourselves for I swear [pencil] to thee my dear Merlin that the best [pencil underlining

of these two words has been erased] "novum organum" [2 und] or "organ of research" into the great secrets of life & of nature & of poetry is — humility. By this I mean the sort of suspension of judgement [2 und] till we know a bit more—that the great Goethe indicates rather than definitely lays down any law about in "Wilhelm Meister" where he discusses the problem of Hamlet [2 und] ! But there is a great & a subtle [pencil] art of "submission" (secretly [2 und] not a little [3 und] ironical!) —to constituted authority!—while we kick up from it what best will serve our turn! as we educate ourselves. This anyway is what I've found by experience. That its wisest to propitiate authority but think your own thoughts & ask all the questions you can to get all the information you can but keep your own counsel & think your own thoughts!!

Good luck to you in your exams!
ever your old friend J C Powys

[24 July 1949] Wolcott has again been describing his college courses and seems to have discussed his unmarried female professor of Contemporary Poetry at some length.

But don't O my dear dear Merlin I implore you disparage "old maidishness" or "old maids". I am a a [sic] fierce worshipper of "Old Maids" or "Spinster Ladies". I think they are far nicer wiser more beautiful than married women. They have always been to me goddesses like the great Pallas Athene. I am a male old maid myself [2 und] rather than a bachelor or a widower! Miss Weston [2 und] (I am afraid dead now) ~~for a decade~~ was quoted in the notes of "Wasteland" by T. S. Eliot [2 und] was the author of "From Ritual to Romance" [3 und] far the best book on Celtic Mythology & the Holy Grail just as Miss Harrison was far the best authority on Greek Mythology since Hesiod's [2 und] Theogony! And now Faber & Faber T. S. Eliot's Publishers (and he is one of the pseudo-directors I think) I understand of this firm have published a book absolutely new by some lady whose name if I recall it properly is Miss Levy a very good name for "thik little job" [2 und] as we say in Dorset for 'tis merely Levi as my own great great-grandfather who came from Hamburg & must surely have been a Jew tho' he was a a [sic] Christian Jew & I pre[fer?] ~~th~~ personally the un-baptized & circumcized [2 und] ones! - was a gent called Livius. I met Vachel Lindsay & hold him to be a greater poet than Frost. My

friend E. L. Masters (still alive but hors de combat) and under the shadow of an old friend of mine called Miss Abby Sunderland who is the head of Ogontz Girl School at Philadelphia) [sic] and under the protection of his faithful wife the 2d Mrs Masters who is an M. A. & teacher at Miss Sunderland's School—he wrote a life of Vachel Lindsay. I have—

I have decided NOT [5 und] to write an article on Poe as I have to write a book on Aristophanes and I am

and I am not equal with my one eye & humouring & hoarding the other to do this article as well: so if you have not yet got any Poe life let it go.

[7 Nov 1951] Again a letter from Wolcott moves JCP to effusive expressions of enthusiasm and affinity, this time with particular reference to *Porius*.

My most dear & so much wiser than in your extraordinary dignity & humility you have any idea of — Merlin — I am so thrilled with this letter from you dated Oct 28. O don't 'ee give it a thought that you were too rushed to celebrate either of our birthdays destined by the stars as you say to be so near each other. Now I'll tell you another resemblance. In a long & rather heavy & high-brow romance a sort of philosophical historical novel I've just published about Corwen in A D 499 in what they call the Dark Ages I not only imagine myself a friend of the Herculean young hero of the tale whose home is in the ancient British Camp overlooking still this little town on the Dee after all these centuries & that still has the original stones of the ruined walls in a great circle but I ~~also~~ imagine myself to actually be the Welsh Enchanter Merlin whose name in Welsh as I call him in this book (whose ~~name~~ Title is PORIUS Porius being the name of the young hero whose mother is a cousin of King Arthur and whose grandfather (his mother's father) is a Roman) is not "Merlin" for Merlin is only the English rendering of that name but Myrddin Wyllt [2 und] ~~or~~ alias Myrddin Ambrosius ~~or~~ alias Myrddin Emrys. I think you are very like my hero Porius and I know well I have put a lot of myself into Myrddin Wyllt who imagines himself a re-incarnation or perhaps even an extremely aged survival of the old heathen god Cronos or Kronos or Saturn who ~~???~~ was cast down by the thunder & lightning of his son Zeus or Jove into Tartarus a place below the

Earth and below even Hades. Between him & Porius there is a unique friendship very like the friendship now existing between you and me. So that in this Romance of mine I am Merlin and you are the hero of my story "Porius". It is possible that the same Firm of Publishers in America the Philosophical Library in New York who published my Rabelais may publish this book called ~~Porius~~ Porius in which case you will be able to see how you feel about the friendship between this young hero half ancient Briton & half Roman and this old Magician-Prophet who imagines to himself he is the old Greek god of the Golden Age ~~when~~ or the Reign of Saturn or of Cronos and who wants to bring back again this Golden Age or Age of Gold to take the place of the Age of Bronze in which he was living then & who prophesied the Iron Age and Age of the Air in which we are living Today!!

You sure are doing a lot for the younger generation my friend & I respect you for it — ever always your old Iohn.

I tell you a book I do want very much indeed and that is an Italian-English dictionary [2 und] !

[5 November 1954] Wolcott seems to have wanted to interest an American publisher in reprinting some of Powys's essays. The "Ben Zenin" to whom JCP refers is probably Benjamin Zevin, at the time president and director of the World Publishing Company in Cleveland, Ohio. World was apparently in the habit of reprinting literary works: it had issued such Dreiser novels as *An American Tragedy* and *Jennie Gerhardt* several times in the previous few years, and in 1956 it would produce a special limited edition (one of the first in English) of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*.

My dear and most kind friend

I do heartily—yes i' faith heartily thank you for your generous effort on my behalf with Mr Ben Zenin the Publisher; but I don't want to write to him myself; and I'll tell you frankly why. Old Age is affecting my mind—tho' not my body.... But I am beginning to lose my memory to such an extent that I even forget the very names I have been using for the characters in the New Novel or Romance I am writing about Roger Bacon in the year 1272 just 600 years before I was born! I am struggling on however with this and have just finished the 6th Chapter [3 und] But I have not the mental poise or energy to add to my correspondance [sic]—especially on such an exciting topi[c] as those little blue, yellow, red—all the colours of the rainbow

books.

[11 Feb 1955] Wolcott seems to have continued to pursue the publishing idea, and Powys offers further discouragement.

And now listen [2 und] my dear friend - I would rather you did not [2 und] carry any further your idea of getting those little books [3 und] of mine published. And I'll tell you why. I've got such a perfect publisher now for my old age in the boss of Macdonald's and I don't think he would like me to have those "little books" essays published in America. I would not want to annoy him in any way—

He goes on to explain that Macdonald's has contracted for the right to republish *Visions and Revisions*, which expresses many of the same thoughts as the "little books."

[7 Nov 1956] JCP sends thanks for Wolcott's gift of a volume of Hazlitt.

Hazlitt has never had full justice done to him. He is our Montaigne & no one has written better on [2 und] Montaigne! - He knew [3 und] that Montaigne is one of those Frenchmen like Rabelais earlier & Anatole France later to whom all of us have to go to learn the real meaning of the words "civilization" and "culture" "How" asked Goethe in some war with France "how can [2 und] I hate the French when I owe my whole intellectual culture to them?" And when I, old John your humble servant who was 84 on the 8th of Oct, think of the Books that have influenced my Education I cannot help recalling that only twice [3 und] in my whole life did I carry one book with me in my pocket wherever I went for Two years! [3 und] One of these was a volume of Hazlitt & the other a pocket edition of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass!

[6 Dec 1956] Powys revisits one of his favorite ideas.

O yes! you are so right about the infinite pathos, and often tragedy too, in the troubles of clever lonely ladies. I think myself that the human beings who come nearer to the uttermost secrets

of the universe and life are old Maids. I think when a a [sic] girl is ravished, although she loves according to Nature's law the bearing of children, she loses a strange mysterious insight and intimation which no mother (save Mother Nature perhaps!) can ever have.

While Powys continues to correspond with Wolcott until 1961, his letters become increasingly less substantive and his handwriting larger and shakier. To the end, however, his expressions of goodwill to Merlin Wolcott (and assurances of the same from Phyllis) remain undiminished.

Colgate University

Book Reviews

The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Frances Gregg. Ed. Oliver Marlow Wilkinson assisted by Christopher Wilkinson. Vol. 1. London: Cecil Woolf, 1994. xxxi. 270 pages. Photographs. £29.25.

Frances, writing to Jack in May of 1922, sums up his literary achievement this way:

By the way, it was never your *genius* that I doubted, it was your control of it. Of course I should have liked you to write something out of the very depths of your being, that would have been a comfort to people, queer lonely people like me, for years and years to come. You seemed to me only to tickle your own vanity with shams of books. Dostoevsky was nearest to what I wanted. Heaven knows that is troubled enough, and exciting, and twisted and nightmarish, —and yet, they come from such depths that there is refuge in them. While you, —but you know all this too well, don't you? (139)

The verdict would have been based in 1922 on two novels, *Rodmoor* (1916) and *After My Fashion* (which Frances would have seen, although it was not published until 1980), his poems, which she did *not* like, and his essays (she had, for example, typed *The Complex Vision* for him in 1919). Her comment was astute in its time, and it still is. Jack's genius could have found expression in a Dostoevskian mode, and later it did in *Wolf*

Solent and *A Glastonbury Romance* and, in flawed ways, in *Weymouth Sands*, *Maiden Castle* and even *Porius*.

Powys did learn to write for someone other than himself. Who taught him? Much of the credit must go to Frances Gregg. The letters published in this volume are the testimony, not, I believe, in a direct way, but in a strange and oblique way, revealing Powys's own slow coming to terms with his own egomania, his unexcused (and inexcusable) possessiveness, and with his malice-ridden "life illusion." They mark out a parenthesis in their careers, especially John's—from their first meeting in 1912 to the publication of *Wolf Solent* in 1929.

Oliver Wilkinson has been wise to include Frances's letter cited above (Number 126) in a volume that is almost completely devoted to Jack. Among the despairing letters of the 1920s, this stands out as an example of Frances Gregg's sharp advice to her lover, a man from whom she expected, perhaps, too much. Jack would not have taken her advice lightly, and I believe that we can discern the genesis of his first masterwork, *Wolf Solent*, in his reflections on his relation to Frances Gregg (who surely provided the imaginative energies needed for the creation of Christie). Frances's appeal that Jack's writing should bring comfort to the lonely and the queer, to people like herself, provides a haunting sound to their subsequent careers. This comfort, refuge, "leeway" (as she was later to say) would have been, to Frances's mind, what Dostoevsky's writing actually did provide.

Cassandra Laity in writing about Frances's place in H.D.'s formative years, as particularly revealed in H.D.'s *Paint It Today*, identifies Frances as a *femme fatale*. I have elsewhere stated my reservations about such an interpretation, but reading these letters I am much more willing to accept her view. To Hilda Doolittle's mind and to John Cowper Powys's, Frances exercised power, extraordinary erotic power. In letter after letter, Jack's reveals an obsession that he could not shake. The letters are filled with a sense of fatality, or impossibility, of *thanatos*, and not simply because of inopportune domestic relations.

It would be a mistake to read these letters as a documentation of inopportune, failed, disastrous domestic relations, or even as a compilation of Jack's literary and personal weirdnesses. Disasters and weirdness are certainly there, particularly in the 1919 letters at about the time living together was attempted in Sausalito, California (Letters 80 to 83, for example). Jack, in addition to being obsessed with Frances's body is obsessed by jealousy of her real or imagined longing to be with Ezra Pound (her relation to Ezra has yet to be assessed). Jack seems less concerned with her desire to continue meeting Hilda Doolittle.

In 1923, the relation changes from obsessiveness to bitterness. To Jack's laceration of himself, Frances says: "Naturally I don't take any credit for the change that you fancy you see in yourself, since the most frequent and lasting emotions that I have stirred in you have been malice and venom" (145). This is followed by "I really shall not write to you again. I got exactly what I deserved for that weak pleading gesture towards you, and I shall not forget this time" (146).

But the letters did continue, and they take a turn towards literary matters. There seems to be a gesture on Jack's part to explain, even advance, his thinking. For example, Frances old suitor, James Henderson, moves Jack to read philosophy. Jack talks about his failure to understand anything about Croce, but he tells in more positive terms about struggling with Spengler's *The Decline of the West*: "I say to you, Frances my old friend that these two volumes of Spengler are 'The greatest book of our time'" (180, emphasis added). Spengler's theories of decline and leadership are certainly consistent with Powys's writing after *Wolf Solent*. The decline of culture and the search for a new leader are the themes of Gregg's memoir, *The Mystic Leeway*.

The publication of this correspondence is an important event in Powys studies. It provides new details about his development, and it gives us an awareness of the complexities of the Modern, of our knowledge about the cultural forces at work in the early decades of this century. For example, we learn much about the "idealizing" of the woman (Frances named by Powys as "Sadista"), idealizing accompanied as always by abuse, about the politics of relationships among the seekers after artistic recognition (the references to Kenneth Macpherson—who became part of Hilda's circle—are particularly relevant to this), and, in a specific way, about the constant anxieties that Jack faced as a lecturer (the "great moments" were few and far between).

The Wilkinsons have provided an extremely rich text, both in the selection of the letters (about which we shall always want to know more) and in the presentation of supporting material. A circle is composed of intimates, acquaintances, the betrayers, the betrayed, the villainous and the generous. We are given sufficient, provocative and at times enticing explanation, both in the introduction and in the extensive notes, and in the biographical notes, invaluable to us because of Oliver Wilkinson's direct connections to so many of these people and their lives. The full index will prove useful both to the hurried reader and the diligent scholar.

The extent of material now available about Frances Gregg—in these letters and the letters to come, in addition to her memoir—will have an important influence on the direction

of biographical writing about the Powyses (Llewelyn, too, sought out—and received—Frances's affection, and she had a special liking for Bertie). On the one hand, the disclosure of Jack's career, still—after all these years—cloaked over with legends that range from the silly to the morbid, some of his own making, will be enhanced by the publication of the Gregg correspondence. On the other, we shall begin to build from the correspondence a moving account of Frances Gregg, a narrative marked both by her vivacity, by her longing for recognition, her toughness, and her struggle.

In spite of Gregg's candid reflections on Jack's lack of intellectual power and social understanding, he did develop—perhaps because of her candid reflections—extraordinary powers of perception, not only of stones, dogs and trees, but of human situations, of the obsessed, the queer and the lonely. These letters—forged as they are from illusions of literary success, from erotic frustration, domestic impropriety, self-deception, and from the relentless fear of financial ruin—still show a resiliency, a convalescence, and an acceptance of life.

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—, and John Cowper Powys. *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Frances Gregg*. Ed. Oliver Marlow Wilkinson and Christopher Wilkinson. Vol. 1. London: Cecil Woolf, 1994.

Ben Jones
Carleton University

Warren, Frank, ed. *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Glyn Hughes*. London: Cecil Woolf, 1994. 80 pp. £12.50.

This brief but enjoyable volume continues the series that Cecil Woolf has been publishing since the early 1980s. Letters to Sven-Erik Täckmark, G. Wilson Knight, Hal W. and Violet Trovillion, Ichiro Hara, Philippa Powys, Frances Gregg, and Dorothy Richardson have already appeared. The thirty-four letters included here were written between April 1957 and November 1961, the last half decade of Powys's life. Eleven of them had previously appeared in *John Cowper Powys: Letters to Glyn Hughes*, edited by Bernard Jones (Ore Publications, 1971).

The originals of ten other letters are in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Glyn Harry Hughes (1932-1972), son of a Welsh pastor, and native of Liverpool, was a song writer, jazz musician, and journalist, who began to write to Powys in 1957, when he was twenty-five, and JCP was almost eighty-five. The letters, edited by Frank Warren, who got to know Hughes in the late 1950s, are supplemented by useful notes and an appendix, as well as photographs of Powys and Hughes (not together), and a brief essay by Hughes. This last item, "Writer and Wizard: A Portrait of John Cowper Powys," from the October 1965 issue of *Prediction*, stresses Powys's "magical and occult insight" and mentions his appearing in astral form to Theodore Dreiser one night in New York City. Although Hughes visited Powys, Warren has been unable to come up with any details about the encounter.

In these letters, JCP struggles with the loss of vision in one eye as well as failing memory. It is the period during which he produced *Homer and the Aether* and *All or Nothing*, but his major work was behind him. *Atlantis*, which he calls here his favorite from among his books, had appeared in 1954. For JCP the big event of these years was his receiving the Bronze Plaque of the Free Academy of Arts in Hamburg from Rolf Italiaander on 7 July 1958. The president of the academy at that time was the great novelist Hans Henny Jahnn, a long-time admirer of Powys, whose major novels, sadly, have still not been translated into English.

Some of the material here is quite familiar. Powys avuncularly counsels Hughes to forget himself completely and live in his sensations (41). For Powys, we do not pursue personal individuation by "thinking about ourselves." Instead, "the more we lose ourselves in our work the more by a strange law of nature do we become our real selves" (52). JCP does not tell us much here about his previous experiences. He mentions briefly meeting Charlie Chaplin and Gen. William Booth of the Salvation Army and tells of receiving a letter of advice from Yeats. Although he needs help from the King James version to read the Bible in Welsh, Powys's enthusiasm for Wales shines through in his praise for Prince Madoc as one of the discoverers of America.

Powys's letters here vary between unsurprising literary appreciations and more pointed personal revelations. On the one hand we see his delight as a young man in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, and Harrison Ainsworth. His continued interest in this form extends to Elizabeth Goudge's *The White Witch* about Cavaliers and

Roundheads (1958). On the other hand, he wishes he might really be part Jewish (21), states that the Jews got their bad idea of everlasting Hell from the Babylonians during the Captivity (46), and declares that he prefers the Devil to God (56). His statements about sexuality are forthright: JCP found it "impossible to be a 'homo' in the quaint modern sense," being "hopelessly attracted to the opposite sex but in such funny ways!" (26). In mentioning his son, Littleton Alfred, Powys writes, "I have a *horror* of 'fucking' as it is called. It is amazing how I ever managed to have a son!" (26).

Concerning the sadism that so fascinated him, JCP proclaims, "Do you know I've *never blushed* in my whole life! I expect that is because my *only* sexual vice has always been sadism. Otherwise sex leaves me pretty impervious!" (33). In a moment of grandeur Powys amuses himself by comparing himself to such a great sadist as Gilles de Rais (even though Powys only cut into pieces a bunch of earthworms rather than torturing to death 250 women and children) (46).

This volume takes an hour to read, and it is worth the time, even for seasoned Powys fans. One small problem is related to the editorial policy. It is not always clear where Powys has made a blunder. Did Powys or the typesetter write "*homo hominus*" (26) and "it's job" (29)? The volume is physically attractive, although the price is a bit high. One looks forward to other titles announced by Cecil Woolf, such as the *Uncollected Essays* edited by Paul Roberts and a second volume of the letters of JCP and Frances Gregg, edited by Oliver and Christopher Wilkinson.

Peter Christensen
University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

Observations, Bibliographic and Social

THE 1995 CONFERENCE OF THE PSNA. The Powys Society conference of summer 1995 was held at Massey College (the University of Toronto). Speakers included W. J. Keith, Ian Duncan, Larry Mitchell, Jerome McGann, Charles Lock, and Peter Christensen. (Robin Wood led a discussion after Christensen's paper.) McGann's address, the featured event, has since been published in the *Times Literary Supplement* as a long review of Wilbur Albrecht's recent edition of *Porius*. See "Marvels and Wonders," in the issue of 1 December 1995, pp. 4-5, for McGann's account of "Powys, *Porius* and the attempt to revive romance in the age of modernism." The essays by Keith and Lock will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Powys Notes* and we anticipate that the other essays, each with vivid

points of interest, will also be in print soon, hither and yon. Certain features, such as Ian Duncan's memorably dramatic reading of passages from *A Glastonbury Romance*, will, alas, be unreproducible on the page.

This conference was stimulating on account of its intellectual coherence. The papers were unusually well-sequenced; they created a kind of reverberatory effect, calling out to each other across the coffee breaks. Told to recall a memorable moment during the three-day event, Maxwell said: "I asked McGann to talk about the poems in *Porius*, and he observed that they didn't stand out for him from the rest of the book, but then he made a striking and weird remark about the the cumulative impact of reading *Porius*; he compared this experience with the impact of Gavin Bryars's composition, 'Jesus' Blood Has Never Failed Me Yet.' (I think Tom Waits does the reputedly hypnotic and mantra-like chanting on the commercial recording.) This was certainly suggestive. Got to hear the CD of Bryars's piece. Not while reading *Porius*, though. That would be too much."

The ever-popular business meeting of the Society produced several new officers. Ian Duncan was elected the new President, following Michael Ballin, and Nicholas Birns will take over the editorship of *Powys Notes* after the publication of the next issue (12.1). Duncan, the author of *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, and Dickens* (1992, Cambridge), was recently appointed to a chair in the English Department at the University of Oregon (Eugene); Birns, whose dissertation is titled "Spirits Linger: Christianity and Modernity in Twentieth Century American Literature," has published widely on twentieth century literature and is instructor in postcolonial literature at the New School for Social Research. Birns's most recent editorial work has been for *Antipodes, A North American Journal of Australian Literature*.

The JCP walking stick which features as the chief fetish of the PSNA is still, we must finally admit, in the possession of Michael Ballin, who has promised to give it up when he finishes, as we suspect he soon will, his long-awaited edition of the letters between John Cowper Powys and James Purdy.

POWYS IN ALBANIA (AGAIN). Antonia Young writes from Colgate University—

"Following up on your...offer or request for something touching on matters of Powysian interest, reminded me of a letter I was reading only yesterday from an Albanian friend, Meri Lalaj.

Meri is an intellectual and this has been the cause of her considerable suffering during the past fifty years, living under a severely oppressive regime. However, her greatest enjoyment in life has been reading and now she is also writing and translating. She is starting to translate *The Meaning of Culture* into Albanian!"

Antonia Young's letter reminds us that we would like to know more about the fortunes of JCP and other Powyses in Eastern Europe. Charles Lock told us a story a few years ago about encountering a translator who was rendering John Cowper Powys into Romanian, but he never sent us a written version of the story and we now only partly remember it. Are you there, Lock? Do you hear us from the remote fastnesses of Denmark? We would be pleased to hear from Lock and other correspondents on this topic.

On Antonia Young's request, we have sent several issues of *Powys Notes* to Meri Lalaj. We will also send a peculiar object of Powysian interest which we recently received in the mail: a miniature clock engraved with the initials of the Powys Society of North America. (See offer in the last issue.) But first we must locate a battery which will make it go, which for some reason we are having trouble doing.

"RADIO INSIDE" ONCE MORE. In response to a query in *Powys Notes* 10.1, Reginald Clarke writes from Citrus College (California)—

"I discovered 'Radio Inside' in a video store last night so I have this to report. Eleven minutes into the film the main character has just graduated from college and is apparently looking for a job in the classified section of a newspaper. But he is really doing a crossword puzzle. He asks his brother's girlfriend, who works in a bookstore, 'Who wrote *Glastonbury Romance*?'. He leaves out the 'A' in the title but adds, 'Five letters.' She says, 'I've seen it in the bookstore.' After a little more talk she says, oddly, 'Remember to call the guy in Glastonbury. His name is John Cowper Powys' (which she pronounces Pow-ees). She spells it and concludes the conversation on her way out the door, 'Five letters!' The scene functions as a point of contact between the characters only. Powys is never again alluded in in the film."

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE BRITISH POWYS SOCIETY. The 1995 *Powys Journal* reached us a number of months ago. Running to 232 pages, it features critical essays by Janina Nordius (on

solitude in *Maiden Castle*), Ben Jones (on Frances Gregg's *The Mystic Leeway*), and Robin Wood (on *Owen Glendower*). In keeping with the established approach of the *Journal*, there are also an extraordinary number of primary documents: essays by John, T. F., Llewelyn, and A. R. Powys; selections from the diary of Katie Powys and the journals of Mary Casey; Charles Francis Powys's sermon for Montacute Club Day, May 1894 (accompanied by a wonderful photograph of Montacute Sunday School, ca. 1906); letters from T. F. Powys to Valentine Ackland and John Cowper Powys to Gerard Casey; Diana Petre's "Living with Louis [Wilkinson]," reprinted from *The London Magazine*; and Phyllis Plater's poem "On the Departure of Powys for England." The result is a very densely-worked evocation of a late-Victorian and early modern milieu (the Victorian and modern sides blend interestingly). A substantial review section is headed by Charles Lock's review-essay of Paul Roberts's *Elusive America: The Uncollected Essays of John Cowper Powys*. Lock argues the position that JCP was peripheral in British literary culture but an insider in its American equivalent, substantiating his case by following Powys's relations with such contemporaries as Ezra Pound, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters and William Faulkner (he pays a little extra attention to Powys's good review of *Absalom, Absalom*, to our mind also a document of major interest) and with such faded luminaries as Longfellow.

[On a related subject: Those who have followed Janina Nordius's articles on John Cowper Powys, including the essay cited above, will be pleased to hear that her dissertation is now finished and will in due course appear as a monograph. The dissertation is titled "*I Am Myself Alone: Solitude and Transcendence in John Cowper Powys* (Göteborg University, 1996).]

The April 1996 issue of *The Powys Society Newsletter* also contains a number of striking primary documents, including a Wordsworthian fragment of blank-verse autobiography by JCP—apparently written in the mid-1890s, and transcribed by Paul Roberts from a manuscript at the National Library of Wales—and a reminiscence by Marian Powys, "Our So Happy Childhood," from the papers of Stephen Powys Marks. In addition, we hear about the formation of a Literary Gallery at the Dorset County Museum—where many Powysian manuscripts are on deposit—and learn how Michael Skaife d'Ingerthorpe contemplated buying the JCP cottage in Blaenau Ffestiniog, but didn't: This latter essay belongs to a genre which we have often considered writing about. It might be called the Narrative of Disappointment. (Joyce's tale, "Araby," is our

favorite instance.) A number of notices cover translations of Powys recently published in Germany, Switzerland, and France. Finally, we are pleased to hear that Isobel Powys Marks took a balloon ride over Bath on her ninetieth birthday.

The same issue of *The Powys Society Newsletter* contains a prospectus from the British society proposing publication of John Cowper Powys' diaries from 1934-35, clearly, as the prospectus argues, a "pivotal" period in the life of JCP—but also, according to the proposal, a pivotal period in the life of Dorset. The aspiring editors are Morine Krissdóttir and Roger Peers (former Curator of the Dorset County Museum). The book, they suggest, would be designed to appeal not only to literary types but also to local historians: thus, perhaps, its proposed title, *The Dorset Year*. Many useful features are promised. "An essentially non-academic introduction would set the background, while a comprehensive index would help the casual browser and serious student alike." There would be an expensive collector's edition and a modestly-priced paperback, issued simultaneously. It is good to see JCP's diaries coming into print, and all Powysians will certainly want a copy of this one, if it is issued. (The possibilities of a genuine interdisciplinary collaboration seem real.) At the same time, some of us will be unable to suppress a sigh of regret that publication of the Powys diaries and the Powys letters can't occur less patchily than they do. Perhaps, if the present venture is successful, some kind of long-term project could be discussed, at least for the diaries. On the other hand, free enterprise may dictate otherwise.

A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS. Also on the subject of the *Newsletter* (we now reach the meta-level of the discussion), Paul Roberts and Stephen Powys Marks write from England—

Dear Richard

Having just received and read with interest, the latest number of *Powys Notes*, we are grateful for the comments under the heading 'Publications from the British Powys Society' on page 59. However, we feel that we must respond to the disparaging remarks about our *Newsletter* in the preceding piece, 'Recent Writings on Powys.'

First of all, the Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines 'fly-by-night' as 'unreliable'; it is not nice to be considered to have a slightly unreliable look: how is such a comment justified?

You say that it is the smallest of the three magazines

reviewed (we note that no comparison is made with *Powys Notes*). No doubt this is so, volume for volume, but with 136 pages in the three issues for 1994, and 152 for the three newsletters issued for this year, it certainly outdoes the sporadic and irregular issues of *The Powys Review* since 1991 in quantity of published material (two 'double' volumes containing 152 pages in all for four years).

We accept that the *Newsletter* is the least beautifully produced of the three periodicals noticed. It would be surprising if this were not so, since we do not set out in our *Newsletter* to rival either Belinda Humfrey's *Review* or *The Powys Journal*; on the contrary, it is produced as economically as possible. It is typeset by Stephen and printed by a printing firm which specialises in, *inter alia*, catalogues for book dealers, from camera-ready copy prepared on Stephen's own laser printer.

The paragraph on Recent Writings would give the impression to anyone who did not know otherwise, that The Powys Society comes off rather badly in the comparison: was the writer of the paragraph aware that the *Newsletter* was not in fact our only periodical? It might have been fairer had it been made clear that we published both *The Powys Journal* and *The Powys Society Newsletter*. The *Newsletter* is, therefore, our *second periodical*, intended to be subordinate in every way to the *Journal*. Obviously, there are many ways in which to design and produce a second periodical, but we feel, as do our members, that we do pretty well to produce two regular journals, an academic annual of high quality and the *Newsletter* three times a year carrying not only news and reports but also articles and reviews of substance, as you yourself have noted.

It might interest you to know what these publications cost: the gross cost of producing the *Journal* last year was 2,343 for 500 coies, the three newsletters less than 400 each for 400 copies, entirely paid for out of our own funds. Perhaps, you say, the cost reflects the quality of the *Newsletter*: well, so be it. We have made the decision, for our *second periodical*, to go for a quantity of material we can afford to put into it, bearing in mind that we consider it essential to be in touch with our members regularly three times a year.

You also comment that it is probably unrepresented in North American library collections; this may be so, but in fact the *Newsletter* is more widely distributed because the *Journal* is sent out only to paid-up members whereas the *Newsletter* goes out to all those who are on our books.

We hope you will understand our dismay on reading a paragraph which may have been written without too much thought, but we wish to have the record put straight, and therefore ask you to print this letter in the next issue of *Powys*

Notes.

Yours sincerely

Paul Roberts
Vice-Chairman and Editor of *The Powys Society Newsletter*

Stephen Powys Marks, Treasurer and Publications Manager

The Editors note that several other members of the British Powys Society wrote in response to the little notice of *The Powys Society Newsletter*; none of them (barring the editors themselves) assumed that the paragraph in question was disparaging. (One correspondent noticed genially that *he* liked the *Newsletter* too.) We submit to Roberts and Marks that they may be over-reading a bit at certain points in their letter. Our own feeling, since this wasn't clear to them, is that the *Newsletter* is in certain ways the *most* interesting of the various publications devoted to the Powyses. (We have a taste for bibliography and details—the sort of details that God is presumed to inhabit, according to Walter Benjamin, Ferdinand Braudel, or some other luminary—which the *Newsletter* regularly satisfies.) Indeed, there is little in the claims made by Roberts and Marks with which the Editors of *Powys Notes* are not in complete agreement. (We do not, as they apparently do, associate quality or importance with number of pages produced, but discussions of this difference, along with investigations of the *real* meaning of “fly-by-night,” can perhaps be put off to some other time.)

Nonetheless, we do feel that our one reservation about the *Newsletter* has been missed. This reservation, we hasten to add, has only the vaguest connection with the performance of Roberts and Marks, which is admirable; it is a question, rather, of the structure and distribution of knowledge at the present time. When we observe that the *Newsletter* is probably not present in many North American libraries, we are implicitly recommending that our own readers get their hands on it because they are otherwise unlikely to see it. To our mind, this is a problematic circumstance. A word of history from an American perspective may be illuminating here. About fifteen years ago, there was, at least among librarians in this country, a sort of anti-Alexandrian movement. No longer, so went the argument, could even the largest research library pretend to have a comprehensive collection. (Perhaps it was just as well that the great library of Alexandria was burned.) People who wanted books not intensely in demand would just have to go to

the interlibrary loan office, or scrounge for their own copies. In fact, many librarians at this time (well before e-mail, cd-rom, and all that sort of thing) seemed to decide that books and magazines were a real nuisance to have around—expensive dust-gatherers, a large percentage of which could be well dispensed with (after all, who would notice?). For a variety of reasons this movement made a big impression on the attitudes and habits of the professions as a whole. (Increases in the prices of scientific periodicals—especially at Pergamon Press—may have been the straw that broke the camel's back). It is now very hard *even to give a gift subscription* to a large research library. We know; we've tried. We've tried, it might be added, with several publications treating the writings of the Powys family.

Perhaps with this background, the comment about libraries will make more sense to readers not living in North America. On the positive side, there is at least one course of action open to editors who wish to see their publications accessible not just this year but next and even twenty or a hundred years down the line. (The *Newsletter* contains bibliographical information and other data unlikely to be discovered anywhere else for quite a while, so this century-long timeable is not such a phantasm.) The MLA bibliography, accessible by rather simple computer manipulations, looks comprehensive. It is certainly—on our side of the Atlantic—the most frequently used bibliographical resource for literary scholars. However, checking through it a few months ago we discovered extremely spotty treatment given to (our test case) the writers of the Powys family. The MLA knew about *The Powys Review*. It knew about some issues of *Powys Notes* but not about others. It was unaware of the existence of either *The Powys Journal* or *The Powys Society Newsletter*. In theory this situation can be rectified by submission of the periodicals in question to the makers of the MLA Bibliography. We ourselves are engaged in trying to get some of the (erratically) unindexed *Powys Notes* into the Bibliography. Our suggestion to Marks, Roberts (and to Peter Foss, editor of the *Journal*) is that they do the same for their publications. A bibliography is not an adequate substitute for a good library collection, nor for a real public sphere. But it may be the best we can hope for at this moment.

Foss's *Lives*. Peter Foss, editor of *The Powys Journal*, has published his second book of poems, *Lives* (North Wales and Wirral: Headland Publications, 1995), U.K. £5.95. It is a slim collection whose slimness wore well with us. Foss writes succinct lyrics of a kind that might, in this country, be identified with the poets admired by Yvor Winters (e.g., the young Thom Gunn), though the style is gaudier than this comparison

suggests. There is an elegy and an aubade; several skillful rhymed poems mix with work in a kind of gnomic free verse. If we were to play the game of Powysian association with *Lives*, we would mention first a piece called "Primus Fecit X," from an inscription on a Roman flue-tile found in Leicester: "Tiler/in tanned hide, moulding mud,/made ten," it begins. But the treatment of this enigmatic inscription proves quite different than JCP's use of similar epigraphs in *Poirus*. Several of the strongest poems in *Lives* describe images: a photograph, a video, a painting. The piece called "Video" is partly incomprehensible to us, but it includes the best description we have encountered of that frustrating and sinister medium, and of its possible relation to human emotions. Foss's ekphrastic instincts return in the collections's last and perhaps most ambitious poem, an elegy "In Memory of George Fraser, which includes a memorable description (Fraser's?) of *La Tempesta*. If we have made this volume sound somewhat intellectual and fully dedicated to high art, then so it is—but not to its detriment.

MYSTERIES OF THE SCHUSTER ARCHIVE. The electronic bulletin-board of SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing, is learned and variegated. Some months ago we came across a posting of interest to Powysians, by Joan Shelley Rubin of the University of Rochester. Rubin had been trying to consult the papers of Max Schuster and Richard Simon at Columbia University. Her difficulties in doing so were considerable. "The Schuster collection, which is massive, has been restricted for many years and still was when I last checked (I'd appreciate knowing if the restriction has been lifted). It's closed because Pearl London, Schuster's stepdaughter (I think), is writing a book about the firm. Columbia will tell you [an inquirer on the network] to contact her for permission to gain access. She virtually never grants it, however; several years ago, she let me see some files she thought were peripheral to her project, but that was all." This story rang a bell with us. Not so many years ago, when the Powys Society of North America was preparing a conference in New York City, a member there asked Pearl London if she would be interested in speaking about Simon and Schuster to a gathering of people with an interest in matters Powysian. "She seemed wary," this correspondent wrote to us, and indeed we heard no further from Pearl London. Whether the history of the firm is so shocking as to require this level of secrecy will probably remain unclear for some time. At all events, restricted access to the Schuster archives is one of the reasons why the publishing history of John Cowper Powys is presently quite difficult to research or write about.