

# Powys Notes

the semiannual journal and newsletter of the  
Powys Society of North America

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*Subscription*

\$10.00 U.S. (\$12.00 Can.) for two issues;  
includes membership in PSNA

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POWYS NOTES, Vol. 6, No. 1: Spring 1990. © The Powys Society of North America. Quotations from the works of John Cowper Powys, T.F. Powys and Llewelyn Powys used by kind permission of Laurence Pollinger Limited, on behalf of the respective Estates of these Authors.

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### The Powys Society of North America

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.

*Powys Notes*, the Society's publication, appears in Spring and Fall issues and presents scholarship, reviews, and bibliography of Powys interest. Submissions may be addressed to the Editor. IBM or Mac compatible discs with accompanying printed copy are welcome.

## IN THIS ISSUE

For all the expansiveness of his numerous works of literary appreciation, John Cowper Powys was not especially noted as a critic of the drama. In fact, his comments on a 1927 production of *The Dybbuk* (our reprint feature for this issue) are, to our knowledge, his one and only foray into live theatrical criticism. Powys speaks of his experience of this often-revived, much-translated play as being, "of all other modern performances . . . at least for the present writer--his one supreme theatrical 'moment'." For that reason alone the piece might be of interest, but it is noteworthy too in its subtle and penetrating characterizing of the Jewish creative spirit, as well as for its indication of the sort of intellectual company that Powys was keeping at that time, at least in print.

Powys's review appeared in the New York based *Menorah Journal*, which was one of the first significant voices of Jewish thought in an essentially non-Jewish society, and which was later described by Sidney Hook as "one of the best journals of its time." The likes of Lionel Trilling and Clifton Fadiman were among Powys's co-reviewers, while during its zenith (1928 to 1932, say), Tess Schlesinger, Luigi Pirandello, and Thomas Mann were frequent contributors. The editor of the journal was Elliot Cohen (later the founder of *Commentary*), who was intent on producing a socially conscious publication that could provide a forum for writers of all political persuasions but that would retain its approximately leftist editorial stance. Readers of *Autobiography* will recognize why this combination would not have been an unattractive one to John Cowper Powys.

For those who braved gridlock and tornadic winds and rain last June 9 on Manhattan's Westside, the two essays in this issue--by Linda Pashka and Peter G. Christensen-- will be familiar. They come of course from PSNA's 1989 conference, "Powys and the Feminine," held at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and attended by members and friends from the U.S., Canada, and the

[continued on p. 44]

Powys's Punch and Judy Shows: *Weymouth Sands* and Misogyny

LINDA PASHKA

Mr. Gaul thought to himself, as he shook hands with Perdita--"I must devote a special chapter, when I come to what with us today represents monasticism, to show how it came about that the old monks thought of women in connection with the devil. I believe there's a deep metaphysical secret here--only it needs working out."

--*Weymouth Sands*

If we can trust Samuel Pepys' diary, May 26, 1689 was the three hundred and twenty-seventh anniversary of the first *Punch and Judy* show to be performed in England (Philpott, 208). Since 1662, the puppet show has become so popular that it is hard find anyone who has not heard of or seen the performance. Punch and Judy have made their way into our literature, too. From Dickens to J.M. Barrie to Russell Hoban in recent years, novelists have drawn on Punch. Although the books on Punch do not mention him, another novelist who has made use of the play significantly is John Cowper Powys. In *Weymouth Sands*, Powys not only uses the show "to enhance the verisimilitude of [his] tale" (Powys 2, 15), to add Weymouth colour, but thematically and structurally, *Weymouth Sands* is a *Punch and Judy* show. On its tropological level, the novel sustains this reading. The generous use of simile, metaphor and image drawn from *Punch and Judy* illuminates the misogyny at the heart of the play itself, and at the heart of *Weymouth Sands*. Indeed, misogyny was closer to Powys's heart than we might like to believe: throughout *Weymouth Sands*, Punch figures, violent and phallic, violate the Judy figures, passive and yonic, which threaten them.

Powys's use of the show is, of course, more complex than this, but before discussing it, a brief history of Punch and Judy will help to set the stage. Punch is the English manifestation of the Italian Pulcinella, a character in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. After Pulcinella was imported to England, he became Punchinello, later, Punch. Judy seems to come from Dame Gigone, the companion of the French marionette Polichinelle

(Speaight, 192). Her name was Joan, but by the early nineteenth century she was Judy. Punch and Judy were marionettes until the early eighteenth century, when they began to appear as glove puppets, as they have continued, and as they appear in Powys.

The earliest book of the *Punch and Judy* show is J.P. Collier's 1828 script. It has continued to be published in the twentieth century and was the text readers (and writers) knew best until the 1950s (Leach, 140). I assume Powys would have had this knowledge, along with the experience of viewing performances at seashores in England. The content of a *Punch and Judy* show changed through the centuries and varied from Punch man to Punch man. What follows is an outline of Collier's text.

Punch enters, calling himself "one jolly good fellow" and "a rogue" with the girls. He establishes himself to be a violent man, struggling first with the dog Toby, then with Toby's master, whom he kills. Punch is gleeful. Judy enters, and Punch kisses her while she slaps his face. Then, left alone with his child, Punch bangs its head several times against the stage. He throws the child into the audience. Judy returns, and, learning of the child's death, hits Punch with a stick. They struggle; Punch gets the stick and hits Judy repeatedly until she is dead. He laughs, commenting that to lose a wife is to gain a fortune. Later, a figure enters and dances, elongating his neck grotesquely. A doctor enters and is killed by Punch. A black servant is beaten by him. A blind beggar-man is killed by him. Two officers come in turn to take him away for his murders; Punch knocks them down. A hangman carries Punch off to prison where Punch outmanoeuvres the hangman and hangs him. Punch's final conflict is with the Devil, whom he kills with his stick. Although the *Punch and Judy* show evolved over time, one stock element is Judy's early death, sometimes provoked.

*Punch and Judy* began, it seems, as working-class entertainment, but by the mid-nineteenth century it was becoming middle-class (Leach, 32; 76). In the twentieth century, there have been opera, ballet and ice rink *Punch and Judy* performances. Its most common appearance, however, is as a travelling one-man show, performed at the seaside in the summer. One travelling showman was Frank Edmonds, Weymouth's Punch and Judy man from 1926-1974 (Leach, 113). Before him it seems likely that his father Harry Edmonds

performed at the Weymouth seaside; I conjecture that the elder Edmonds or one of his contemporaries (see Leach 112-114) was seen by Powys when he was a child at Weymouth.

Robert Leach calls Punch "an eternal archetype" (141), and I think he is quite right. But what is Punch an archetype *of*, and what fascination does he hold for us and for Powys? He is generally discussed as an Everyman figure, by the few who have considered him critically. His triumphs are those of the oppressed proletarian, an id-figure, asserting his individualism and independence in the face of the crushing trinity: marriage, law and religion. Punch is a folk-hero--particularly, a *male* folk hero. When those who have studied *Punch and Judy* write that the play represents revenge on "nagging wives" (Speaight 2, 145), "freedom from oppression" (Leach, 165), and the conquering of the Evil principle, Judy, by the Good, Punch (Byrom, 1), they write from the point of view of the male, seeing the female as the "other" at the least, as threatening antagonist, or as engulfing danger. They describe the *Punch and Judy* show as an allegory in which the oppressed figure finally triumphs. But whose oppression is escaped? Punch's, certainly. What is not taken seriously is that Punch is himself a violent and ruthless oppressor--of animals, of children, of minorities, of women. The twentieth century calls people like Punch cruel to animals, child abuser, racist, misogynist. All of these practices proceed from the abuser's perception of a self-versus-other division, a pattern in which the self is privileged to an extreme.

I am aware of *Punch and Judy*'s operation as fantasy, as a world in which Judy represents the attractive/repulsive object of desire who carries with her obligation as the price of enjoyment. The viewer's satisfaction is to be had through an identification with Punch, who, as Leach points out, "commits forbidden deeds, yet remains guilt-free" (170). Still, it is necessary that we, the audience, consider the implications of such an identification with Punch. I will argue that Powys was embarked on such self-criticism.

The misogynist message in *Punch and Judy* is transmitted on the figurative level in the performance after Judy's death. Of the nine "scenes" usual to the play (Leach, 154), Judy appears only in the second. The rest of the show contains threatening female symbols. The doctor and police officers may be manifestations of the Judy figure: the controlling mother-image

or castrating female. With its open mouth, the crocodile--which replaces the devil in the twentieth-century versions--is a yonic hole which swallows Punch's sausages, or his nose, or his stick, or Punch himself (Leach, 172-73). The noose in the hanging scene is a threatening female symbol which kills the hangman when he enters it. Punch's stick, the symbol of male potency and power, always triumphs over the traps laid for Punch by his female antagonist.

While the phallic and violent associations with Punch are obvious, the character Punch has worn many faces over time: in Powys's novel Punch is at his most interesting, his most complex. The Powysian Punch is ruthlessly directed and violent; he is also a trickster, a dreamer, a philosopher. He is a man eternally frustrated and puzzled by women, as his unconscious actions attest. And Powys's Judies *are* victims and masochists; they are also teasing tormentors. Powys appropriates the Punch and Judy tale and shapes it according to his own philosophy and psychosexual identity.

Powys is often held to love and idolise women, to worship the feminine. G. Wilson Knight and H. P. Collins both see in Powys the Teiresian ability to sympathise with the female, to see with a female consciousness. "Powys writes from a bisexual integration," Knight tells us, "half a woman, he is a Tiresias understanding sexual affairs from the women's side" (Knight, 21). Collins agrees that "into feminine instincts John Cowper's penetration is . . . extraordinary" (Collins, 214). Knight realises, however, that Powys's "sadistic instinct" (Knight, 127n) is at the root of his creativity. "Much of his writing can be read as an attempt to replace this grim recognition by a sunnier . . . gospel" or life-way (Knight, 21). In fact, I think much of Powys's writing can be read as an attempt to *display*, at the tropological level especially, Powys's uneasiness about, perhaps his fear of, or hatred of, women.

Powys's misogyny (my word) is evident in his philosophy, too, as H. W. Fawcner points out--the Powys hero is a Self; the female is an Ego.

Most painful of all is the vision of the Ego from the perspective of Self, the manipulative and autonomous seen from the vantage point of the receptive and the communicative. The Powys-hero, being male, sees this

Ego in the female, and therefore females in general tend to be given a number of negative attributes that belong, essentially, to the Ego of both sexes . . . . [Women] are part of matter, matter itself. Men are not matter, not nature. The male is that which destroys matter, from without (Fawcner, 90-91).

Fawcner argues that the slit and crack imagery in Powys is not purely sexual, but is "something far more complex, interesting, and significant" (Fawcner, 164), relating it to a quasi-religious experience. Flinging and thrusting are ways of transcending consciousness. Morine Krissdottir, too, explains the "abnormal" (non-consummatory) sexual encounters in *Weymouth Sands* in terms of Taoist erotic mysticism (Krissdottir, 104).

These are valid explanations, but to explain the male-violating-female suggestions in Powys as mystical seems more to dispose of the problem than to analyse it. Powys's own reflections in the *Autobiography* point to a lack of comfort not only with the Female, but with women. He writes that when his dog Thora died, he was sent into a neurotic fear of the feminine:

A gulf of femininity opened beneath my feet. It made me shudder with a singular revulsion. Everything I looked at in Nature . . . presented itself to me as a repetition of the feminineness of Thora! . . . The thing went so far with me that I became panic-stricken lest I myself should develop feminine breasts, breasts with nipples resembling the dugs of Thora (Powys 1, 222-23).

This may be explained as grief, but the hints of a whore-madonna complex are difficult to ignore. Powys coupled a "frenzied eye-lust" (Powys 1, 242) for distant girls with a purely spiritual pleasure in his own companions. He writes, "though I derived plenty of romantic and sentimental overtones from being with . . . street-girls I got hardly any erotic pleasure. My desire, directly I became friendly with the girl herself, changed into a sort of ideal attachment" (Powys 1, 241).

This Powysian attraction/repulsion pattern is common to not only Powys but also his several extensions--the Powys heroes, his Punch men. John Crow, Adrian Sorio, Wolf Solent and Magnus Muir all carry sticks, as Punch does, of course. All use their sticks as phallic talismen, compelling, warding off or

attacking desired but evil or threatening female figures. All of Powys's major romances can be read as *Punch and Judy* shows, but none so explicitly as *Weymouth Sands*. Chapter thirteen of *Weymouth Sands*, "Punch and Judy," acts, in fact, as the "title" chapter in the novel because it is there that the Sands themselves are discussed at length. The dry sands and the wet sands are ever separate, like earth and sea, male and female, Punch and Judy.

Considering *Weymouth Sands* structurally as a *Punch and Judy* show, we can reconsider some of the objections that have been levelled at it. One critic writes, "I find *Weymouth Sands* slack and disoriented, both thematically and stylistically. . . . The numerous subplots are not held together . . . but allowed to fly off and float into extinction like sparks from an untended fire" (Krisdottir, 107). She finds the hidden symbolism in the novel "perfunctory and often forced," and suggests that setting the novel in Weymouth may have been "disruptive" (107). While it is true that *Weymouth Sands* is lacking in conventional unity of focus, it is still carefully structured. Characters appear and are developed one by one, coming together only as incidentally as the characters in Joyce's *Ulysses* do. The structure of *Weymouth Sands* is in novelistic terms a loosely picaresque allegory; in dramatic terms it is that of the morality or passion plays from which *Punch and Judy* descended. In *Punch and Judy*, recall, Punch remained on stage, while the rest of the "cast" came onto the stage one by one and rarely interacted with one another. *Weymouth Sands* is also set in one town and structured similarly. We examine Magnus, then Perdita, the Skald, then Daisy, then Peg, then Gaul over a hundred pages before we return to Magnus.

There are fourteen characters in a standard *Punch and Judy* show. Punch sees brief action with thirteen of them. In *Weymouth Sands*, Powys lists twenty-two characters among his *dramatis personae*. I count thirteen relationships, too, in *Weymouth Sands*. There is a clown, an officer, a doctor, a "hanged man," a character who has the trick of elongating his neck, dancers, and a few versions of Punch and of Judy. Each character comes onto the stage for a bit, then exits. A unifying motif among these roles and relationships in *Weymouth Sands* is the Powys-hero's struggle against mysterious or diabolical women.

There are explicit *Punch and Judy* references. One page into the novel, Magnus watches a *Punch and Judy* show with "an especially violent Punch"--a Punch which compells Magnus with "an indecent, insane, brutal tone and yet . . . not devoid of a curious poignance" (Powys 2, 18). The second *Punch and Judy* show takes place on Magnus's birthday, and haunts Magnus with "the brazen, goatish, rammish cry: *Judy! Judy! Judy! Judy!*" (Powys 2, 467).

The characters in *Weymouth Sands* are Punch and Judy figures. Marret, "a Punch-and Judy girl," is linked immediately with Judy: "Marret! Marret! Marret!" the Punch-man kept repeating" (Powys 2, 21), stretching out his neck, while a policeman angrily addresses Sylvanus, who is repeatedly figured as the Hanged Man (Powys 2, 391). Marret's family is a standard *Punch and Judy* family; Marret, the mother, says, "don't let Father hit Tiny" (Powys 2, 395). The father is held to be "vicious and vindictive" (Powys 2, 393). Marret's first memory is

Father hitting Mother with a water-jug. He held it by its handle till it broke . . . after that she were gone and her feet were cold. I knew they were cold, because when Father came in he said, "Mart, thee may feel her feet just once, if thee likes, so as to say you've touched Death" (Powys 2, 385).

In her own relationship Marret wields a frying pan in an argument with Sylvanus, as Judy does in one version of the play.

In addition to this literal Punch and Judy family, *Weymouth Sands* is full of characters associated thematically with these roles. Skald is a Punch man; he is short, thick and quarrelsome. Jerry Cobbold is a clown who fools to fend off the horror of life. Doctor "Lucky" Girodel wears the striped tights Punch has been pictured in. Hortensia Lily, always on the verge of being "ill-used" (Powys 2, 223), is the eternal Judy. Sylvanus is called a "human Puppet" (Powys 2, 505), and Marret is continually figured as a doll's head on the handle of a broom. The Cobbold's home is decorated as a stage-set.

The *Punch and Judy* shows continue relentlessly on the novel's symbolic level to unify *Weymouth Sands*. Sticks, stones, umbrellas, pokers, trains, edifices, all embody the Punch-male's qualities of aggressor and violator. Likewise, living things (seaweed, plants, eels, worms, animals, once-living seashells),

receptacles (grates, cups, boats, tunnels) and earth itself (grass, mud) are passive receivers of this violation. Early in the novel Magnus plants his stick "firmly between his legs" (Powys 2, 26) where it belongs. Powys underscores his point, as he always does, telling us that "the stick itself protruded upwards from his side as he walked, making an acute angle with his body" (Powys 2, 27). Later, "as he tapped with his stick against the rails of the small patches of earth," he thinks associatively of Curly (Powys 2, 104). And the reverse association occurs: upon approaching Curly he is "pressing the end of his stick into the soft-sun-thawed mud" (Powys 2, 123). Earth is the symbolic victim of man-made tools.

Elsewhere, Perdita is a Judy figure. No sooner is she off the boat to Weymouth than Bum Trot "prodded her arm with the handle of the umbrella he was carrying" (Powys 2, 49). But it is in her relationship with Skald that these symbols are most evident--Skald, whose "upraised arm" flinging a piece of seaweed into the sea brings an erotic charge to both of them (Powys 2, 49, 59), Skald with his big stone resting in his pocket throughout most of the novel, pressing against his thigh (Powys 2, 76), a stone which bruises Perdita when they embrace. At one point, in an obvious position of sublimation, "as he stood in a mental tumult, with both hands deep in his pockets, his fingers clutching his Chesil Beach pebble, it was of a woman he thought" (Powys 2, 205). The stone is a phallic substitute and an intended murder weapon. Clutching it makes Skald think of Perdita.

These male and female symbols work together in fairly tame encounters, but when Powys use tropes--specifically simile and metaphor--he is less delicate. Usually the vehicle for a comparison with a female is a mysterious, trapped or violated animal. Curly is as inscrutable as a cat (Powys 2, 38), Perdita is like a bird in a cage (Powys 2, 53), Cassy is like a fish in an enclosed pond (Powys 2, 71), women are stinging bees (Powys 2, 448) and one is a vivisected panther (Powys 2, 443); throughout, the thought of the torture of animals is attended by a quasi-sexual fascination (Powys 2, 111). In one scene Sylvanus hears sounds, "as if a number of demented rats were engaged in . . . pursuing hundreds of female mice in order to disembowel them" (Powys 2, 509). The philosopher Gaul speculates that all love-relationships might be "a sort of rape committed upon the essential gregariousness of women, like picking a rose from a

rose-bush" (Powys 2, 338); not long after, Magnus fantasises about raping Curly (Powys 2, 464). Curly is a synecdochic name, of course. Her name is one example of women in Powys being viewed in parts, not wholes.

Most of the men in *Weymouth Sands* hold the conviction that women inevitably bore into and destroy a man's secret identity, although the two male characters that Powys claimed in a note most resembled him do not express this belief. Magnus and Sylvanus, our Powys-heroes, claim to stand in opposition to such views, but they come dangerously close to them in their dealings with women; both men take pleasure, especially Magnus, in enjoying every length of sexual exploration with a woman short of consummation. This fear of final abandonment with a woman suggests the old Freudian fear of being swallowed up--Punch's fear, perhaps Powys's.

Hand in hand with these fears is a manifest fear or hatred of marriage expressed by many of Powys's Punch-men. Magnus is nervous about marrying Curly, Girodel attempts to persuade Peg that prostitution is the intelligent alternative to marriage, Gaul considers weddings pure performances, Jerry Cobbold and Skald express violent sentiments against weddings.

In addition to the image of the shrewish wife, Powys presents a wide variety of Judies. Just as Powys men are mariners, harpooners, conchologists, abortionists, taxidermists, his women play many roles in *Weymouth Sands*. They are virgins, plain Janes, spinsters, kept women, gold-diggers, Harpies, sadists--none is a positive role; all seem to inspire fear or hatred in the men. Mr. Frampton feels "vaguely hostile" (Powys 2, 90) to his daughter; Skald considers Lucinda Cobbold "a type he detested" (Powys 2, 76); Gipsy May, of course, plays the role possible at the root of the Powys-hero's latent misogyny when she clips Sylvanus' moustaches: the castrating female.

The truth was she experienced a diabolical rapture from that first expression his countenance assumed as his hands went to his face and he found those familiar adjuncts gone (Powys 2, 407).

Powys as narrator points out that "sweet revenge resembles very closely the erotic obsession which exacts it" (Powys 2, 408). Gipsy May's diabolism is driven by sexual energy and vice-versa.

Women are not Powys's only sadists, although he writes in the *Autobiography* that "my sadism is . . . the sadism . . . of a woman. Deep, deep in my nature lies the vice of a sadistic woman" (Powys 1, 426). This creates in Powys two categories of women: sadistic women and female victims of sadism. Women, then, carry the whole burden of sadomasochism. The male principle is not involved if it is a man's female side which participates. Powys's philosophy allows him to project his dark passions onto women, which in turn allows him to explain or defend his own misogyny.

*Weymouth Sands* is full of masochistic women, women who derive sexual pleasure from pain; these women express Powys's Punch-like pleasure in hurting them. They also express a Judyesque mania to push the Punches to punch. Sometimes this pleasure is sublimated, as when an undressed Curly with feverishly eager fingers tears out her hairpins, "several times making faces and crying 'Goodness!' when the tangles hurt her" (Powys 2, 86). Sometimes, the masochism is more direct, as when Perdita feels herself "enslaved" to Skald (Powys 2, 214). But it is in Curly, our main Powys-hero's desire, that masochism is most obvious. Sippy Ballard promises her nothing, but

some deep feminine impulse in her made her secretly derive--though she would never have admitted this to herself--a self-lacerating delight in feeling herself to be his slave, his plaything, his chattel, to be used for his pleasure without any return (Powys 2, 126).

Although Magnus does not dare such a game for fear of losing her, he is "thrilled" by her passivity when she allows him to explore her body (Powys 2, 127). Other men become aroused picturing women "ill-used" and vulnerable (Powys 2, 223).

Dr. Brush, of course, is the sadist extraordinaire in his torturing of animals with whom women are closely linked. He rationalises his sadism in terms of science: "I don't know which is the most exciting," he thinks,

cutting truth out of dogs or coaxing it out of men. But this I know: that I would help every dog in the world to die howling and reduce every woman in the world to a cold sepulchral pulp . . . if I could only add a page to the great Folio of *verified and verifiable truth!* (Powys 2, 434).

Powys's protagonist objects to this philosophy, but he is also morbidly aroused at the thought of it. Magnus is less a humanitarian anti-vivisectionist than he is a closet sadist, frightened to act on his impulses, unable to act against them. In this, he is, perhaps, like Powys, vicariously a Punch-man. When, for Magnus, his "erotic passion and his sickening twinge over vivisection" imaginatively fuse, he experiences the sympathetic pain contortions of a torture victim, and these are much like orgasm.

He kept experiencing a twitching in his long legs, and every now and then with a muscular contraction that corresponded to what he visioned was happening under Mr. Murphy's devotion to science he would draw up one of his heels along the floor of the car (Powys 2, 307).

By recognising this sickening/arousing response, and by seeking release at the level of fantasy, Powys's Punch-men avoid acting on these impulses as the puppet Punch does act. They substitute or sublimate. The admission of abusive impulses within ourselves is important; explaining them as mysticism or philosophy without examining those systems' assumptions is not satisfactory. The *Punch and Judy* show flourished in the Victorian age and has become less relevant in the late twentieth century, perhaps because we are beginning to admit to our own dark sides. Powys is courageous in these admissions, if not directly frank. His lesson at the end of the *Autobiography* is that labels such as sadist, masochist, and misogynist are too pat "to cope with the mysterious impulses of the living soul" (Powys 1, 625). He calls the tearing away of masks and the exposure of his true psychosexual identity Cowperism. We all need to follow his lead. Recognising deep-seated fears or hatreds is a step towards freeing ourselves from them. *Weymouth Sands* shows us Punches and Judies acting out their roles with varying degrees of awareness. To read *Weymouth Sands* is to watch a sublimated *Punch and Judy* show.

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## The Idea of the Feminine in John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*

PETER G. CHRISTENSEN

Study of *A Glastonbury Romance* has been hampered by the critics' failure to analyse the relationship between different levels of discourse in the novel. Scholars have been happiest discussing the symbolic level of the narrative by relating to the Grail and other Arthurian traditions, or, they have been content to pay attention to its character interactions. They have been reluctant, however, to integrate with these concerns both the novel's cosmic frame of reference (such as the First Cause and Cybele) and Powys's authorial statements of general psychological principles. One means of focusing on the connections between these four levels is to use the idea of the feminine as an entry point to each level and then to see what tensions in the novel have not yet been accounted for.

Among the critics who have not looked at the authorial narration of fixed psychological principles, much of which deals with the psychology of women, particularly in their affairs with men, are Glen Cavaliero, John Brebner, G. Wilson Knight, Morine Krissdottir, C. A. Coates, Jeremy Hooker, H. P. Collins, and H.W. Fawkner. With regard to the cosmic level, Cavaliero believes that it cannot be well integrated with the rest of the novel. Krissdottir and Fawkner imply that it can be, and the remainder of the above-mentioned critics fall silent on the issue. Fawkner goes so far as to say that "the dextral and feminine is affirmed with triumphant occult overtones" (74).

The reason for a study of the kind I suggest comes first from two new sources of information. Frederick Davies' recent edition of Powys's diary for 1930, a period of time when he was working on the *Romance*, tells us that the impulse to devote the closing to the triumph of Cybele came from his companion, Phyllis Playter, who by that time had been with him for about seven years (5). In addition, Susan Rands' recent article on topography in the *Romance* offers valuable information on Powys's detailed study of Glastonbury. A second reason is the recent trend for many Western women to reject traditional male-oriented Christianity and Judaism for alternative religious beliefs.

This position that Christianity and Judaism cannot be reformed from within so as to become less patriarchal is perhaps best explained in the work of Naomi R. Goldenberg. Many women have turned their religious allegiance to the Mother goddess, whose appearance in this novel is studied by Penny Smith, Ned Lukacher, and Morine Krissdottir. Third, in a time in which more attention is being paid to the representation of homosexualities in fiction, it is important to examine how Powys treats lesbianism in his novel and to see how it is connected to the idea of the goddess Cybele.

Brilliant and monumental as it is, *A Glastonbury Romance* is a divided novel in which Powys's doubts about human free will and his desire for some order in the cosmos bring him to expound a limiting and essentialistic vision of the feminine in official authorial pronouncements--ones which are not validated by the "empirical" witness of the various character relationships in the novel. In his desire to grant humans free will, Powys seems to have resorted to unfounded generalizations about female and male character traits. As he explains in his "Author's Review" of his own novel in 1932 he tries not to let his imaginative universe fall into potential chaos in a world in which the First Cause is made to be both "God and the Devil in one" (8). In trying to critique a Christianity traditionally biased toward the patriarchal, he offers us an ahistorical version of the Great Mother as a counterweight, never succeeding in reconciling the diversity and unpredictability of human behavior with the idea of cosmic forces at work in the world.

Thus my position on the novel is quite different from that of its most persuasive critic, Charles Lock, who in his essay "Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*" writes that the authorial commentary does not have any authoritative weight (274). However, it seems to me that we cannot overlook the fact that the narration is used to explain not just cosmic ideas but everyday behavior. The narrator's essentialistic version of woman is an extension of similar discourses of the time--ones which take form in novels as various as *The Rainbow* and *Ulysses*.

The narrator has been described as "chameleonlike" by Elizabeth Barrett (24), and John Hodgson (34) has seen him as a practical joker making fun of the ideas of Percy Lubbock on point-of-view. For David A. Cook he is "an awesome authorial

omniscience aspiring toward the cosmic consciousness of God" (341). This narrator gives many authoritative, generalized statements about women's nature. Although these are often intended to show the superiority of women to men or of the feminine to the masculine, they tend to create a reductionistic, essentialistic conception. Women are said to know the flowingness of time in a way men do not (437), and they laugh with a "pure naughtiness and unadulterated mischief" (808) which is unavailable to men. They like their menfolk always to look the same (878), and they "receive the tragedies of others with more vegetable-like acceptance" than men (698). In short, they are less intellectual and more tied to nature. They are able to smile in a knowing, condescending way at all philosophy (210).

Many of Powys's authorial comments have to do with love-making. First, the woman is made into a sensitive plant:

The whole Being of the coldest, plainest, ugliest girl in the world resembles a sensitive plant whereof the reluctant lips are the leaves. Organised for receptivity by the whole structure, substance and nerve-responses of her identity, the electric yieldingness of a girl's body vibrates to the least pressure upon her mouth. Only the craftiest and subtlest of lovers know the preciousness, the tragic, unique and perilous preciousness, of that moment when, under the pressure of a kiss, her lips are parted. (981)

By implication woman is passive, and she is awakened to love-making by man. The narrator goes on to describe Leonardo da Vinci and Dante as the "two greatest Realists" who were "at one in finding in women's lips the *entelecheia* of all Nature's secretest designs" (981).

Second, as we learn in the passage when John and his cousin Mary are on the river together, women are more narcissistic than men. We are told that "[e]very girl lives so constantly in the imaginative atmosphere of being made love to that even the most ignorant of them is rarely shocked or surprised" (88). When we are introduced to the love of Sam Dekker and Nell Zoyland in the chapter "Whitelake Cottage," we find out about the "universal prostitute" in every woman's nature":

It is indeed always a puzzle to men, the physical passivity which women have the power of summoning up, to endure the inconvenience of an amorous excitement which they do not share. Few men realize the depth of satisfaction to women's nature in the mere possession of the power to cause such excitement. (139)

Although women tend to be narcissistic and passive, Powys stops short of adding that they are also more highly sexed than men. Instead, he writes that Teiresias, the "Theban prophet may have been right when he said that in the act of love the woman feels a greater thrill than the man; but he would have been wrong if he had said this about the *expectation* of such a consummation. A girl's physical love, except at the moment of mutual contact, is much more diffused than a man's" (309). Since this pronouncement is also prompted by the affair of Sam and Nell, one wonders if Powys is trying to use Nell as an archetypal woman and generalize from her character traits or whether she was created to exemplify his already formulated essentialist philosophy of women's nature. Perhaps both possibilities are true.

Third, the sexuality of women makes them subject to special dangers. Again in reference to Nell and Sam, Powys writes:

It is women's fatal susceptibility to passionate touch that hypnotizes them into by far the greater number of their disasters; for under the touch-hypnosis the present transforms itself into the eternal, and their grand sex-defence, their consciousness of continuity, is shattered and broken up. The ideal love-affairs for women are when it is easy for them, after these momentary plunges into the eternal, to fall back again upon the realistic sense of continuity; whereas the ideal love-affairs of men are when their feeling for novelty and for adventure is perpetually being re-aroused by the bewildering variability of women's moods. (296)

Later references to the Earth Mother in the novel lead us to suspect that it is through giving birth that women are connected to the continuity of the natural world. The "bewildering variability of women's moods" presumably allows a man to love

many women in one incarnation and thus be emotionally promiscuous without actually sleeping around. Women do not need to perceive their lovers as many men at once.

Fourth, women put more of themselves into sexual love than men do, for they do not lose track of the givens of the situation, and they fantasize less than men:

There are levels of feminine emotion in the state of love entirely and forever unknown to men. Man's imaginative recognition of feminine charm, man's greedy lust, man's pride in possession, man's tremulous sense of the pathos of femininity, man's awe in the presence of an abyssmal mystery--all these feelings exist in a curious detachment in his consciousness. They are all separate from the blind subcurrent that sweeps the two together. But with women, when they are really giving themselves up without reserve, a deep underflow of abandonment is reached, where such detachment from Nature ceases completely. At such times she does not feel herself to be beautiful or desirable. She does not feel her lover to be handsome or strong or clever or brave. (298)

Women are presented as greater realists than men. A woman does not have to glamorize herself or her lover to give their intimacy validity. She accepts humbly both her own and her lover's limitations. Ironically, it is the narrator, presumably male, who is not able to travel along this path of humility, for he has to give cosmic significance to the love affairs of men and women, as in this passage about the elderly Geards.

The most absorbing and distracting, the most delicately satisfying, of all lovers for a girl, are neither the thick-witted novelty-hunters, nor the sour puritans. They are the vicious monogamists! Such indeed are the triumphant Accomplices of Life; and when you see the pleasure of unsated and natural lust carried on between two elderly people--as, owing to Bloody Johnny's occult wisdom, they were carried on between Mr. and Mrs. Geard--you see a checkmating of Thanatos by Eros, such as makes Mr. Barter's brutal approaches and Miss Clarissa's silly yieldings as commonplace as they are uneventful. (498)

If the lovemakers are not being transformed into these Greek abstractions, they may be related to Greek mythology by the narrator to give them a more timeless significance:

Every woman--the most abject as well as the most beautiful--has certain moments in her life when the whole feminine principle in the universe seems to pour through her, and when men, when every man obeys her in helpless enthrallment as if she held the wand of Circe. (976)

The narrator seems to be writing from the point of view of one of Circe's captives, hopelessly enchanted by the feminine principle.

Repressed, however, under this dominant discourse of heterosexual inevitability are a few statements about the naturalness of same-sex responses. First of all, in reference to Cordelia, we read that when a woman is in the grasp of darkness, the polymorphous amorist,

. . . it seems to arouse something in the feminine nature corresponding to itself, so that the recessive mystery of darkness in the woman--that underground tide of the old ancestral chaos that ebbs and flows at the bottom of her being--rushes forth to meet this primal sister, this twin daughter of the Aboriginal Abyss, whose incestuous embrace is all around her! (214)

On May Day, the narrator notes that girls, "When they are thus alone together, give themselves up to all manner of little gestures, movements, abandonments, which not only the presence of a man but the presence of an older woman would drive away" (508). The possibility for greater freedom in primary relationships among women of the same age is cautiously broached here.

Some problems between men and women seem to be rooted in heterosexual intercourse itself. When Nell hits Will Zoyland, Powys comments:

In the relations between men and women the taking of virginity is undeniably the symbolic as well as the psychic root of all complications. This act causes pleasure to the one and suffering to the other--

--therefore, when a woman strikes a man, a deeply hidden, basic relation is broken; and broken in a manner that, as a rule, is dangerous for both. (867)

As the scene between Nell and Will escalates into a fight, it leads to a more pessimistic comment that men and women are really not very compatible. The lack of similarity in nature and socialization leads to a lack of empathy.

The tearing of her dress was the raising of the sluice and the flood simply followed. The truth seems to be that the attraction between men and women lets down a drawbridge across a fretting current of hopeless differences that has only to be exposed to lead at once to these wild outbursts. (868)

Powys suggests, but never explores fully the implications that men and women are by nature mismatched and that people are better off having primary relationships with others of the same sex. Discussing Persephone Spear, as viewed by Angela Beere at the pageant, he writes:

Perhaps a girl's nerves respond to the nerves of another girl and send out magnetic currents that can be caught from far off; whereas something in the masculine constitution, something dense, thick, opaque, obtuse, *stupid*, has the power of rejecting such contacts. Or it may be that the erotic emotions, when they brim over from the masculine spirit, extricate themselves, as women's feelings never do, from the bitter-sweet honeycomb of Nature, and shoot off, up, out, and away, into dimensions of non-natural existence, where the nerve-rays of women cannot follow. (612)

There seem to be two ways of interpreting this statement. It might be that the main idea is that women are better at love than men, or it could be that women are more likely to get genuine responses from other women rather than from men.

With reference to John and Mary we find another hint that the former possibility is true:

The very fact that she was such a grave, self-contained and dignified girl made all her little feminine peculiarities much sweeter to him. Mary

indeed had got in John what women rarely get, a lover who was as conscious *as another girl would have been*, only actively instead of passively so, of the thousand and one little infinitesimal flickerings of physical feeling which create the aura in which the mind functions. (626)

Here, a man who can have feminine attributes is seen as a woman's ideal lover. The ideal seems to be that of androgyny, although that word is not actually used in this context.

Let us now turn to the same-sex relationships in the novel. Here women and men are not inevitably paired with each other. Euphemia Drew is in love with Mary Crow, Angela Beere with Persephone Spear, and Elphin Cattle with Sam Dekker. More complex is the longstanding, sexually charged relationship between John Crow and his friend Tom Barter. On the plot level, as compared to the level of most of the authorial commentary, it does not appear as if same-sex relationships are unusual or doomed to failure, and, considering all the human misery in the novel, Powys's overall goal is certainly not to show the bliss of happily married heterosexual couples, although, as Dorothee von Huene Greenberg points out, we may think of John and Mary as the married couple embodying hope for the future at the end of the novel (40).

The two lesbian relationships deserve particular scrutiny for the skill with which they are handled. Midway through the novel, Angela has recently met Persephone for the first time in ages, and she immediately plunges into a "feverish obsession" over her:

. . . she had wanted to run away from her; she had wanted to toss herself tempestuously, distractedly, into her new friend's arms! "Did she like me," she was thinking now, "did I look well?" What did she mean by talking to me as she did, if she didn't want me for a friend? When she said that about life being so difficult, and the love of men being so gross and brutal, and it being so hard to find a person you could love whole-heartedly, did I make her understand how I sympathised?" (545)

Although this love is presented as an obsession, Powys still shows that it is grounded in same-sex empathy and not just in loneliness

or a lack of sense of self. Angela does indeed have something to offer her new friend.

In a more striking passage Powys compares Angela's love for Persephone with a young nun's worship of the Virgin Mary. (Here Powys does not speculate on the importance of the idea of communities of women to lesbianism.) Unfortunately, however, Persephone's attention at this time is directed toward Mr. Evans, and so she cannot return it. The fact that Angela feels real sympathy for Persephone on the cosmic level makes it more possible for her to reach out in love towards others, even though she does not return Angela's love. It is this incident which prompts the authorial discussion of a girl's nerves mentioned above.

Persephone comes to accept Angela's feelings for her. She spends a night in a little cheap bedroom "dreaming peacefully of Angela's devotion" (672). Only once does Angela succeed in getting Persephone to spend the night in her room, and on this occasion Persephone insists that they keep the night-light on.

Lovely were they both, as they lay there in that glimmering light, but whereas Angela seemed to draw to herself from out of the storm-cleansed darkness everything that was pallid and phantasmal in the rain-soaked meadows, in the dripping hazel-spinneys, in the cold, moss-covered hill slopes, Persephone seemed, as she lay listening to her friend, as if she were an incarnation of all the magic of the brown rain-pools and the smooth-washed beech boughs and the drenched, carved eaves of fragrant woodwork, and the wet reed roofs of the dyke-hovels down there in the marshes of the Brue. (698)

The passage indicates that the two women have very different natures and cannot make a successful pair, but it also treats them very sympathetically lying at each other's side. Later, when Persephone writes to Angela from France that she is going onward to Russia, Angela stoically conceals from Sam Dekker how sad she is (958).

What Powys does not explore in Angela is the sense that she must have that lesbian attractions are not approved of by society; indeed they are non-representable in the light of the heterosexual authorial discourse presented early in the novel. In

the relationship between Euphemia Drew and Mary Crow, Powys is able to touch on this sense of social stigma against lesbianism. We see this first of all in Miss Drew's denial to herself of her real feelings (228).

The confrontation between Euphemia and Mary in the "Idolatry" chapter is one of the best scenes of the novel (630-42). Mary handles the situation well, experiencing a "vast pity for this unloved and childless old woman" (637). Euphemia begs Mary to allow her to hold her all night close to her, and Mary protests that this is not right. However, she does not mean that it is perverse. Instead, her thoughts are on John.

Miss Drew is characterized as having "devastated frustration" (639), but neither her emotional nor her physical attraction for Mary is criticized. There is only one authorial generalization added to this confrontation: "The tragedy of passion often consists in the depths of harsh unlovableness into which it throws its victims" (638). This is one of the easiest to accept of the authorial comments, and the whole scene benefits for Powys's avoidance of unnecessary, unlikely-to-be-true *ex cathedra* pronouncements about women's nature.

Powys gives us a rendering of Euphemia's confused thoughts which is one of the rare forays into interior monologue in the novel. Apparently when Mamma found young Euphemia kissing Betty Newton in the hayloft, she sent her to bed all day and gave her only bread and water to eat. This is the one moment of the novel in which social and religious repression of homosexuality is made most explicit. Mamma is associated with the punishing God. Lesbian experience, although it does not "work out" in the novel is not seen as inferior to heterosexuality. Neither Mary nor Persephone turns down her female suitor because she defines herself as "heterosexual." Powys does not resort to this view of sexual identity here.

When we try to relate Powys's ideas on women's sexual nature to the information about the First Cause, we approach again the strict heterosexual division of forces, only finally to swerve away from it. In the chapter "Tin," when Philip Crow is walking out of Wookey Hole Wood, the narrator interrupts this scene for a page-long digression about the relationship of sex to the First Cause. The narrator claims, "Both the two great forces powering forth from the double-natured First Cause possess the

energy of sex." He continues, "One is creative, the other destructive; one is good, the other evil; one loves, the other hates" (665). From here Powys does not connect these forces with any version of male or female essentialism. Instead he discusses the changing image of personality.

. . . What mortals call Sex is only a manifestation in human life, and in animal and vegetable life, of a certain spasm, a certain delicious shudder, a certain orgasm of a purely psychic nature, which belongs to the Personality of the First Cause . . . . And the ecstatic quiver of that great cosmic ripple we call Sex runs through the whole universe and functions in every organism independent of external objects of desire! (665-66)

Here sex is presented as essentially spasm rather than union. Once this is established, then both masturbation and homosexuality (and the practice which combines them) are given more legitimacy than in traditional Christianity. There is no recourse to a so-called natural law of heterosexual coupling. The external objects of desire do not count, and thus they cannot be used to calculate the legitimacy of a form of sexuality.

The narrator goes on to legitimize parthenogenesis as well.

Parthenogenesis, as Christian clairvoyance has long ago defined it, is a symbol of what the soul constantly achieves. So are the Dragon's Teeth sown by Cadmus; and the pebbles cast behind them by Deucalion and Pyrrha. (666)

The narrator establishes a continuity of paganism and Christianity in asserting the symbolic value of parthenogenesis. On the other hand, ordinary birth has no special mystique about it, and women are not prized for their child-bearing role.

As we move from the discussion of the First Cause to that of the Holy Grail, which is a "broken fragment of the First Cause" (748), there are more noticeable strains of sexist essentialism present. Some power outside of Mr. Evans seems to prompt him to give the following pronouncement. The rules of Ynis Witrin sought for more than a fish when they fished. What they sought was "Parthenogenesis and the Self-Birth of the

Psyche" (740). His speech gives special value to parthogenesis, but it also uses images such as "the copulation-cry of the Yes and No," and the Cauldron and the Spear to suggest a world in which female and male opposites unite for world harmony.

The famous closing of the novel appears even more essentialist than this passage about the Holy Grail. The narrator pits the male essence and science against the female essence and revelation, thus separating women from reason:

The powers of reason and science gather in the strong light of the Sun to beat her down. But evermore she rises again, moving from the mists of dawn to the mists of twilight, passing through the noon-day like the shadow of an eclipse and through the midnight like an unblown trumpet, until she finds the land that has called her and the people whose heart she alone can fill. (1119)

The narrator apparently allows for the fact that "people" not just women shall worship the goddess, and he also admits earlier that the Goddess moves "from one madness of Faith to another." However, we are still left with Cybele as the source of all value, an idea which leaves women with no self-image of intellectual endeavor. This approach to the cult of Cybele is so spectacularly ahistorical that Cybele stands as an essence with no discernible connections to social realities and determinants.

Ned Lukacher gives a completely different interpretation of the paean to Cybele at the end of the novel, since he connects Cybele to the Death Drive. For him, "Cronos is itself a dissimulating metaphor which conceals the Eternal Feminine Behind a devouring patriarchal possessiveness" (25). Although this is a very provocative suggestion, it does not seem to account for the statement that around Cybele's "turreted head blows the breath of what is beyond life and beyond death" (1119). Thus to associate her with the death drive is problematic. It seems to me better to take the passage at face value and criticize it rather than to use the hermeneutics of suspicion on it.

Morine Krissdottir writes that Geard's "journey to Cybele is more than the pagan counterpart of Sam's heroic deed; it is, indeed, *alien* to the heroic quest" (94). He is "not searching for Arthur, the heroic symbol of the reunion of body and soul" but rather "fishing for Cybele, the self-generating, undivided One, the

was before Time was" (97). Krissdottir's view seems the exact opposite of Lukacher's, for in finding the undivided One, we get back to life itself.

Understanding of the role of Cybele is further complicated by a textual problem. Penny Smith points out that a nine-page passage crucial to the image of Cybele in the novel appears in the 1932 Simon and Schuster edition but not in the 1955 Macdonald edition, namely, Persephone and Philip's pilgrimage to Wookey Hole at the end of the chapter "Wookey Hole." She writes that "in the description of the cave Powys does seem to be alluding to the practices of Cybele's cult" (15). According to Smith, the change in the "Wookey Hole" chapter "robs Cybele of her gory relics, Philip of his magushood and Persephone of her surprising virginity whilst restoring to Dave Spear a sense of humour" (16). She feels that the change comes for Powys "at the cost of undermining the integrity of his overall vision" (16). I would say that the omission of the reference to castration by the men in the Cybele-Attis cult only serves to further dehistoricize the presentation of the Goddess.

Rather than rescue the organic unity of the novel as does Charles Lock in his explanation of the narration, I sympathize with Glen Cavaliero, who feels that it does not all hold with the story line. However, my criticism comes not from the strange or unprovable status of much of the commentary but from its self-contradictory nature and its partial failure to accept what the character interactions in the plot have revealed about human beings. Powys seems to be looking for some framework in which his world can be understood, but in doing so he asks women to accept his own version of the unsatisfactory Eros (woman) vs. Logos (man) dichotomy that has not helped anyone understand the world.

Powys definitely tries to criticize patriarchy, but in the terms of Naomi R. Goldenberg, "thinking of archetypes in this manner devalues the facts of experience. It encourages us to give close attention to experience only when it approximates an archetypal absolute" (63). Instead, we need more historical studies, such as Gerda Lerner's recent *The Creation of Patriarchy* to come to grips with a major cultural failing.

At the same time, in fairness to Powys I must state that the immense achievement of *A Glastonbury Romance* lies in its



characterizations. Through the character of Johnny Geard and his concern for the body, its functions and its ills, he helps us to remember the self-defeating dichotomy between men and women in our family traditions. As Dorothy Dinnerstein points out, in Goldenberg's summary of her position:

Because men have minimal contact with our infant selves, . . . they always seem to represent cleanliness, antiseptic order and even immortality. Woman becomes raw nature who must be carefully regulated by man. According to Dinnerstein, we want man to control woman and nature so that our infant experience of being vulnerable to the bodily suffering identified with women will not be repeated. We thus tend to place men in exclusive command of our adult public lives--of our laws, our government and our military activities--with the hope that they will save us from our own mortality. (107)

To stress women's connectedness with life Powys points out differences between men and women, and he hopes that men will become more like women. However, his stress on such cosmic forces as the First Cause, the Grail, and Cybele remove us from the actual cultural critique by which the public can be educated and society improved.

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## A Modern Mystery Play

JOHN COWPER POWYS

The contribution of the Jewish race to the imaginative arts of the world is a contribution of a peculiar and special character. Expressed--except for the old Hebrew books and modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature--through the medium of so many Occidental languages, the genius of Israel has shown two quite opposite tendencies: a tendency to a certain highly sophisticated internationalism and a tendency to exaggerate, in a sort of passionate esoteric intensity, half-ironic and half-enthusiastic, the temper, color, quality, taste, of the particular nation whose language it has adopted.

Disraeli's treatment of the English aristocracy is an example of both those tendencies. So is Heine's treatment of German folklore.

When, however, we come to this extraordinary modern masterpiece, *The Dybbuk*, of which S. Ansky was the author, E. Vachtangov the director, and the whole Habima company the vehicle, these familiar tendencies in the Jewish genius are changed into something far more significant and arresting. Everything about this play seems to have gathered to itself a transcendent glamour. Zemach, who discovered Anna Rovina, the actress who plays Leah the possessed, was himself, it appears, a man devoured by an almost prophetic intensity. In this play something seems to have released a strange power that touched author, director, manager, musician, choreographer, players, with a live coal from the very heart of beauty.

One had the sensation as one saw and heard the play that the totality of the thing--its story, its music, its dancing, its scenery, its atmosphere--existed before Ansky wrote it, before Zemach discovered Anna Rovina, before Vachtangov assumed its direction. And one felt that this totality, this astral body of weird beauty, was so saturated with Hebrew tradition that every part and parcel of it, every curve, every contour, every note, every light and shadow, was flesh of Hebrew flesh. Never since the old Greek drama has anything appeared so autochthonous,

so woven--like that Jewish garment once diced for by Roman soldiers--"without a seam."

The Russia that permitted this strange flower of human imagination to blossom in its vitals must have a power of fluid self-effacement where art is concerned denied to England or Germany or America. There must be something in the Slavonic temperament so malleable, so receptive, so feminine that this "Golden Bough," taken from the very horns of Jehovah's altar, could put forth its leaves, as if it were in the garden of Solomon, nor lose one drop of sacred dew, one dust-grain of sacred pollen!

Subtle indeed, with a protean sophistication, must be the esthetic instinct of Russia when such a thing as this, the very scholastic "quiddity" of the Judaic spirit, could be incarnated like this, could be cradled and suckled into living natural growth, unwarped, undiluted, unperverted.

"For what cause, for what cause, did the soul descend from the loftiest height into the nethermost abyss?" The quivering intensity of these strange words vibrates, like Israfil's lute "under the ribs of death," from beginning to end of this extraordinary play.

A tragic gregariousness, where superhuman passion alternates with Aristophanic humor, forms the groundwork of this drama of the love-possessed. That unfastidious *tribalness* of the people of Israel, so mysterious, so shocking even, to the "lonely-wolf" temper of Nordic art--that physical sense of heads against heads, held close together, of hands beating against hands, of breath meeting breath, of knees touching knees, of beard wagging against beard--that feeling of the bodily intensity of human intercourse, unreticent, unguarded, uninhibited, where fingers are locked in intercession, brows perspiring with supplication, shoulders swaying cheek by jowl, "skin for skin," in an orgy of love-hate--that unshrinking *acceptance* of the unashamed flesh as the expression of the passions of the spirit, as one is conscious of it again and again in the Hebrew Scriptures, rises in this play to a pitch of ecstatic unity which is as transporting as the *Song of Songs*.

Those mysterious books, with flickering candles between their pages, and bowed figures swaying rhythmically before them--that singing of the crazy *batlonim*: "for what cause, for what cause?" -- the lurid love-starved Chanan--the girl greeting him by

the faded curtain of the *Sepher Torah*--all these confluent casualties seem to roll over us at the very start with a power as drugging as thick incense.

More formidable than this, however, and more human still--human with a sort of atrocious humanity that rakes and harrows our "bowels of compassion"--is that beggar dance after Chanan's death, where the obsessed girl first begins to grow aware of the presence of the Dybbuk.

Clothed in rags that seem composed of the very excrement of earth-worms, dust so bleached and blown that it is like the dust of some "second death," these distorted figures mock and mow and gibber about that white-faced maid. Like a noctambulist she is tossed from one to another, and a feeling comes over us that this is some strange ritual, some litany-dance, full of terrible humor, in honor of unknown Cthonian gods!

But even more impressive than this *danse macabre* are the scenes of the exorcising of the Dybbuk. It was in the act of reading the book of the Angel Raziel, out of the Cabbala, that Chanan perished; and his soul--now in complete possession of the girl's body--refuses to come out of her.

In vain, at the command of the great Rabbi, they bring forth the actual Scrolls of the Law and the holy rams' horn trumpets and the black candles. The Dybbuk will not budge an inch from his sweet lodgement in his true-love's breast. And what a scene it is! That mysterious table, arranged by a stroke of pure genius in an incredible perspective that slopes upward, like Jacob's ladder, to the weary wisdom of the bearded Exorcist! Why, it is more than a table, as every other material object in this world-deep pantomime is more than itself. It is the platonical, cabbalistical, thaumaturgical "idea" of a table! It is the table of two thousand years of Aristotelian metaphysic!

And how the physical unimportance of these small objects--the sacred roll . . . the sacred rams' horns--enhances their occult quality! They are the true vehicles of that *Deus Inconditus* of which they are the Shekinah. "*Numen in est!*" one cries with holy dread as the Chassidim bring them forth. Surely the Dybbuk must obey now! And the Dybbuk is--for the moment--hurled forth by this terrible white magic. But only for a moment! Round the poor girl--"wailing for her demon-lover"--the great

Exorcist draws his cabbalistical circle with the rod that one feels to be the very rod of Moses himself.

Then, as once more the wild tune breaks forth--*abyssum invocat abyssum*--"for what cause, for what cause, did the soul descend from the loftiest height into the nethermost abyss?"--the girl after many vain attempts plunges at last across the very fingerprint of omnipotence; and falling dead in body in the presence of them all rejoins in spirit the soul of her lover, and in one supreme act of revolt--against Man and God and the Law and the Prophets--realizes that incredible victory, *anima femina contra mundum*, a woman's love against the cosmos, which is the subject of the whole play.

It is a Jewish *Antigone*. But while the revolt for which Antigone went to her death was also human love against human custom, the Ghetto view of love and death and custom, which the Habima play evokes, possesses an utterly un-Greek atmosphere--has indeed many psychic vibrations which strike us as curiously medieval.

But whatever the atmosphere may be, the subject is a universal one. Occult, psychic, magical--it is still universal. The borderland which is its stage is still "what was and is and is to come" in the human heart. But, given the universal nature of its "formula," what is the esthetic quality that separates *The Dybbuk* from all other modern performances and renders it--at least for the present writer--his one supreme theatrical "moment"?

It cannot be anything else than a reversion to the primordial element in the drama itself, that religious ritualistic element which existed at once in the first Greek "Tragedies" and in the first medieval "Mysteries."

This is the "open secret" towards which, from Job to Faust, the esthetic instinct of our race has groped its way. This is what Euripides, Wagner, Scriabin, Isadora Duncan--all the sly, thaumaturgic conjurors with the Divine Comedy--have had at the back of their heads.

It is an attempt to get the physical, "behavioristic," imitative impulses of the audience spiritually established, *with the players*, upon a common stage! It is to give the audience the mystical sensation that they are performing some ritualistic act of worship that releases every hidden human impulse and "purges" it in the

releasing. It is to orientate the diffused consciousness that we all share, in regard to life's wormwood and life's nepenthe, in mysterious rhythm with some impersonal life-force.

But where *The Dybbuk* is so especially "human" is that it releases the ironic malice of our mind as well as its spiritual passion. The *batlonim's* songs equally with the beggars' dance are a sardonic bit-back that relaxes with an unspeakable relaxation a certain pent-up stoicism of assent upon which the order of life, its formality and its decency, has inevitably insisted. This is that metaphysical relaxation which all great farce aims at; and the Jewish genius for just this has been displayed, ere now, not only in Heine's mockeries, but in the traditional "comic Jew" of the modern American burlesque show!

Of all tribes of men the children of Israel are the most human. They are human in precisely that gregarious sense, with its abandoned unfastidious gestures of love-hate and hate-love, which excited in the Apollonian mind of Nietzsche the supreme "loathing." The warm "human-too-human" perspiration upon the brow of this super-vitalized Samson can turn into farce when it becomes the sweat of the "comic Jew" or into tragedy when it becomes the "bloody sweat" of the "Son of Man"; but farcical or tragical, it is the generative semen of any drama that would hypnotize the world.

*The Dybbuk* is so unique a work of art because not only are scenery, music, dancing, fused into an homogenous whole; but, by means of a deep liturgical incantation, the pulsebeats of the audience--nay the very noddings of their heads and unconscious movements of their hands--follow the systole and diastole of the performance!

The present writer well recalls having seen in "The House of El Greco" in Toledo, Spain, a picture by that artist of St. John, not the Baptist but that other Jokannan, the one whose head lay on the bosom of the Christ. The post-impressionistic green shadows across that face, surmounted by such flame-like hair, were to his astonishment reproduced in the strange countenance of the Zaddik, the inspired Rabbi! It is in this "Byzantinizing" of real human passions that this ritualistic art attains its effect. The *batlonim's* songs, the beggars' dance, the rams' horn trumpets, the cabbalistical folios, the black garments of Leah, are not symbols. Art of this intensely "saturated" kind

is all of one piece. There are no "lacunae" between the idea and the form, between the flesh and the spirit. The miracle towards which dramatic art is always fumbling is actually performed in *The Dybbuk*. And it is performed in the only way it can be performed; namely, by the formal crystallization of certain intense moments selected for their pregnant significance out of the chaos of reality, until, like flowing water-drops changed into stalactite, they pass from the transitory to the eternal.

There is one simple proof of all that I have been saying which ought not to pass unnoticed here; and that is, that for one ignorant of Hebrew it is astonishing how little loss is thereby incurred. So profoundly in harmony with the spirit of this language must be every gesture and every flicker of atmosphere in *The Dybbuk* that the sound of syllables we understand *not* merely enhances the impression of what we *do* understand; just as those fragments of ecclesiastical Latin which, in the Roman liturgy, remain mere "sacred sounds" to many a devout layman enhance the weight and solemnity of the genuflexions he understands so well.

But finally, as with so many works of art that possess this particular kind of creative impregnation, a critic finds himself carrying about with him the phynosis of *The Dybbuk* as a sort of mystic clue to certain chiaroscuro effects of life; effects which, like the lights and shadows of Rembrandt's pictures, it needs a rare order of genius to throw into this sort of relief.

Reprinted from *The Menorah Journal* 13 (August, 1927): 361-5.

## A Rediscovery: Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*

RICHARD MAXWELL

With the possible exception of *Lolly Willowses* (1926), Sylvia Townsend Warner's novels have had rather little attention. During the last few years, however, there has been a sudden partiality for a 1936 historical fiction of hers, *Summer Will Show*. A recent *DNB* supplement suggests that *Summer* is Townsend's "most substantial book." In the United States, subsequent to this notice, *Summer* has been reprinted in two editions--first as a Norton hardback (*Four in Hand: A Quartet of Novels*, 1986), next as a Penguin paperback (1988). I sense a tendency here, perhaps even a fashion.

A reading of *Summer Will Show* quickly suggests one or two excellent reasons for this burst of publishing interest. The novel has a good subject, Paris in 1848. Moreover, Warner handles her chosen topic with indelible originality. Quotations go some way towards suggesting *Summer's* peculiar flavor. The heroine, Sophia Willoughby, regains consciousness in a brightly decorated room; it was "like waking up in the bosom of a macaw." Or, from a conversation between Sophia and her husband's mistress (Minna Lemuel, a sort of Jewish Scheherezade): "And after she had gone I found a monkey's tail in the rubbish-bin . . . Judge for yourself if she was depraved or no." A superb paragraph on the death of cats ends with this account of one typical feline demise: "they will . . . sit gasping for breath with their blackened gaze fixed upon some familiar piece of furniture as though, at long last, they recognized in it the furtive enemy of a lifetime, the unmasked foe."

I note that the three sentences cited above share an interest in animals, and by implication in a sort of vitality or vividness that human behavior tends to lack. This lack (along with its remedies) is almost the theme of *Summer*--almost, because the action of the book transforms such references, asks us to understand them in the context of a particular historical moment. As befits a 1930's leftist, Warner takes revolution seriously, especially failed revolution. Suffering from a rigid upbringing, a rotten marriage, and the sudden death of her two children (eliminated by smallpox in several excruciating scenes), Sophia

leaves her Dorset estate for Paris, determined on compelling her wayward spouse to impregnate her. Once she arrives she falls in love with Minna (one observes that this book is dedicated to Warner's long-term companion, Valentine Ackland) and eventually espouses the political uprising sporadically on view throughout the narrative.

There are odd echoes of *The Ambassadors* in this, but Warner could never be mistaken for Henry James. She projects a literary ruthlessness all her own. We are not allowed to like Sophia much. Minna, perhaps the novel's most attractive character, suffers first from the revolution she celebrates (apparently when artists get what they want politically, they are shattered by it), then is destroyed in a sort of allegorical coincidence: emblematically, at least, one oppressed class is used to betray another. Furthermore, though the story ends with *The Communist Manifesto* hot off the presses and Sophia immersed in it, Warner's treatment again suggests considerable skepticism. Revolution is identified as the acting-out of a communal death instinct; a massacre staged by the radical forces elicits from its victims "profound physical satisfaction." Finally, even if death-as-theater were to have some long-range potential for good, Warner faithfully reminds us that 1848 went sour. It is Frederick, the awful husband (identified with the soon-to-be Napoleon III) who keeps worldly power in *Summer*, Sophia who loses it and is (evidently) left penniless. The revolution has changed her character, imprinted her "blank good looks" with personality and memory.

It has not given her social influence or social effectiveness--just the opposite, Warner implies--however determined her heroine may be to get through Marx. The mid-thirties, well to remember, was not an encouraging time for political activists of Warner's stripe. Even the most promising of nineteenth-century upheavals could look pretty hopeless from a perspective like hers.

Warner dictated to Valentine Ackland a note on the origins of *Summer* (it is printed in William Maxwell's introduction to the Norton edition). Here the author emphasizes her interest in fragmentary pictures and moments. Even when she did serious research--reading comprehensively in the memoirs of the period--what she took away was a collection of absurd vignettes: e.g., "Marie-Amélie urged poor Louis-Philippe to go out and confront

the mobs, adding, 'I will call down blessings on you from the balcony.'" Warner's tendency to work from such clues could have led to a maddeningly disjointed novel. However, I hazard a guess that she meant to suggest close relation between aphorism or anecdote (her favored modes of presentation) and the special historical quality of the events of '48. At times *Summer* becomes a study of impulsiveness in its many forms, Sophia's and Minna's, for instance. More broadly, the novel is conceived as a sequence of "misfiring impulses," of spontaneous and dramatic errors which lead individuals or masses--which lead the plot itself--into one strange turn after another. The first misfiring of the book is Sophia's; in a compulsive effort to purify her children, to rid them of dangerous germs, she has a worker hold them over the fumes of a lime-kiln on her estate. This project ends up killing the children, drives Sophia to Paris, loses her the property which has been her life, and gives her a kind of liberty she would otherwise never have experienced. Warner traces a crazy chain of causes and effects, each odder than the next. Despite the book's pessimism, a certain exhilaration spreads from it. The harsher, the more disastrous, the novel's events, the crazier the logic of its peculiar narrative, and the more Warner appears to enjoy her work. And the effect on the reader is enlivening as well as disturbing. Every few pages another "adventure . . . [miscarries] very oddly;" each miscarriage or misfiring adds to our sense of this perilous revolutionary world.

It's easy to forget that historical novels were what Warner typically wrote; besides *Summer*, there are at least three significant ones: *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938), *The Corner That Held Them* (1948; the tale of a medieval nunnery, much lauded by feminists on this side of the Atlantic), and *The Flint Anchor* (1954; cited by Glen Cavaliero as Warner's masterpiece). *Don Juan* remains unread by me, but I have a tentative speculation as to why Warner's historical fictions might be worthy of further study. Built into this form--so it would seem--is a bias towards the communal, the anonymous, the collective, the movement of chance rather than of will. The Tolstoy of *War and Peace*, at least the Tolstoy who lectures in *War and Peace*, sets the rules for the form as it is practiced by most later authors. Warner, among the most fiercely individual of historical novelists, finds her own special means for apprehending the nature of mass crisis, mass experience. There is much to learn from her special

solutions to the aesthetic and political problems raised by the genre in which she so often worked.

One bibliographical note: the Norton collection is beautifully designed but poorly proofread. Penguin, then, may be preferable on textual grounds--but Penguin doesn't include *Lolly Willowes*, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, and *The Corner That Held Them*. You pay your money, you take your choice.

Valparaiso University

## EDITOR'S NOTES

*POWYS EXHIBIT IN SWEDEN.* Sven Erik Tackmark writes: "It might be of some interest to my unknown friends in the Powys Society of North America to know that a John Cowper Powys Exhibition is to take place, probably this September, at the Upsala University Library, founded in 1477. After showing my fairly large JCP collection (which I began in 1938), the Library Director, Mr. Thomas Tottie, was so fascinated that he decided that an exhibition should take place. It will include 140 items: books by and on JCP, *Powys Notes*, *The Powys Review* since 1972, some original letters, press-cuttings, photos and miscellaneous items. A press release about the exhibition will be issued to about 100 newspapers throughout the country--not too bad for a nation with 8½ million inhabitants."

*RECENTLY NOTED:* "The Powys: Catalogue 2," from Joan Stevens, Bookseller, 2 Prospect Road, London NW2 2JT, England. 244 Powys, or Powys-connected items, including 5 autograph letters from Llewelyn Powys to Seamus O'Sullivan, editor of *Dublin Magazine*.

The cover of a forthcoming collection, *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, June 1990) features a 1957 drawing of John Cowper Powys by Augustus John that has not previously been published in the U.S. In a gracious note to Denis Lane (editor of the collection), John's executor, Vivien John, provides some details of the re-union of these two titans. Vivien John writes: "I am very interested and pleased you wish to use one of the drawings of my father Augustus John for your forthcoming book. I am particularly pleased as I had the pleasure of driving my father up from Hampshire to Wales where the several drawings were executed. It was good to see the meeting where they embraced! and John Cowper Powys said, 'Master, Master!' He also clapped his hands on his little couch overlooking the valley and said, 'Isn't it wonderful, I'm going to die here!' The little house was the smallest I have ever seen, called 1 Waterloo in the old mining village of Blaenau Ffestiniog. We were regaled with buns and honey by Powys's charming American companion, Phyllis Playter."

[JCP's account of his first meeting with Augustus John is, of course, graphically recorded in *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, pp. 337-38].

**CORRECTION.** *Powys Notes*, Fall 1989: In Marius Buning's essay, "Theodore Powys via Meister Eckhart," the last two sentences of footnote 8 should read: "All subsequent quotations are from these two volumes, referred to as *Meister Eckhart*. The modern critical edition is by Joseph Quint, *Meister Eckhart: Deutsche Predigte und Tractate* (Munich, 1963)." In footnote 9, C. F. Kelly's study of Eckhart is correctly entitled *Meister Eckhart, or Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

**OF RELATED INTEREST.** THE SEQUICENTENNIAL of the BIRTH OF THOMAS HARDY: A CELEBRATION, June 7-9, 1990, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Displays, readings, lectures and discussions related to the writings of Thomas Hardy and the work of James Osler Bailey, renowned UNC Hardy scholar. Readings and presentations by John Fowles, Robert Creeley, J. Hillis Miller, M. L. Rosenthal. For further information write: Thomas Hardy Sequicentennial Celebration, CB # 342, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

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[In This Issue, continued from p. 3]  
U.K. Among distinguished guests were Mrs. Isobel Powys Marks, Morine Krissdottir (Chairman of the Powys Society in the U.K.), and Florence Howe, Director of the Feminist Press at the City University of New York. Gloria G. Fromm of the University of Illinois at Chicago was the featured speaker. In focusing on aspects of the feminine in the work and thought of John Cowper Powys, the conference was designed to encourage investigations into a primary (and critically topical) area of Powysian discourse. The two essays presented here (And a third essay reserved for the next issue) indicate how multifarious those investigations are likely to be.