

# The Powys Review

SPRING 1977. NUMBER ONE



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# The Powys Review

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# Editorial

The Powys Society, which exists "to promote the study and appreciation of the work of John Cowper Powys, T.F. Powys and Llewelyn Powys", was founded in 1967. Its first large-scale conference, of readers and scholars not only from the British Isles but from America and Europe, was held in 1972, at Cambridge, for the centenary of the birth of John Cowper Powys. Until this time, criticism of John Cowper Powys's works was slight in volume. The only two critical books were G. Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* (1964) and H.P. Collins's *John Cowper Powys, Old Earth Man* (1966). My own edition of critical *Essays on John Cowper Powys* was brought out, through the University of Wales Press, at the time of the Centenary Conference, in the hope that it would "at least clear further ground and begin or provoke more of the close critical study which this generous writer merits". George Steiner in his Centenary lecture (printed in this *Review*) described the unhappy situation of Powys studies in 1972. His description, perhaps too extreme anyway, was just behind the time. The Conference marked, or began, a rise of interest in the works of John Cowper Powys. More critical books, by John Brebner, Glen Cavaliero and Jeremy Hooker, were accepted and published very soon after. More important, a very large number of J.C. Powys's works were reprinted in this country, by several publishers, the most prolific being the paperback Village Press. Moreover, we learn yearly of an increase in the study of J.C.P. in British universities, especially at postgraduate level, of which the results will no doubt soon be visible.

The valuable *Powys Newsletter*, published by the Colgate University Press, Hamilton, New York, and edited by R.L. Blackmore, is now several years old. (Its richest number was probably "Three, 1972-3".) We have wanted to supply a periodical more substantial than a newsletter, and we believe that we have now reached a time when this is possible. Since 1968, copies of most of the papers read to the Powys Society have been distributed to its members. (A list of the Society's past papers is provided in the present *Review*). It is our hope to include such papers in future numbers of *The Powys Review*, but this publication will provide a vehicle also for other critical writings, reviews and information, and the Editor will be grateful to receive useful scholarly material.

The present *Review* is more annunciative than informative. The texts of lectures given at the J.C.P. Centenary Conference, 1972, were not printed and distributed by the Powys Society. We produce three of them here, in the order in which they were given, the very first (George Steiner's), a middle one (Angus Wilson's) and the last (G. Wilson Knight's), for their retrospective and their permanent virtues. The texts here have been established by Timothy Hyman from tape-recordings. For the Editor they resurrect these three vigorous

lecturers very well indeed; they bring back with especial clarity the experience of hearing the excited, rapid talk of Angus Wilson and the abundant laughter of Professor Wilson Knight. Just two tape-recorded discussions from the Conference are included to jog the memories of those who were there. (These two discussions were selected because they happen to be *short* bursts, not because they are better than discussions recorded after other talks or during Conference seminars.) The Conference was initiatory and happy, and these three talks by three very different, great champions of John Cowper Powys seem appropriate for the first *Powys Review*.

Future numbers may be given predominantly to Theodore and Llewelyn Powys. Here we confine ourselves to John Cowper. *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (1972) contained an Appendix by Derek Langridge which brought his bibliography, *John Cowper Powys: a record of achievement* (1966), up to date. The bibliography of critical writings on J.C.P. since 1972, to be found at the end of this *Review*, has been compiled by Derrick Stephens, Hon. Secretary of the Powys Society. We do not pretend that it is complete. Rather we hope that it will prompt readers to send T.D. Stephens or the Editor more of such bibliographical information (on Theodore's and Llewelyn's works too). The Editor would also be grateful for detailed information about research work in progress on the writings of any of the Powyses.



G. Wilson Knight, Angus Wilson, Glen Cavaliero and others at the John Cowper Powys Centenary Conference, 1972



# George Steiner



## The Difficulties of Reading John Cowper Powys

My role tonight is a slightly ambiguous one. I'm trying to be of use to the Society by speaking as it were from the margin, or a little bit from the outside. Let me just try and initiate some thoughts on the difficult, yet obvious, subject of why we should be meeting at all, which I don't think should be taken for granted. I think the fact that we're meeting reflects a rather complicated situation.

What are some of the difficulties about reading John Cowper Powys? I want to start with a humble one: the texts are not available. There are very few single editions of paperbacks. There was an important Penguin misadventure, which many of you may know about — others will fill in the details. A number of us fought extremely hard to get Penguin to include Powys in the Twentieth Century Classics, to announce a whole group of Powys's books. This would have been the breakthrough. After very difficult negotiations and considerable reluctance,

*Wolf Solent* was launched, and one waited, and there was a shattering review in the *New Statesman* which said that this was not only silly and bad, but that it had behind it a cabal, and that one must stop this kind of nonsense, which was merely a special interest trying to thrust its face upon the general public, and so on (I have a file of correspondence), after which Penguin abandoned plans which had called for *Glastonbury* and the *Autobiography*. There's absolutely no doubt that if there had been a breakthrough with Penguin the situation would have been profoundly different throughout the reading community.

There is no general biography. This is very important. There is no life, no generally acceptable, straightforward biography. The result is a very curious and dangerous one in my opinion, a mosaic of rumour, a mosaic of private gossip and in-group knowledge to which the outsider has no real access. He feels kept out, because the cognoscenti know a great deal, can understand references and place vital elements in the work. There is no general biography available of the kind that is an invaluable help for many other great writers. Not only is there no biography, there is the problem of the *Autobiography*, a book magical in its genius but compounded of silences, compounded of extremely subtle obliquities, indirections; no simple guide, God knows, for anyone trying to find out the history of that life or what it was all about or who was involved. So we really have a double problem, not only the lack of a biography, but the presence of that very disturbing, very difficult work which in some ways makes the biographer's task hopeless to begin with, because how dare he compare his own inadequate means to that very great book?

We have no general critical introduction. I say this with all due respect to the presence here tonight of those who have written about him. The literature is growing but I think you would agree that there is no single introduction to

the whole of his work — a general critical introduction placing it, guiding one, discussing various works in sequence, and attempting a general first judgement. In a moment I'll give examples of what I have in mind. On the contrary, we have a number of epochal critical dismissals which have enormous authority, and Cambridge is the place to speak of them. Dr. Leavis's dismissal is certainly one of the lasting historical turning-points; it has had enormous influence. Not only is it a dismissal which has been made over and over again in lectures (as, when asked by students, that "it is an utter waste of time to try and read John Cowper") but which follows up this dismissal by rapidly saying, "Yes, but — the other brother. Yes, but *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, though not in the Great Tradition, not entirely of the Alpha double minus or whatever, is kind of, of the Beta query double plus class, and this is the one, if at all, you will want to look at." And *Mr Weston's Good Wine* is one of the books which a Cambridge undergraduate professes to have acquaintance with, and Dr Leavis has always said that to look at *Glastonbury Romance* or *Weymouth Sands* or *Wolf Solent* is almost a mark of misguidedness, a mark of mental confusion. Had Dr Leavis judged otherwise, we would today have the biography, we would have the general critical work, and I believe we would have the paperbacks. And I think one can show that, because in a number of cases it has been the one or two great academic critical voices who have launched authors, who have made them generally and widely available in the syllabus.

There is the absence of Powys's name from surveys of modern English literature — the name simply doesn't appear in the index. There is no transcendental, absolute mystery here. There are a lot of contingent accidents, a lot of bits of bad luck, a lot of questions of personality clashes, a lot of near-misses, which all of us I think can document in the career of John Cowper Powys's reputation.

But let's ask why, in a more fundamental sense. Surely our first impression after seeing this should be of deep bewilderment. There is the eros in *Wolf Solent*, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, in *Weymouth Sands*, which goes far beyond anything in Lawrence, in its exploratory frankness, in its genius, in its candour, in its sheer courage to explore almost every ramification of human sexuality. So the argument might go: why hasn't John Cowper Powys profited enormously from what is called the new liberation?

Let me just try to answer this question in a simple-minded way. If we argue that we are rediscovering a lot of literature in the name of a new and untrammelled interest in sex: why, read the second chapter of *A Glastonbury Romance*; there is nothing like it in Lawrence, nothing to touch its sheer violent intensity and truth. If we are told there is today a passionate interest in sadism at every level, in psychological sadism, in sex as cruelty, in sex as domination, as exploitation: where else but in these magnificent novels do we find a treatment as powerful, as overwhelming in terms of truth? Compared to this, the tactical cleverness of *Lady Chatterley*, the enormous manoeuvres of evasion in the successive versions, and finally the silence, the much debated silence, on what seems to be the central sexual experience of the protagonist, compared to Powys, these are not inspiring examples of great courage, of great public emancipation. So, one would say, people would have rediscovered John Cowper; "Yes, here is a great pioneer of the interests and problems that now beset us".

But there's a second issue. Many aspects in his art are in the very best sense, cinematic. An eye, an eye for motion, an eye for the great scene, for figure in landscape, an eye for action. So one could say, until one saw this on film or on television, one couldn't realize how marvellously palpable this material is. I'm thinking how Hardy has profited

from the camera, of the way in which much of Hardy has been taken up again, in a sense in which we don't perhaps all agree with, but which makes it intensely visual and vital. One could have said, "What are they waiting for?" The people who tell us they're hunting for good books to serialise on television, who tell us there is a constant need for scripts from the past — the kind of novel a great director wants to deal with. You say to them, "Have you read *Wolf Solent* — or parts of *Glastonbury* — or many parts of Powys which are crying out for this kind of treatment which is now possible. Why don't you turn to it?" This at a time when, on latest count, eleven of Henry James's novels have been televised or filmed. Think of the contrast — the most etiolated, the most guarded, the most, in some respects, non- or anti-visual genius has been ransacked by film and television often with brilliant success, saying "Look, we have found here something intensely pictorial, why didn't anyone tell us this earlier?"

There is in Powys a critique of technological mass consumer society, prophetic in every respect. Long before current notions of pollution, current notions of man's destruction of the animal world, of the landscape, long before it became almost the overwhelming cause of political passion, he was saying all this with a kind of power and detail which no-one has matched since. Here is a man who grew up in what I suppose we all look back to as Utopia — open country; who still knew an England which today is entirely gone except in certain artificial remote corners, and who gave clear warning, "If you don't keep the land open, if you don't keep this a place where one can breathe and look about one, it will be a nightmare". He saw it all, he was completely a prophet of what was to come: the cruelty of the machine, of the inhuman, insensate domination of the world by man in it. You say, "Right, the young people all over the earth who are finding Thoreau and Emerson again, or in the United States, the young who are looking back to all the writers who

felt this, and who gave this warning, and who are going back to Herman Hesse at every point, saying, 'There is a man who told us we must withdraw, that we can't take part in this rat-race,' they would discover these books and say, 'There it is, there is some-one helping us' ". He saw much more clearly than anyone else what the current battle for having a liveable world is going to be about. Only once more it hasn't happened.

The Conspiracy theory is very tempting. At certain moments, in the Byzantine condition of literature today, where critics matter more than writers, where quarrels matter much more than imagination, a handful of people can decide a great deal. But it's not a helpful line to take. We have to look a little deeper. I would like to be as honest as I can tonight, and at some danger of very mild disagreement with the Society, I would like to try and put the other case. With your indulgence, suppose we look at it from outside, suppose I'm asking to be convinced. I'm a hostile witness. What might some of my fundamental difficulties be?

The first is almost puerile to say — the books are very very long, and very taxing to read. I think Powys's committed, passionate lovers, as almost everyone here is tonight, sometimes forget this.

There is no ease of access. Each great novel of John Cowper Powys is a world of its own. It has to be reconquered, reunderstood almost from the start. But this difficulty has not stopped the proliferation of power in the world of very difficult authors who write huge books. A writer as difficult as Musil; *The Man Without Qualities* sells half a million copies in paperback — a four-volume, immensely difficult and demanding work.

But there is inwoven with the most accessible of John Cowper Powys's novels certain obsessions and convictions of an extremely special sort, which,

depending on one's point of view, are sublime or merely cranky. In almost every great writer, as in almost any significant human being, there are very strange threads, thank God, complications, areas of shadow. In this man, they all of the time lie near the centre of the work. You can't just say, "Pay no attention to these things. Get on with the story". This gigantic human being seems to have been able to orchestrate at every moment such a vast range of convictions, of insights, of beliefs, that they come in like chords, like great musical chords, so that it's almost impossible to say, "Please pluck one, two and three out and listen to the rest".

And these are very difficult chords. There are his convictions about spiritualism. A conviction so terribly literal, and often so dogmatic.

There is the Faddist. There is a man who does not only hate vivisection but who links it to a theory of cosmic evil and retribution. We pass from what would be a private passion, a nuance of feeling, into a very central statement, which demands with full integrity that we understand it, and that we make up our minds whether it is a rational proposition, worth taking seriously.

There is the Celtic Nationalism. The involvement with that world, the passionate, the deep inspired vision of that world, onto a level of expert magic, makes the reading of *Porius*, of *Owen Glendower*, exceedingly difficult without a great deal of help. The publisher puts in this little thin cast of characters — it's no help whatsoever — it's almost a sign of despair on the publisher's part. It's like in very bad editions of Russian novels where you get: 'Vassilevich Nikolayevich is a third cousin of Ippolovich Ivanovich' and good luck to you! With John Cowper Powys there's that majestic impatience, that transcendental, titanic impatience with our lack of background, and I think this has put off a great many readers.

These are lesser points. A bigger one perhaps is that here is a writer so complexly out of his time. In many respects, surely, his art reaches back to the oral epic. No modern artist is more magnificently spoken, or sung; his technique and sense of time, his distribution of narrative mass, is more like Homer than almost any other modern artist. He goes back to the picaresque novel, which derives from the spoken epic. In him the link with the origins of the novel is brilliantly clear and important. The whole history of the novel is almost recapitulated in this body of work. In style of narrative and direct address, in his lyric word-paintings, in his circumstantial scenery, this contemporary of Kafka and Joyce reaches back to Scott, to Dickens, to the Brontes, to Thomas Hardy. What I'm trying to say is, he eludes 'placing', and that puts him together with that other great neglected giant in modern English literature, David Jones; these two figures just escape historical location.

There is the seeming absence in him of certain social and political central awareness in relation to his age. There is the blatant naivete of his relatively rare pronouncements on what was happening in much of the twentieth century. One can say, of course, he saw very deeply, and I have tried to suggest how deeply he saw what we call today the Crisis of the Environment, how much he knew about the rising genius of cruelty in our time. There are in *Glastonbury* amazing aperçus about the social crisis, about the crisis in industrial labour, about the whole problem of power relation between owner and proletariat. But there are also immense absences. It is as though much of the history of our lives had not happened, and as if it had been of no concern to him. And that is why one can say that even Lawrence's awful errors, the black muddle of *The Race and Charismatic Leadership*, even Yeats's senile exultation over the politics of Ireland, are more immediate to our response than the vague rhetoric of Powys's rare comments on his time.

There is an enormous emptiness there, and I think many of us pick up a novel of classic stature with at least some expectation that it will have been in the imaginative grip of the events around it.

There is, finally, the exceedingly delicate problem of the sexuality of this work — its ocular sadism, its furious genius for masturbation, — of its giggly quality, which grows absolutely sillier than words towards the latter part of his life. (I'm thinking of the disastrous recent publication of some of the letters.) His candour on these matters is in fact totally opaque, as we know. There's a kind of fearful childishness, of histrionic disguise, which runs through the heart of some of his great works. He's often silly in a way in which only the very greatest of artists can afford to be, and even those only briefly. In Rabelais and Tolstoy it just works, because it is held in place, as it were, by very strong clamps of common-sense, of sudden gusts of almost luminous simplicity and self-correction, so that the other thing holds. Only a few Titans have been able to incorporate that kind of strangeness and not have the form of the work crack under that challenging weight.

In one sense it is supreme good luck for a writer to be loved and studied by a group of human beings who share a delight in his genius, who feel that the different aspects of that genius, just because they're so different, are almost made for them. So that for almost everyone in this room there is something in Powys so important that he says, "Look, he wrote that just for me," or "He knew my life without ever having met me".

But it is also a danger; when that coterie is at several crucial points isolated from the general stream of feeling. With regard to John Cowper's reputation, with regard to his being read, by people who don't regard this as a special exercise or as a strange esoteric hobby: the chance for that depends in

part on a meeting like this, but it's also in part endangered by it. This is the fascination of our adventure here; it is an ambivalent adventure. In one sense it's marvellous that there should be a celebration, for his birthday of one hundred, in another sense there shouldn't be. It should be an obvious fact, in the history of literature, in the sense that small groups don't gather to mark the birthday of Conrad or James or Lawrence — that is just part of the accepted curriculum of our civilisation.

I want in selfish delight to end by looking at two passages in which John Cowper Powys's genius is such, and of so immediate a quality that one would want to read them from the rooftops: the kind of passages where everything I've said fades into total insignificance, and one is just left with the desperate question, "why does anybody need convincing?"

[Here was a reading of the long paragraph in the chapter "Consummation", in *A Glastonbury Romance* (London, 1933, p.317) which begins, *This was the moment, as she felt herself pulled across the room by her wrist, that she knew her first real spasm of fear of her man,* and ends, *The extremity of her sensation — that sensation which Teiresias (to his own disaster!) had placed above the man's — implied a vivid consciousness that she, Nell, was being possessed by him, Sam.]*

The Tiresias reference seems to me so much deeper here than in Eliot because we have felt the whole of Tiresias in that passage. John Cowper, as perhaps Leonardo before him, or as Goethe in certain very key passages, is both man and woman, and has this breath-taking equity of judgement, this unbelievable impartiality of judging sensation.

One always looks in English literature, doesn't one, for "Is there anything left by Shakespeare for us to do? Is there any corner where his mastery does not touch? I find Shakespeare on animals

utterly intolerable.

I'm thinking of the chapter "The Stranger" in *Porius*, when the as yet unidentified Merlin comes over the river. This is a passage, I believe, unlike any other in world literature, where suddenly the air is alive, the words are alive, everything is electric, and it is electricity from a magician passing through animals, so that man comes very late and stupidly down the perceiving organs. Everything else has got it right, long before man, with his gross cartilages, gets anywhere near feeling it.

*Porius certainly needed every mental power he possessed to keep, mentally speaking, even a boat's length behind the rush of sensations. He was vividly aware of that special kind of shock that comes when a phenomenon that in itself is perfectly natural presses so hard against the sequence of things with which we're familiar that it discredits the very witness of the senses themselves. Emerging from the cave, he felt at once that the twilight was agitated by much more than the screams of a flock of seagulls. He thought he heard the bark of a fox. He was sure he saw the grey unshapely form of a badger; and the air seemed as ruffled by excited stirrings and flutterings as the earth seemed ransacked by wild scamperings and drummings.*

All the animals know it's Merlin, the whole emanating power of his presence is in the animals.

*He paused and gazed round him . . . That yellow vapour was here again! Yes, that same stubble-coloured mist like a conscious presence, whose motion across the sky he had followed from the Gaergate . . . His mind struggled to catch and clarify the confused ideas that came swimming into his consciousness . . .*

Watch as his own consciousness — that's his great good fortune at this moment — becomes organic. There is that Lawrentian, hoped-for, that organic, penetration

of consciousness.

*As he listened to these scufflings in the undergrowth and cries in the air, and the more desperately he tried to get his sensations under control, the more this unnatural mist thickened about him. It could no longer be called stubble-coloured. Twilight had darkened too far. But the effect on Porius was the same as if it could be so-called; since there was something about it that differentiated it completely from the darkness that cradled it and carried it.*

The darkness is cradled within the darkness. The noise of the animals is cradled within the river-noise.

*Thicker and thicker it gathered round him; till he began to wonder if he was destined to reach Brother John at all that night.*

And then — I can't go on, it's too late already — remember he hears the dog, by the ferry . . .

*. . . uttering . . . quick excited barks; but the tone of these barks struck him as utterly different. They were barks of contentment, barks of satisfaction, infinite relief.*

The dog has seen Merlin; this is the beginning of that amazing emergence from the river.

I think there is nothing like this in any other writer, this power, which Shakespeare singularly lacked, to penetrate far beyond speech into the quick of animal and stone. In one sense John Cowper Powys is surely our greatest Platonist, and like Plato he seizes at the merest edge of transcendence in material things; but unlike Plato he never despises the husk, the quiddity of matter.

And perhaps, after all, it is right that he should be so difficult to read, because when we read him, it is we who are honoured by the labour.

## Discussion

**Glen Cavaliero** In reference to the point you made about the "silliness", I wonder whether this is partly involved in the fact that he's a novelist who is supremely interested in the yearning child within the man, the aspect of people that never grows up, the child that is not left behind but remains the core of the personality? Because one finds it again and again in his men of power, in Philip Crow for instance; Philip is often portrayed as a little boy. This can lead to a foolishness, a silliness, but it is indeed one of his strengths, one of his unique qualities — this particular aspect of human character. I can't think of any other writer, except perhaps Dickens, who reveals it.

**George Steiner** I meant more in his pronouncements, in his recently published volumes of letters. I wish we were working from the centre, and then the specialized student would say, "Shall I one day read the *Letters to Ross*?" and so on. I think we're at the moment in a very curious esoteric situation of the wrong end of the stick.

**Angus Wilson** It seems to me this is a very parallel situation to the first letters of Virginia Woolf that came out, to Lytton Strachey. They created a very, very bad effect indeed, nearly disastrous. I think it's to do with the world in which people lived between about 1900 and 1925. Their approach to sex among themselves was inevitably what we must now think a bit "giggly", because one of their only ways of being free of the whole burden of Victorian attitudes to sex among themselves, as a sort of private club, was to adopt this particular sort of epicene version of the men's club smutty story. But this is the kind of jokiness people went in for, as a way of relieving themselves of that terrible period of their childhood where nothing could be said.

**George Steiner** *The Autobiography* presents a tremendous fascinating prob-

lem. The auto-eroticist, the self-exciting passion, which seems to be central to Powys, you could read it and get wrong. What is it all about, in the most central sense?

**G.Wilson Knight** Surely it depends on the state of mind in the western world altering. If our present consciousness persists, it's likely that the authors you named as being famous should get what I think is probably undue acclaim and that Powys should not have his due. But when and if the wider consciousness alters — Powys may perhaps even help to alter it, or it may perhaps alter our appreciation of Powys — that is the kind of way you want to look at the problem, I think. When we have a consciousness which is aware of the imponderables all around us instead of the consciousness which is dependent on the scientifically factual, then there may be a change.

**Bill Lander** Let's assume that we've got a Penguin edition of John's work, any one of them, don't you think it'd bring John down? Now I happen to come from *Lady Chatterley's* country, and when that was published, all the general readers wanted it, just for those swear-words, and after that he hasn't got, I should say out of half-a-million people, I bet he hasn't got a thousand genuine readers.

**Colin Wilson** There's a question that hasn't been mentioned though, that some of the later books are so extremely difficult — I'm thinking of *Up and Out* — that they're a positive embarrassment to a critic. If someone settles down to write a really big book about Powys, they're faced with the problem of how do we deal with these.

**G.Wilson Knight** But I think they can be dealt with, as enormous fairy-stories, humorous, in a very serious way though.

**Diane Fernandez** But what would the biography say about the Welsh years? What can one say about thirty years in

North Wales?

[After an interval, this discussion continued for another hour.]



# Angus Wilson



## John Cowper Powys as a Novelist

Since I've been finishing a novel myself, which is just now done, I confined this talk to three novels, to *Wolf Solent*, to *A Glastonbury Romance*, and to *Porius*. I think that *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Owen Glendower* are the three conventional near-masterpieces of John Cowper Powys. I say near-masterpieces because it's quite evident to anybody that these are flawed. (My own belief is that any masterpiece that is really good is flawed. I rather suspect perfect works of art, I think there is something, finally, some dimension, that is lacking in them.) But I want really to go on to suggest why I think *Porius* is the most exciting thing, because I believe it to be totally unlike any other novel, and leading, or could have been leading, us on to something in a dimension quite different from other novels. But I'd start really with those three more conventional novels. He himself said that he was an extremely literary writer, and it's clear that they are deeply influenced by other writers that went before, and I shall make some mention of those influences and how far they work or

not.

But just to say a word about *Owen Glendower* first, since I am not going to talk about it. It is in some ways the richest and finest work. I feel happier not to speak about it in detail because Professor Wilson Knight has written an essay which seems to me to say almost all that needs to be said about it. It's the one book in which the central figure who is the uncertain man is also a magician. Of course, every character in John Cowper Powys is possessed, but there is a sense in which Owen Glendower is the only magician whom the author really enters inside in a way that he can't do with Merlin, I would suppose, and can't really do with Geard. So this makes Owen Glendower a very special sort of figure, and no other book that I know of shows the impossibility of the magician really being helped either by conventional Christianity, or by any sort of rational belief. Owen Glendower stands somewhere in a realm which is untouched by those sorts of things. The other thing which is very, very impressive in the book, is the very compassionate separation of the man of action, the sleepless Henry IV, from all the rest of the characters. A dimension totally lacking in John Cowper Powys's work (and possibly one could say this is both a strength and a failure of power), is any real understanding or any real portrayal of power. I'm sure he had the understanding but he chose for certain reasons not to portray it. I think there is the sense in Henry IV not of power, but of his being a man of ceaseless, sleepless political activity, who is cut off from all the other characters.

Then Rhisiart is obviously one of the great figures of all Powys's work, and he embodies everything that you can find in John Crow or in *Wolf Solent*, all those things which are strength-weaknesses. Because all the way through, if we are talking about Powys, we've got to talk about ambiguity. What is strength is weakness and what is weakness is strength. And all the sexual ambi-

guities, all the lack of steadfastness in relationships, all the over-flexibility of character which might be thought to be a weakness, and which in a sense, as I shall suggest, is weakness in relation to other human beings, is also a great strength in Rhisiart, making him an untouchable man. I suspect that the perfect ease with which one is willing to believe that this man should end up as a judge, is one of John Cowper Powys's best little jokes. Rhisiart, I think, is a sort of picture of his teasing us a little here, and saying, "Look, this is what I could be. People in high places are not really so far removed from the salamander wriggling-eel figure, which I have put at the centre of my work."

Well, the other reason why I really won't talk about *Owen Glendower* is because it is a historical novel in the real sense of historical novel. I think there are certain masterpieces in literature which are called historical novels but I don't think they are. I refer to *Rob Roy*, to *La Chartreuse de Parme*, to *Barnaby Rudge*, and to *War and Peace*. These are not historical novels in any real sense. They are novels which come out of the folklore of the grandfather, or even perhaps the father, of the author. They derive from his own time. *Barnaby Rudge* is the folk memory that must have been still talked about when Dickens was a boy. *La Chartreuse de Parme* is in the background of Stendhal. These sorts of novels are not to me historical novels in the sense that *Owen Glendower* is a historical novel, going right back to the fifteenth century. Nor can a historical novel be what *Porius* is, a dream novel, a different kind of novel altogether. And so although I deeply respect *Owen Glendower*, I cannot mark it and class it with the great masterpieces of the novel, because for me a historical novel is something which can never quite have the felt quality, the quality that comes either out of the author's subconscious dream world, or out of his own conscious experience, or out of a mixture

of both, which is usually the case of any really serious and good novel. A historical novel cannot be quite of that kind, unless it is to be the novel of personal and contemporary life dressed up as though it were in the past. And this is certainly not the case with *Owen Glendower*. The scholarship of it (and I was trained as a medieval historian; and the dark ages, funnily enough, and the fifteenth century, were the subjects I studied when I was an undergraduate, and indeed I intended to go on with such studies, but life decreed otherwise), the scholarship of *Owen Glendower*, the reconstruction, is marvellous. But the effort which John Cowper Powys makes to throw himself into that known age (quite different to *Porius* where we come to an unknown age), I think is somewhat too much for the obsessive but exceptionally immediate creativity which is so very strong in John Cowper Powys, and which is not only strong, which is also I think, his very great strength.

So in my opinion *Owen Glendower* is a remarkable novel, a very good novel, but not the exciting novel that *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* are, and I see it chiefly important as liberating him from the present and allowing him to move forward to *Porius*, which was to be his great revolutionary contribution in the novel. His step into the unknown, as I shall go on to suggest, came too late for *Porius* to be quite the masterpiece that it could be. It's possible, I think, that he's trying to do something there that never can be done. Had he written it earlier, it might have been the first of an exploration into a whole new kind of novel, in which he could have produced this total masterpiece, but I rather wonder, because when we move further on, and stones and vegetables begin to speak, I'm not certain that it really works, and this is the direction in which such a novel must move.

Well then, so much for my choice of those three novels, and I shall divide *A Glastonbury Romance*, and *Wolf*

*Solent* from *Porius*, although of course only the medium is different. The themes, the psychological divisions, are almost exactly the same though the final cosmic view is a very different one, and this is very important indeed for the shape of these novels, and when I come to *Porius* I shall speak most particularly about the way it is shaped, the kind of feeling of it. To me the style and construction of a novel is really something I would describe as feeling; it has to do with a pervasive atmosphere of climate, and so on and so on. And although John Cowper Powys himself rejects much talk of such technical matters, I think one can't escape talking about them when one talks about his work. You know, he says, "the writer naturally talks about these precious patterns to sympathetic and admiring friends, what the devil else could he talk about? No doubt the friends of the author of *The Faerie Queene* knew every detail about that damned allegory". Well that's all very true, but nevertheless in *Porius* I believe he was approaching a whole area of experience in a totally new way, and that way has to be talked about.

Well, let me then start with *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*. I'm going to start with an aspect which is usually totally dismissed and I believe quite wrongly dismissed. I'm going to start with the totally external social aspect. I think many people may wonder why a novelist said to be so satiric as I am, certainly so concerned with the social surface of life, so concerned with the exactitude of dialogue and so on, should be so devoted to John Cowper Powys. And I must obviously therefore approach his work from my own angle to some degree. But I believe that even if I were not that kind of writer, people have very seriously and gravely misjudged this purely exterior social aspect of John Cowper Powys's modern novels. It's noticeable in Mr. Collins's book that he speaks as though John Cowper Powys was totally cut off from the social world of his time, that the picture he gives exists nowhere, or if it does exist

anywhere it's out of date. This I believe to be totally untrue, in fact quite to the contrary, I think that John Powys was so embedded and immersed in the particular English social atmosphere in which he'd been brought up, and which continued right through until the thirties, that he was able to dismiss it as almost no other author has been able to do, and so to devote himself to the depth-psychology of the characters, to move on to all sorts of relationships between human beings and so-called inanimate nature, because he really took for granted and understood absolutely and completely the particular social world which he chose to portray.

I wonder if it may be the accident of where one is born, but it so happens that when I read *Weymouth Sands* or *Glastonbury Romance* or *Wolf Solent* I am living exactly, socially and externally in the world of my childhood. And I make no apology for talking about this a little although I am quite aware that, for what John Cowper Powys finally has to say, it is a triviality. I think it is important to establish it because I think unless one understands this, one cannot go on to understand why it is that he is able to move so smoothly.

Now I happen to have been born in 1913, and so my childhood was of the First World War and the twenties, my adolescence up to the very early thirties; although John Cowper Powys, as we know, was mainly in America during this period, he made many visits back to England, and I think the picture that we get in those novels I've named is an absolutely true one of the world that I knew in my childhood. It was a world somewhat changed from the world that John Cowper Powys had left behind in 1904, or whatever year it was that he first went to America, but it was not so wholly changed as all that. I think it is the viewpoint that perhaps is unusual and unexpected, because it so happens that it is not a viewpoint which other well-known or famous English writers have had, in our century at any rate. John Cowper Powys came from a special

kind of upper middle-class society with absolute certainty of its own position. An upper middle-class society not urbanised, not living in the city, an upper middle-class society of the kind which I came from in my own childhood. And when I read (I was brought up in Bexhill as a matter of fact, again at the seaside), when I read *Weymouth Sands* it is as though I was living my childhood all over again in external detail. To me this is far more real than the world of *To the Lighthouse*, or *The Rainbow*, or *The Longest Journey*, but then I suppose that would not be so for the people who were brought up in those respective spheres. Perhaps the critics tended to come from the urban intelligentsia on the one hand, Bloomsbury Group people, or from a working-class intelligentsia, Lawrentians, on the other hand, and therefore the world of John Cowper Powys, with all that it takes for granted, is for them something so peculiar that they dismiss it as not being real. I believe it to be a totally real and exact thing.

My own family, it's true, were more urbane, more sophisticated, more stupid, more deadened with common sense, than I find in John Cowper Powys's work in general. And there was within the central core of my family, I wouldn't say totally, some kind of lack of religious belief, though there was Christian Science, and such things, but in general there was not a solid Anglicanism such as one finds at the centre of John Cowper Powys's work. But we were involved with people of this kind, and when I read about John Cowper Powys's society in those novels, there is a special kind of centre to the upper middle-class of that time which is portrayed in certain characters in his work. And if we are to understand the values of his work, apart from the cosmic significance which I shall come on to, we must see that characters of the kind of Elizabeth Crow and Tillie Crow, Matt Dekker, Mrs. Otter, form a kind of solid centrality which I know was something by which everything was measured in my own childhood. I recognise all the time as I read that work that it could be

my own childhood again, both the dead Mr. Solent with his escapades; Mrs. Solent — the marvellous and wonderful scene between Wolf Solent and his mother recalls again and again to me my own mother's kind of mixture of proud hilarity with sudden outbursts of grief; Miss Gault; Miss Drew; how often have I been taken as a child to the houses of old maids like that, how often have I met exactly this kind of people, and been treated to bread and butter sandwiches with brown sugar inside! I shall come on to talk about the lack of affluence in this world, however socially distinguished, and this is very, very important I think. All the other characters are to be seen in relation, I think, to Matt Dekker and Elizabeth Crow. Goodness knows their social presumptions are great, but their goodness is also recognised as being absolutely central to the community in which they live, and only characters on the extreme edge, like Red, will attack them; or characters like Philip Crow, who wonder whether the world is going to move in such a way that we can afford any longer to treat Matt Dekker and Elizabeth Crow as our central standards of value.

The shop people, the working people, are seen exactly as I was taught to see the shop people. This is not to speak as though John Cowper Powys was a man who had any kind of snobbery. As I shall go on to say, he eliminated in himself all kinds of violence, all kinds of sense of power. But nevertheless innately in him the world has its order. The upper middle-class are 'Here' (he had, which I didn't have, and I shall come to that, a knowledge of the aristocracy which was 'Up Here'); and, 'Then', come the shop people. (We didn't go out on certain afternoons in the week, because that was the afternoon the shop people had their afternoon off, and it wouldn't be fair to them to go out, because after all they had to enjoy themselves, and they didn't want other people about, and they wouldn't be able to enjoy themselves in quite the same way if we were about the place.) Now this kind of

value, which seems, I know, to many modern audiences an appalling thing, is nevertheless somewhere implicit, it is an order which John Cowper Powys, I think, felt to be a valuable order, though he would certainly have detested any aspect of pride in it, any aspect of condescension. But it was an order which lies behind his books, I do insist, and feel most acutely, because I remember it. And people like Persephone, people like Dave Spear her husband, or Paul Trent, I remember them so well, they what is called "kicked over the traces", they were the younger people in society who had "strange ideas". You haven't got to dig very deep in Persephone, you haven't got to dig very deep in Paul Trent, to find that their values are the same as their elders', their solid concept of the social world is the same one.

Above all, I think you cannot understand the characters of John Crow and Wolf Solent, those characters, unless one understands this. They are not Birkin, this is the whole point about them, not only because of the lack of violence in them, not only because of the lack of rancour. That quality of rancour in Birkin, that quality of interest in power which you find in Aaron in *Aaron's Rod*, the way in which he wants to know about the sources of power, this belongs to something quite different to the world I knew. This belongs to Lawrence's world, this belongs to the working-class man who moves out of his working-class world and who is excited to find, although he eventually rejects, the way that the world works. The drop-outs of my family were many; and as I look at John Crow, as I look at Wolf Solent, above all as I look at Tom Barter, I recognise my brothers. I had many brothers, some still alive, who were total drop-outs from a middle-class society. Drop-outs is a bad word because it suggests some kind of condemnation. They decided they didn't want to live in the family world in which they were born, but they kept the values of the family world in a most extraordinary way, subconsciously. They were not

interested in power, because they took it for granted that the upper middle-class world was the one which was going to go on, which was going to run as it did, and this I think you feel with Wolf Solent all the time. People have criticised (I find it in Mr. Collins's book) when Wolf Solent marries Gerda and goes to live with the Torps. (He says that never is there any feeling that Wolf becomes part of the Torps.) Well I had an experience in my boyhood of a rather different sort of relationship; a very near relation of mine formed not a marriage, but a homosexual relationship with a working young man and lived with the working young man's family, and their relationship was entirely close in exactly the same way as the Torps' and Wolf's. But the Torps of this relationship went on behaving to this gentleman who was living with their son, exactly as the Torps here go on behaving to Wolf Solent who was married to their daughter, with the same kind of treating him as a gentleman, the same kind of playing-up. You see people speak with some kind of criticism of the accents and the language used by the Torps and the other country working people in these novels. I think if we are to understand these we have to understand them as being the way that they talked when they were talking to the gentlemen, to the upper middle-classes. You listen to Mr. and Mrs. Torp talking and you see the way in which they are using the whole of this so-called relationship between themselves and the gentleman who has married their daughter, as a weapon, as a very cunning weapon, to make him feel at a disadvantage.

And so it was, in country towns and in sea-side places, right through until the early thirties. It's persisted, you know, with this kind of middle-class man or girl who decided to move out of society, to move out of their narrow upper middle-class world, right to today. I can think of a brother of mine who moved out of this kind of upper middle-class society many, many years ago and who has led an extremely reckless and in

many ways a very Bohemian (as we used to call it) life; and yet he will still write to me from Portugal that, "things are changing very badly here; I have to allow Maria, our young servant, to go out and watch something called The Television once a week, although I'm glad to say that my dear Concepcion", -- that's his older maid -- "is too sensible to wish to see such monsters." Now this is straight out of this kind of world, it's still going on. I insist upon it because it's a kind of vital centre to what is the world of John Cowper Powys, and his accepting of it is frightfully important.

I think one of the few characters that is badly treated in John Cowper Powys's novels, funnily enough, is Bob Weevil. I notice that people writing about this speak about Bob Weevil as a sort of contemptible. I believe that Bob Weevil is a real figure and is just a faint beginning of some real rancour. Bob Weevil is playing a little joke which is rather more difficult for Wolf Solent to take (quite apart from the cuckolding of his wife) -- his whole social attitude is just a bit more difficult to take than the Torps'. The Torps' is a little game, we've played it all our lives, we know what the Torps think about us and they know what we think of them and they speak in that mummerset to make us feel more uncomfortable. But Bob Weevil has a quality which threatens this whole society and which looks forward to the future. Bob Weevil is always referred to as having a water-rat's head, and I believe that this is the quality of him, that he's thought to be rat-like because we're frightened of rats, he is the one sort of frightening figure in the book. He's not cunning (cunning in John Cowper Powys's language is a word of very great praise), and I shall come on to speak about why cunning is one of the noblest attributes that a man can have; but ratting is not, and the water rat quality of Bob Weevil is something which faintly threatens the society in which Wolf Solent is able to be a satisfactory drop-out but maintain all his feelings.

Now let me insist also on the poverty of this world. There is practically not in any of John Cowper Powys's modern novels anyone who is really rich. We are told, and it seems to be the case, that Lord Carfax does buy up the erotic books of Mr. Malakite, and so enable Mr. Malakite to retire and play bowls at Weymouth. Well, this suggests, I think, the cheapness with which in those days you could retire and play bowls at Weymouth for the rest of your life. Everybody is really very poor, not affluent in the sense we understand it. Even Philip Crow, you remember, when his bridge is destroyed by the flood, is near to ruin; he's not a rich man as we understand it. Miss Gault no doubt had good dividends put away and so did Miss Drew, but they lived frightfully simply. This is the world I remember. I remember so well this upper middle-class world, so absolutely sure of itself, which never-the less had jugs of water on the table, which lived on bread and treacle a great deal of the time, a world in which the idea of foreign wines was not a customary thing except at Christmas. This was a world which in its simplicity of living was very much more uniform than we now know, and right the way through John Cowper Powys's work I have this strange feeling of a world of boiled eggs and rock cakes, something which I remember from my childhood and which has now almost entirely disappeared. You don't get a vast community now living on boiled eggs and rock cakes, but you could in those days, right from Miss Elizabeth Crow at the top right down to Number Two and Number One at the bottom. They were living in a very simple way. Cheap pub lunches, very cheap pub lunches, shilling lunches and rooms for a gentleman in which, although the gentlemen were poorer than the people who let out the rooms, they were still treated as gentlemen. This world has gone. Who now would let a room to a gentleman and make a fuss about him and keep on apologising to him for not being up to his social standard, if you know that you've got about four times as much money as he

has? But that is a world in which this happens and it makes for a kind of simplicity which is very, very important; because ingrained in the whole of John Cowper Powys's work, I think, is an accent on the inessentiality of the external life, and it's only if you can take the external life completely for granted both socially and in its material terms that you can devote yourself as intensely as he did to the inner consciousness of people, and to the cosmic scheme of things. It's only when you feel free of caring about the rat race, feel free of worrying about whether you ought to learn how to make Coq a la Reine, it's only when you don't worry about whether you're serving the right wine, it's only when you don't worry at all about what kind of holidays you take, that you begin to allow mosses and lichens to have their part in your life. And I think this aspect of John Cowper Powys has been completely ignored, because people are fussing about the fact that the First World War is not mentioned in his work.

This is not the twenties of Noel Coward, it's not the twenties of the Bloomsbury Group, it's not the twenties of D.H. Lawrence. All those twenties are exceedingly feverish, but there is nothing feverish about John Cowper Powys's world. Even in *A Glastonbury Romance* which portrays, I think, something deeply influenced by Dostoevsky's *Possessed*, something like a kind of break-through in the solid structure of society, nevertheless there is no real feeling of any kind of tension and feverishness. People are always saying how peculiar his characters are, "his characters are so eccentric, so odd". I think one might allow that Jason Otter certainly, and Johnny Geard, are rather outside the cognisance of most of us, but the rest for me are the people of my childhood. They are the products of the gossip that I used to hear in my childhood. I was always being told of "that horrid old man". That horrible old man is Mr. Malakite. I was always being told of that "disreputable old woman". That

disreputable old woman is Mrs. Legge. I was always being told of "that unpresentable young man". That's surely Sam Dekker. I was constantly being told of "that peculiar girl". That surely is Angela Beere. And the fact is that the gossip was true! And John Cowper Powys tells us about it as it really was, and this is not a world of peculiar people, it's a world of people as they were then. And sex, too, I can see (and John Cowper Powys marks this, and I think it's very interesting), was socially striated in exactly the same way. Infidelity and adultery, these were the marks of the upper classes and the upper middle-classes. If we were church-going we deplored them, if we were not we gave a conventional wink, but it was an accepted thing. And then, more whisperingly, homosexuality was part of the upper middle-classes and also I suppose of the upper classes, though I knew little of this. But incest, Mr. Malakite, belonged to 'them'; that belonged to the working people, not that we blamed them for it, we just expected that there would be incest among those kind of people.

He had the advantage, of course, of his father having been connected with Montacute, and so he knew the aristocracy, something which I never knew at all, at least until I was in my thirties, and he does have the wonderful power occasionally of seeing this from their angle. If you remember Lord Carfax expresses great contempt for Mr. Urquhart, for saying so much about what he imagines to be his "devilishness". Squire Urquhart's tendencies towards necrophilia, if that's what they really were, the whole boasting of it, the whole fuss he makes, it is something that gets on Lord Carfax's nerves. He is an aristocrat, he says, "alright, yes, yes, but you know, these are things that people do, it's always gone on"; and it's noticeable again when we get to Lord P. in *A Glastonbury Romance*, that he refers with tremendous contempt to Lawyer Beere, because he sees Lawyer Beere

boasting about his daughter having some sort of passions for other women, "Well, I mean to say, a middle-class sort of thing to fuss about", he says.

So anyway he is so socially secure that he can go into the characters in really serious psychological depth in a way that most of us, I'm afraid, are not able to do. I wouldn't fuss around with the social surface so much if I was more sure of it. Goodness me, since that time it's not been possible to be so sure of it, and therefore we've been forced back upon this appalling constant attention to manners which I think John Cowper Powys took for granted. We do have, however, to ask ourselves about the town; after all, by the twenties certainly the great city was encroaching, was becoming the menace. The alienation of city life, of megalopolis, was already upon us. I think the answer to this is that it was more than upon us, and the real protest, the real portrayals of the terrible alienation of the city, had taken place in the great nineteenth century figures, Rastignac, Raskolnikov, Arthur Clenham, Gervais, these are the portrayals of the terrible things that are done to people by cities. This is the centre of it, in the nineteenth century. By John Cowper Powys's time, I think, it was something that he was very fully aware of (how could he be otherwise, with his experience in America?). But I think he is moving away from the necessity of creating a central figure within a city, like Raskolnikov, he's moving away towards what Beckett is producing, he's moving towards Malloy and Malone, towards the person who has been, so to speak, totally alienated, has been reduced to a kind of trunk, and this I understand to be the meaning of the eyes of the man on the station at Waterloo. I cannot see why this has not been emphasised more. To me it is impossible to read that whole novel, and to take part in all that happens, without knowing, the whole time, the hero has at the back of his mind the eyes of the man whom he saw on the

steps at Waterloo, and that is the city as it stands outside, the city threatening. There's no need to go into the city once you've said that. This is the tramp figure, not the tramp figure as John Crow sometimes sees himself, the cunning, sponging, wise drop-out kind of man. This is the real horrible, terrible, defeated man of the city as we understand it. And there's no need to create a Raskolnikov, there is no need to create Gervais in order to say this, because it is already said off-stage, and constantly pervades the novel in the eyes of the man on the steps at Waterloo. I think that is very typical of John Cowper Powys, that it should be the eyes; the eyes are a haunting thing in John Cowper Powys.

I suppose I ought to say a word about machines because people seem so fussed about his attitude to machines and the fact that he is worried about aeroplanes and so on and so on. I don't know what one can say about this, except that clearly from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards there was this technological threat to the integrated society and to the integrated culture. And those who despaired of human beings, like Kipling and like Lawrence, these people became obsessed either against machines or, as Kipling was, in accepting machines. I think that John Cowper Powys, in his attainment of some kind of serenity, in his detachment, in his determination to be away from this, is haunted, if you like, by the aeroplane, but he is not going to allow the aeroplane to become either a symbol of power, as it does in Kipling, or a symbol of menace, as it does in Lawrence. I think that he keeps it off-stage purposely because it must not be allowed to invade the serenity which (serenity, God help us! the fantastic multiverse *activity!*) he has immersed himself in.

I do think there's one aspect of all this which perhaps does not tell in his favour. I've said that his work is not broken up and fretted and disintegrated by the attention to social manners that

too many of us have had to give, because he has taken his society for granted, but I do believe, of course, after *Wolf Solent*, he really abandons all dualism, all really serious belief in evil as such, and this I shall talk about in a moment. But there is one aspect of evil, a very serious aspect of evil in the modern world, in a way far more serious than murder, far more serious than sadism, far more serious I think in a way than vivisection, which is to be found in the writing of most other twentieth century writers, that is what I would call cultural or journalistic gossip. I believe that the talk that goes on in Aldous Huxley's books, the talk that goes on sometimes in the books of Virginia Woolf, and a great deal in Lawrence, and sometimes in, say, Evelyn Waugh, that this sort of trivial trivialising journalistic gossip about culture, about politics, is something, it's absolutely true of life, but it is one of the most evil things of our whole life, of our whole world. It's part of the urban scene which is to me almost more terrible than alienation, because it is constantly trivialising, fragmenting that which is serious, and this does not come into John Cowper Powys's work. I think it's partly because he had a very bad ear; it's his greatest failure. But also perhaps because living in a more rural world, there wasn't too much of that terrible kind of endless pseudo, supposedly serious, talk about politics, and about books and about science, and about culture generally, which of course is my chief charge against television. Television is like a kind of skit on this, a kind of terrible surge of this endless triviality comes pouring out at you, but it's triviality about what is serious, and that you do not get in John Cowper Powys, and in so far as you don't get it in his work one very important aspect of modern evil is absent. Because evil doesn't always wear the face of Fagin and Sykes, evil can wear the face of a lot of people sitting together mauling over something that they ought to give serious attention to, as a way of placing themselves in a social hierarchy which they feel they haven't

attained to, or something of this kind. Evil can be triviality, shall I put it that way, and in John Cowper Powys's novels, even where he still believes in evil as part of the mythology of *Wolf Solent*, there isn't, because of his very nature, much room for triviality.

People have talked about his work being pictorial rather than dramatic. That is to say, I suppose, if you're to translate it into stage terms, his work is more like a Noh play, where a few people are moving very slowly into certain kinds of rigid and set postures rather than a fast moving drama. I don't accept this at all, and I shall go on to say why I think there is constant movement in his work. But it is true that in his relationship of characters he does have certain set pieces; for example the relationship of *Wolf* to his mother, and then to Gerda and then to Christie, is a set piece. It's something which occurs all over again in a novel so different as *Porius*: one may trace the man and his relation to his mother and relation to two different women. There are other such set pieces: there is the buffoon magician, Merlin, Geard, the divine clown if you like, but it isn't quite the divine clown because they really are magical people, but whose magic is capable of strange sluggishness and strange clownishness. The strange quality that they have is that their magic proceeds from what seems to be their inertness. There are of course the old maids. (I suspect, by the way, that that relationship between the man and his mother and the two women is a derived one, strangely derived and very much better done in my opinion, derived from Mrs. Yeobright of *The Return of the Native*, and the relation of Jude to his wife Arabella and to Sue. It seems to me that a triumph, if we want to talk about the greatness of John Cowper Powys, is the degree to which he has exceeded some of his forbears. To have turned Arabella, that hated character, that not really ever felt character, of Hardy's, into the perfection of Gerda and her blackbird song, is really quite a triumph, of goodness if you like, and

goodness is something which seems to me to be a great feature of John Cowper Powys.

There are the old maids as I say, and then there are the messenger boys, Lobby, Elfin, Ned, these knowing boys who know really more about what's going on than anybody else. I know of no other writer who has created this particular kind of boy. (The only one I can think of at all approaching it is Meredith, an author who had no connection with Powys, I know. Nevertheless I think Crossjay Patterne in *The Egoist* does have this quality which is present in these messenger boys of John Cowper Powys.) And then there are the good but finally rejected Christian characters, with their love which nevertheless is a love which is used for power and therefore is seen finally as wrong by John Cowper Powys: Mr. Tilly-Valley, Sam Dekker, Drom. And we accept the cuckolding of the anti-hero as part of that: cuckolding of Wolf by Bob and Carfax, of Porius by Rhun, and so on. All these, and there are many more such patterns, I think they would seem to be limitations. You get this in every writer, of course, we all of us have only a limited stock set of figures that we can use, but the actual positioning of them is much more rigid in John Cowper Powys's work. But strangely enough I think because the thing is done in advance it allows him to examine those characters in depth in a way that he would not otherwise be able to do. That breakdown of Ann Solent and her turning from that to her laughter and her mockery, Miss Gault's breakdown with John Crow, Miss Drew's breakdown with Mary, these are able to be possible. I don't think that Johnny Geard could be seen so deeply if we didn't know that he belonged to this whole Merlin tradition. It simply is, I suppose, that just as socially, so also in character form, he doesn't need to put in too much detail; the whole thing can be done with a little algebraic equation, and this gives him room to move so much deeper.

It changes very much after *Wolf Solent* because the dualistic mythology of Wolf is defeated, and we move into a multiverse universe. It is in *A Glastonbury Romance* that for the first time everything is spread into a multiverse world, and this is why he throws up in this incredible way not only his pattern figures but other brilliant characters, particularly women. If we think of Cordy and Crummy Geard and Mary Crow, Persephone Spear, Rachel Zoyland, Tossie Stickle, what other author in one novel could have thrown up so many individual women? It's necessary to him because the universe has now become a multiverse one. People speak about his women comparing them with Dostoevsky's. They seem to me to excel Dostoevsky's women greatly in many ways because they are not over-ruled by the obsessive mythologies or the obsessive creed of Dostoevsky. It seems to me that Nastasya Fillipovna and Aglaya are finally limited. We know that Nastasya is going to be subordinated to Dostoevsky's obsession with murder. We know that Aglaya is going to marry a Pole and is therefore going to be proved a terrible figure. This is part of Dostoevsky's chauvinistic obsession, his hatred of the Poles, his Pan Slavism and his Russianism and so on. Now John Cowper Powys has more of these kinds of accepted creeds, and so his women are able to move absolutely freely. I know no other writer who is able to allow people to move so freely, and it means of course that he can go so much deeper inside his characters.

I've already said that I think he did not have any ear for dialogue; it is his great defect, and yet perhaps it isn't needed. His characters, when they speak — it's alright sometimes, but it's often not alright at all, and it seems to me that means we know those characters from their inner consciousness. To me this has one defect, and when we were talking last night about the difficulties of reading John Cowper Powys I kept on thinking of this. I know of no form in the novel which is so exhausting,

which is finally so clogging, so suet-pudding, if I can use that phrase, as the interior monologue. I wish, perhaps, as he seemed to be doing, John Cowper Powys had been able to move on to the stream of consciousness. This has a slightly more direct quality, it's slightly more dramatic. There is something about a great deal of interior monologue which is deadening, and I believe that if there is a deadening quality in his work it is because of the form of it. But so fine is his inner perception of those characters that he overcomes the natural overweight, I think, of interior monologue, and we really do know these people. If we don't know them from their speech, we know what they are like inside. It's taken for granted what they're like outside and we know in the most incredible way what they are like inside.

This is partly because, as I say, he takes the external world for granted, but it's partly due to another thing. That is to say that the relations of characters to each other are always subordinate to it. It is never in itself the absolute centre of things, because there is the relation of human beings to the inanimate, to the vegetable world, to the world of stones, to the total non-human world. And so this inner consciousness and dialogue is always an intuitive one, it must be an intuitive one because the only way we can apprehend the non-human universe is an intuitive apprehension. And this is extended to the human beings themselves. There is hardly any dialogue between people on an intuitive level within the consciousness of their characters, and, much more importantly, there is a constant dialogue between them and the vegetable and animal world around them, and indeed the world of stones. This is essential and it's not like Wordsworth, a dialogue with the stones because the stones speak out and glorify man; far from it, they have their own right, the vegetable-mineral world exists in its own right. And toward the end of his time, I fear it was with a lack of success, he did indeed try to

make those things talk, as we know, in *Atlantis*. I don't think it works and I think he was moving towards what is an impossibility in the novel. But that it gives a total dimension of intuitiveness, of inner consciousness to his work, which is to be found in no other work, I do very genuinely believe.

However, he did inherit from Dostoevsky the great human confrontation scenes, and these often do work, but especially in *Wolf Solent* because Wolf Solent still has this escape into the old dualistic world of good and evil which dominates Dostoevsky and the nineteenth century writers. It's essential of course to all scenes of human confrontation in Dostoevsky, in Dickens, even in Proust. If you think of things like the Guermantes saying goodbye to Charles Swann, or the taunting of Charlus at Madame Verdurin's, then you must believe in evil and in good, otherwise this kind of pain could not happen. That hasn't yet been exploded in *Wolf Solent*, but even here I think the best of such human confrontations contains something of the inanimate. One of the finest scenes in that book is when Miss Gault is present with Jason, Wolf and Urquhart who are sparking off together, and she is somehow a kind of a catalyst between them, but none of the three of them are so important as the little bits of snail shell that are to be found, the scattered pieces of snail shell. It's around the scattered snail shell that that human confrontation really takes place. Now how impossible that would be in any nineteenth century author! And when we have that magnificent scene, when we finally see that, whatever we may have forethought about the wickedness, the evil, of Squire Urquhart or of Jason Otter, they have a blissful, an actually idyllic side to them when they're watching Lobby Torp and Bob Weevil bathing in Lenty Pond. Nevertheless all those human participants, in that rather beautiful scene, I think, are rather paled by the slime, the green slime of Lenty Pond itself; it's that that we constantly recall when we speak of Lobby Torp's

body or of Bob Weevil's, it's always with this coating of this green slime. Inanimate matter comes into, or vegetable matter comes into, the greatest human confrontation, it seems, and is absolutely vital.

Where I don't believe it does work is where he thinks it necessary to have violence. Now we're coming to the core of what I have to say. I think I shall have to break and, if you'll forgive me, talk about *Porius* after we've had the break, because I see that I've given myself more to say than I should do. But I'd just like to finish this about murder and sadism because it is absolutely essential to the whole thing. I think that this kind of human confrontation, this sense of evil, is already dissolved in *Wolf Solent* by the blackbird's song of Gerda. Wolf himself surmises, if you remember, that evil is not a concrete thing — it's the kind of sluggish primaeval quality in life — and even that is forgiven, I suspect, when we get the whole business about the Cewri at the end of *Porius*, where the vision of the girl under the lake is something which is a kind of redeeming even of the primitive. But in *A Glastonbury Romance* we still have these human clashes, but we're now in a multiverse world, it's no longer a dualistic world; there is no question of good and evil really in the same sense. The influence of Dostoevsky's benevolent fund for the governesses in *The Possessed* is (as in my work), I believe, overpowering; and I think that the whole of the pageant is perhaps a little over-influenced by that. It works when you see Lord P. being attacked by the mob. That works because it is seen by Johnny Geard from a distance, and then he comes down — this works; but I don't believe it works at all when Evans is on the cross. I think the most moving part altogether is Persephone as Mary rather than Evans himself, and I think this is because Evans's sadism never never has any reality. It doesn't exist.

This is why Tom Barter's murder seems

to me to be finally a failure. What have iron bars to do with erotic sadism? Nothing whatsoever! And I do think that John Cowper Powys possibly was not a sadist at all as he thought himself. (I understand this very well because deep in my own nature is a very strong erotic sadism which I've tried to work out in my books.) But I don't believe that it was there in John Cowper Powys, at least I find no evidence of it at all in his work, although he talks about it in the *Autobiography*. I think that if it was there he eliminates it along with power, and this is very important in his work, this elimination. But it seems so terribly confused, this sadism. If it was erotic does he not betray it because he couldn't or because he wouldn't?

There is no torture in his work. You see, the essence of sadism is some kind of torture — it needn't be physical — mental torture. The nearest we get to it is the treatment of Christie by Wolf Solent, that is a kind of torture, but that is to do with something else which I shall speak of later, that is to do with the denial of orgasm which is altogether something different. That is something absolutely implicit in John Cowper Powys's view of life. The other time sadism comes up is connected with necrophily. Well, of all the things in the world what *has* sadism to do with necrophily? Who can hope to get any sadistic erotic pleasure from dead bodies? It's in itself a contradiction in fact. And yet he seems to have this somewhere in the centre of his work. I believe it is because he had derived from Dickens and Dostoevsky this whole magical thing which they had about murder. But if you look at murder in Dickens's and Dostoevsky's work, the horror of murder is not, as we are told in *Glastonbury Romance*, Tom Barter being hit on the head with an iron bar — it is Porphyrius's questioning of Raskolnikov which is really passed over — it has no meaning — it's the way in which Porphyrius plays with Raskolnikov like a cat with a mouse, that's the real sadism in the work. That's the obsession with murder, the obsession

with the pain of the murderer, not the murder itself, I am sure, and this is also true in Dickens. Dickens is obsessed with Jasper, he's playing with Jasper, all the time; not the murder of Edwin Drood, but the playing with Jasper, this is the sadistic side. This is not there at all, as far as I can see, in John Cowper Powys's work. That murder of Tom Barter, what is it? It is attributed to the only person in the whole of his work who is said to be mad, mad Bet. Well that makes it in a sense awfully remote from anything that matters in the book, because it's not now talking about people who are called mad by the world, but somebody he calls mad. And then she employs a man (I think it's founded upon Fedyia the convict in *The Possessed*), to go and do this. But the motivation of this doesn't work at all, I have no conviction that this man would go off and happily kill John Crow just because this old mad woman has told him. It just doesn't work. I think this murder is something which has come to Powys from outside and which is imposed on him by his great love of Dostoevsky, and it is an attempt to try to work out what he believes to be his sadism. But I don't believe the sadism is there.

I think this whole thing is not there because he had eliminated violence from his life. He had determined that violence and power were things that were destructive to anything that could be good in life, and therefore they are absent from the book. I think that when we get to *Porius* it doesn't matter because, as we shall see, he always manages to evade it. It doesn't work; violence, murder, they're all there, all we know about it is what happens before violence and after violence, just as we know what happens before sexual orgasm and after it. The actual deed itself is not important to him. It is something which he has been able to give up, to leave alone.

And this is true of power. Phillip Crow in *Glastonbury Romance* is portrayed

as the new man of power, the industrialist who is ruthless. There is not a moment in the book when he ever does anything to anybody. Occasionally he says that he will do something but he never does; people do terrible things to him, he is defrauded of all his money, and we are made by John Cowper Powys to give him great compassion. John Cowper Powys had decided that we must love (not love, no that would be a Mr. Tilly-Valleyish kind of thing, not love), but we must take in, accept, a multiverse, everybody. And since power and violence are utterly unacceptable and utterly destructive of anything he wants to stand for, I believe that, finally (whether to the detriment or to the betterment of his work I don't know), he really does remove them, in any real sense. He *says* that they are there because it is necessary to a certain dualism that he persists in up to that point. But I shall suggest when I come to talk about *Porius* that this has been eliminated by the time we get to *Porius* with great advantage to the novel in the sense that we have a quite new kind of novel. It's full of action, full of movement, but it's not about *doing*, ever; it's about what we feel like as we're about to do, and what we feel like after we've done, which is another whole new world which nobody's written about. And I shall go on to suggest that what he's doing for the first time of any is managing to create for us the dream world which we live in in dreams, and to relate it to our own real world, something that I think no other author has ever done, and in *Porius* I believe we are in our dreams as much as we are in real life, and the two things have been fused quite miraculously.

### Interval

From what I've been talking about in the interval, I would like to make a clear distinction, that for me what is to be found in John Cowper Powys's works is not sadism, which has erotic roots, but

what I would call excessive homicidalism; but this we may discuss. But I would say that increasingly in his work he does eliminate, I think, all suggestion of power and violence, and it's very interesting that the one time that I feel that real power is mentioned, if not actually exercised, is closely connected with the cuckolding of *Wolf Solent*. It's when Lord Carfax was just about to go and sleep with Gerda. Lord Carfax says to Wolf (Wolf betrays a certain agitation and so on), "I don't like it when people's nerves get out of control. My instinct is to beat them down as a menace to civilised behaviour". Now that, I think, has a touch of what I call sadism.

But anyhow, let me leave that aside. I would say that these confrontations are not wholly successful in the early works; better in *Wolf Solent* (because there is still this dualistic belief); not very effective, to me, in *A Glastonbury Romance* (though I think it's a magnificent book, the great multiverse novel that I can think of.) But still, in confrontation (which he still seemed to feel necessary, but which I don't believe is necessary, in his work), not successful. Except, of course, when Geard is drowning, when Geard is seized by the flood, then you have the great confrontation scene. And that is a confrontation, not with other human beings, but with the flotsam of life. This is the time when inanimate nature and Geard come together, it's not a conflict but it's a confrontation, it's all those things that are floating past him, that he sees, all those things that have been carried away by the flood waters. This seems to me the great dramatic scene of *A Glastonbury Romance*, far more dramatic to me than the pageant and infinitely more dramatic than the murder. That I think is because of the relationship between man and what John Cowper Powys sometimes called the "scourings" of life, all the droppings (that wonderful time when he talks about the "golden droppings" of animals), this whole scattered flotsam and jetsam which Geard

sees floating past him in that wonderful suicide (as it is) but a suicide to make life more full, which I think is the really great thing of *A Glastonbury Romance*.

But there is some interconnection, it's always glancing, and listening and dying between people. That I think is what he needed, not the big confrontations but the little ones, the little moments. You know, that marvellous moment when Angela Beere meets Sam and speaks to him, and he tells her that he has seen the Holy Grail, and the sort of scepticism that she shows, it's so beautifully done. And then later, when he talks to Geard's daughter, and Geard's daughter says "But I always supposed you had." These are the little confrontations which are so completely wonderful, and this is why he does need to use plot and sub-plot. But the world we move in here is not really a world so much of interconnections between people, it's a world where people have eyes for two purposes. One is a very close vision, the vision of lichen, moss, stones, wood-lice. You know that wonderful scene, when Geard puts old Tittie Petherton into the Holy Well, where the body-lice escapes and meets the wood-lice; it's both a wonderful example of John Cowper Powys's humour, I think, and it's also a thing which is seen frightfully close-to. It's this vision, very, very close like a child has, if one can remember one's childhood. (I can remember mine; it was spent mostly on the beach or in the country.) This close vision where ants and wood-lice were the centre of one's vision, this is part of it; but then also, human beings are there not only in their close vision of the earth beneath them, but also as the targets for the planets and the solar system and the whole of the universe above us.

Now I must declare all my cards here. I know that many people here have occult beliefs and transcendental beliefs. I do not have these, and it makes it odd perhaps for me to be a great lover of John Cowper Powys. I am not hostile to

such beliefs at all, I just have never experienced them. And so I would say that I accept the universe as it is scientifically explained, simply because of electricity and various kinds of medical treatments I have had, these things seem to work and so the rational scientific world is the one that I accept. But of course, it's a total magic for me because I understand neither physics, nor chemistry, and therefore I might just as well in a sense believe in the occult. But then, it so happens that the occult world has never manifested itself to me, and so I must declare myself to be on the other side. But this doesn't really seem to matter in reading John Cowper Powys because, as I understand him, he believes everything. This is why he has this acceptance of a multiverse, that things can be true or they aren't true. I think he has this quality for which the idea of an absolute truth is not an essential, is not the really important thing, it is the experience. Now, when I say that the characters in John Cowper Powys's world live in a world in which they are close upon the vegetable and stone world beneath us and that they are, so to speak, the magnets of what is going on in the sky above us, I would say this is really, if I may confess it, my own sense of what the world is like. And I believe that, if people are honest, this is the real sense that most people have, unless they have had experience of the occult, or have had some mystic transcendentalist experience, or have a necessary, a complex training in physics and chemistry which allows them to understand the scientific rationalists. I believe that most people are not equipped with these things in any really serious degree, and that therefore for most people the world still remains much as it is for a child. Not if they think about it intellectually, but if they feel about it as they go around every day. I believe that a vast number of people like me, as we walk around, believe that we are creatures moving somewhere within a vast universe, though we may be sceptical about its actually having a magnetic power,

with which we are conscious that we are connected; and also in a world of so-called inanimate and also vegetable and animal creation with which we are intimately connected. And as soon as we begin to refuse to accept our connection with that inanimate or vegetable or animal world, and as soon as we begin to refuse to accept the consciousness that we have of the stars and the planets and the universe outside us, then I believe that we are refusing the actual intuitive quality which lies inside us, which for me is something as important as any intellectual system which we can devise.

So John Cowper Powys's world appeals to me, and I'm being perfectly honest, on this level, this is why it makes its appeal to me because it represents a universe as, if I am honest, it has always been since I was a child and still is now. Of course I could give you hundreds of reasons on the one hand why this doesn't fit in with things that I've been told about ESP, and also why it doesn't fit in at all with modern physics and modern chemistry and even modern biology. I would know just enough to do that. But what affects me is this kind of vision of the world which I've always had, moving between the sky and amongst nature and this is something which I still believe in; I acknowledge neither God nor the devil, nor do I believe in physics, and therefore it is for me a universe which is sentiently very much the one that John Cowper Powys has.

Now it seems to me that this is a universe which is closely connected, because of its intuitive quality and because of its sensuousness, with the world of dreams. I place enormous importance on the world of dreams. I cannot believe that, although we forget them, the intensity with which dreams affect us after they are over is not a vital part of our living. Even if I don't remember them in detail, I know what the world of my dreams is like. It's not so different in the total sense from the

world of dreams as they have been described to me by other people. And it's this world that I believe John Cowper Powys moved towards when he finally rejected a dualistic system, and then even perhaps moved away from the attempt to relate his multi-universe universe, through a historical novel like *Owen Glendower*, moved away to something which was outside life as we can actually identify it. I do not believe that there could have been a more satisfactory date chosen than the date that is chosen for *Porius*. 499 A.D. in Britain is the beginning or is in the centre of a dream; we have almost no knowledge of what was happening in Britain then. We have, yes, there was a Bishop, we well know this, who visited from Ostia, who came to St. Albans, and there's a short report of what it was like in St. Albans after the Roman legions had withdrawn. We have Gilda's fairly near evidence, and then we have Nennius's very late evidence; and we have something which seems to be about the battle of Mons Badonicus, and that really is all that we have.

It is a dream-period. It may be a nightmare, it may be a lovely dream, I don't know; when we come to *Porius* I think we'll see that it is both. When one starts to dream (you see I think when you dream, especially as you get older, you are conscious that you're dreaming), when you move into the dream-world, this is a kind of symbol of dying, it's a symbol of moving out of your own control. We believe even if we are going to be thrown over a bridge that we will be able to decide how we will take being thrown over a bridge. But when we go into a dream we have no power whatsoever, it is the negation of power. And all the time John Cowper Powys has been trying to move away from power, from the idea that one human being exercises power over another. I quite understand why George Steiner, for example, last night feels that there's something lacking in his universe. I personally don't think it was reasonable to suppose that he would have spoken about Hitler when

one thinks of the date of his books, but nevertheless if you want to fight against the evil in this world, then John Cowper Powys is not the man to go to if you want an active fight. He's against evil all the time, but it's not by activity. He does I think do what we do when we go into dreams, or maybe when we go into death (I don't know, because I know nothing about death), but it is then that we give up all power, we give up. All we have left is our sensuous power, our sensuousness, our intuition. even in dreams we have a sense of ourselves, but we have no action, no power.

Now, if you read about the history of England, you suddenly do come, to dream-like experience. (And I think it is a very frightening thing. I've often thought of this; at the time when I used to be at the British Museum, and when they discovered the burial ship at Sutton Hoo, there was a sort of feeling of something that had come out of a black dream; it was a very beautiful object but what it meant, what the life of those people could have been, I doubt if we shall find very much.) And in 499, and it starts with that, *Porius*, it says, "here we are, going into a world in which we know only those faint things from outside which perhaps in a dream, when we've woken from a dream, we might remember"; and it's very symbolic. People have talked about Powys's failure to come to terms with reality, you know. Here is Arthur, the brilliant military commander who is seen only for a moment and we have no picture of the campaign he's fighting. I'm sure this is purposeful. The whole of the action of *Porius* is oblique and this is very fascinating. It is simply Arthur creating a little ruse, which is drawing off the Saxon troops into that direction and so weakening their power of fighting at Mons Badonicus. And so the idea that somehow the centre of this whole campaign of Arthur is not contained in *Porius* is a ludicrous one, because it's not meant to be. It is like all the other things in the book, it's not the action itself, it is something at

the side of the action; it is not power exercised, as a battle would be, it is before and after and not the thing itself. The object itself, the centrality itself is something from which John Cowper Powys has moved away altogether.

Now, something that people talk about is that his novels are very static. I think this is not true. As I've said earlier, one of the features of the 1920's of people who lived in the country was walk, walk, walk, walk, walking. Now, in *Porius*, people are on the move almost all the time, and I think that this is the most extraordinary literary marriage producing the most wonderful monster that could be supposed. I suspect that the basic root of *Porius*'s shape comes from that great novelist whom Dickens admired enormously, but who is much, much neglected today, namely Walter Scott. I think that we must see *Porius* as we might do *Rob Roy*. There are the riders, the knights, the other characters, riding through forests, coming to clearings, coming to the lake-side, there is the tent that might be out of *Ivanhoe*. This is a book which could be a Scott novel; and yet how different it is, because as *Porius* moves around it's much more like the White Knight in a way; we are in the world of Lewis Carroll. It seems to me a most extraordinary mixture of a novel like *Rob Roy* with a surrealist work like *Alice through the Looking Glass*, and it is an achievement, a marriage that I would never have imagined could have happened, which seems to me to be absolutely right for the book which he is wanting to write.

It is a book of constant movement with constant topography. This has always been so in Powys's novels. People are always on the move, and what is in their consciousness all the time (not actively there, not described directly as a realist novelist would do), is the topography they're going through; the birds that they hear and that wonderful passage, that George Steiner read

yesterday, about Merlin's approach and the scurrying and padding and prowling of the animals. Now I think that, if we combine this constant movement and this constant topography, with the confrontations that never lead anywhere, we are again in the dream world. Imagine if you are dreaming and your consciousness is that you are in Britain in 499; how frightening this would be, and yet how exciting. And this is the nature of a dream, this is the world of which we know nothing; what will it be? You know, this is the thing that always disappoints me in science fiction, where they go back into the past; things don't happen in the incredibly exciting way that one knows that they could do. Or in the terrible war. One just can't visualise what it must have been like to be those people still faintly Romanised, with the Saxon hordes advancing and so on. The whole of this great ethnic range that John Cowper Powys gives, all this world is there.

Yet none of these encounters ever lead anywhere; their importance is always in their preliminaries and in their sequels. I believe that this lies in John Cowper Powys's attitude to sex, where the orgasm is on the whole repugnant, and where the lead-up to the orgasm and the sequel to the orgasm are the real thing. And I would like to say that in this Lawrentian, now perhaps fadingly, but at one point deeply Lawrentian-influenced age, I believe there is much more truth in that than most people would admit now. I do believe that on the whole perhaps even in the sexual life the lead-up to the orgasm and the and the follow-up from the orgasm have an importance which is much greater in many, many ways, and more powerful in its effect upon oneself and upon others, than the orgasm itself. I think this is reflected in the dream-like quality of Powys's actual novel, where always things are about to happen, and everything takes place, so to speak, off-stage, just as the whole novel itself is a little of off-stage to the battle of Mons Badonicus.

The great thing in *Porius* is his power of of suspense. Earlier in *Porius*, he says that Porius had learnt two pieces of news that day, which were going to absolutely change everything; but it's ages before he even begins to hint at what those are. He's a master of suspense. Within the consciousness of people, there is always this statement that something is about to happen, or has happened, which is absolutely vital, but it's not revealed. He was a cunning old Master in this matter. People talk about how difficult it is to read his books. Maybe. But once you come to read them, they are magnetic. He really knew how to tell a story with suspense, with a sense that something is coming, but we don't quite know what is coming. And in fact in *Porius*, like in a dream, we're always apprehensive of something coming, it never really does come, but what does happen is the effect of it, or the thing that went before it.

When we have the battle with the Saxons, it's almost comically treated. I think he's pulling our leg about this, I think he doesn't really suppose that it matters at all — but what *does* matter is the presence of the bodies of Auntie Tonwen and her lover, with the horrible thing of their heads having been changed, a desecration of a human being which is appalling. But that has happened before — we're never told that, we never see that.

The whole episode of the fight with the giant is deeply moving in a way, because as we see at the very end of the book, after *Porius* has released Merlin, he has this vision of the face of that girl. This is the primitive sluggish quality which in *Wolf Solent* Powys has identified as being possibly the meaning of evil — but even that is now released, it's released with everything else, into the multiverse. There again, what matters in the struggle with the giant is not the fight at all, not even the sexual relation with the daughter; what matters is that vision of them, after they are dead, going down, down, into that lake.

So it unites life and the dream-world for us as no other novel I know of does. Of course there are very great novels which lay stress on actual climaxes, on orgasm, on violence and struggle and actual conflict. But I think this is among the great novels because it is unique. I'm afraid that he was very old when he wrote it and it is not the great novel it might have been if he had been a younger man. It might have been the first of a number of explorations into the dream-world and the world of reality, the combination of them.

Of *Porius* I would claim that, imperfect though it is, it is a totally original novel, something that explores a whole new area of life. And there are very very few novelists who do that, and even fewer who do it without the high jinks of experimental writing. This is an extraordinary achievement — to be able to write something totally fresh about man's relation to the universe, about the universe itself, and not to let off all sorts of obvious fireworks of verbal play and experimental form.

## Discussion

**Diane Fernandez** Exactly as you say, *Porius* is, I think, an immense day-dream. Yet Powys hates dreams, and he says so many times. Is *Porius* a sort of allegory of the subconscious, in which Powys rules the world he creates? Does he accept dreams when he creates them, and refuse them when he dreams them?

**Angus Wilson** Something that occurs to me about this: of course, he does dissolve power in his books, but you see, I'm afraid a novelist can never do this. If you're a novelist (I'm very well aware of this myself), even the poorest novelist is, for himself at any rate, God. It's impossible to get away from this. I used to be very worried at my own novels which were deterministic, because I wrote immensely careful plans in advance; and in the last novel, which I've just finished, I took enormous trouble

not to make plans. It was agony because (like Porius) I came to an abyss and I didn't know what was going to happen. But nevertheless, of course, eventually I did create something, and also I must admit I then went, for the first time perhaps, back, and revised my book to make it all fit in with the ending. There is an undetermined dreamlike quality in Powys, and I think it does succeed, so far as the universe he has created, in removing power and violence, because he felt them to be such terrible things. But of course I'm afraid if we write a novel at all we are exercising power. Unless we believe we are the voice of some force beyond, which I don't think Powys ever said. So there is a kind of basic contradiction somewhere, but the main thing is that one tries to "use one's power for good", as the saying is.

**Diane Fernandez** No, the contradiction is that the characters never dream.

**Angus Wilson** Yes, but isn't that a necessary evasion? If you're going to create a dream-world, there's no need for dreams, because the world is your dream.

**Timothy Hyman** There are dreams. In *A Glastonbury Romance* for example, Philip Crow dreams of the Tin-merchant – rather an important dream. And there are a number of other dreams.

**Glen Cavaliero** Dreams are curiously externalised. There's that wonderful chapter in *Glastonbury*, "Nature seems dead" – and you get it in its crudest, and I think very comic form, in *All or Nothing*, where a dream becomes an actual character that visits people.

**Diane Fernandez** But in all the first novels dreams are completely refused.

**Glen Cavaliero** Ah! So you mean it's after *Glastonbury Romance*, after the multiverse?

**Diane Fernandez** Yes, exactly.

**Timothy Hyman** About the whole

question of the oddity of the characters, which a lot of writers (Collins, I think), talk about as a kind of arbitrary eccentricity. Well, I don't think it *is* arbitrary in Powys. As you pointed out, there is this sort of base level of Elizabeth Crow and Matt Dekker, but there aren't very many such characters. Given that all the central characters *are* odd, Sylvanus, or even Perdita (Perdita says that: "no man had ever put his arm round her", she's rather frightened of telling the jobber that, because she's twenty seven, and she's afraid he'll think she's "odd"). . .

**Angus Wilson** . . . I think there are many more people like that than one might think . . .

**Timothy Hyman** . . . I agree, there *are* many people like that; but, put it like this – Powys is deliberately choosing a kind of person who has an enormous experience of pathos. They need, very much, some sense of redemption outside human contact. And this is the meaning of their "oddness" – not mere eccentricity.

**Angus Wilson** This is where he unites with the world of Dickens for me. He himself accuses Dickens of sentimentality, but I think if we were to accuse Powys of anything, it might be of sentimentality. He does have an intense sense of pathos, of the degree to which people's lives, which could be so vital, are, as you say, lived under a kind of depression and sadness. I would agree with you very much.

**A member of the audience** You said that you yourself did not believe in any kind of transcendentalism, yet in your talk you used the concept 'Evil'.

**Angus Wilson** I have been attacked for this, by some solid rationalist, who said I betrayed everything by introducing mediaeval concepts and so on. Dickens says in the introduction to *Oliver Twist*, about Sykes, that there are some people so destroyed by life that they have a malevolence so excessive that it goes

beyond anything one can explain. I do have a sense of this; I wish I had an equal sense of good. John Cowper Powys was worried because I ascribed evil, in my novel *Hemlock and After* – the only novel he corresponded with me about – to Mrs Curry, the procuress. I associate evil always with sweetness, external sweetness is for me a sign of evil. I must say I did feel her to be an evil character, in so far as she did with a real pleasure procure children against their will for men who wanted children. But that isn't really evil in a transcendental sense.

**Michael Greenwald** Mr Wilson, I'd like to ask you to expand a little more about Dualism. You seem to suggest there's almost a clear-cut moment in Powys's career, perhaps during or after *Wolf Solent*, when he rejects Dualism.

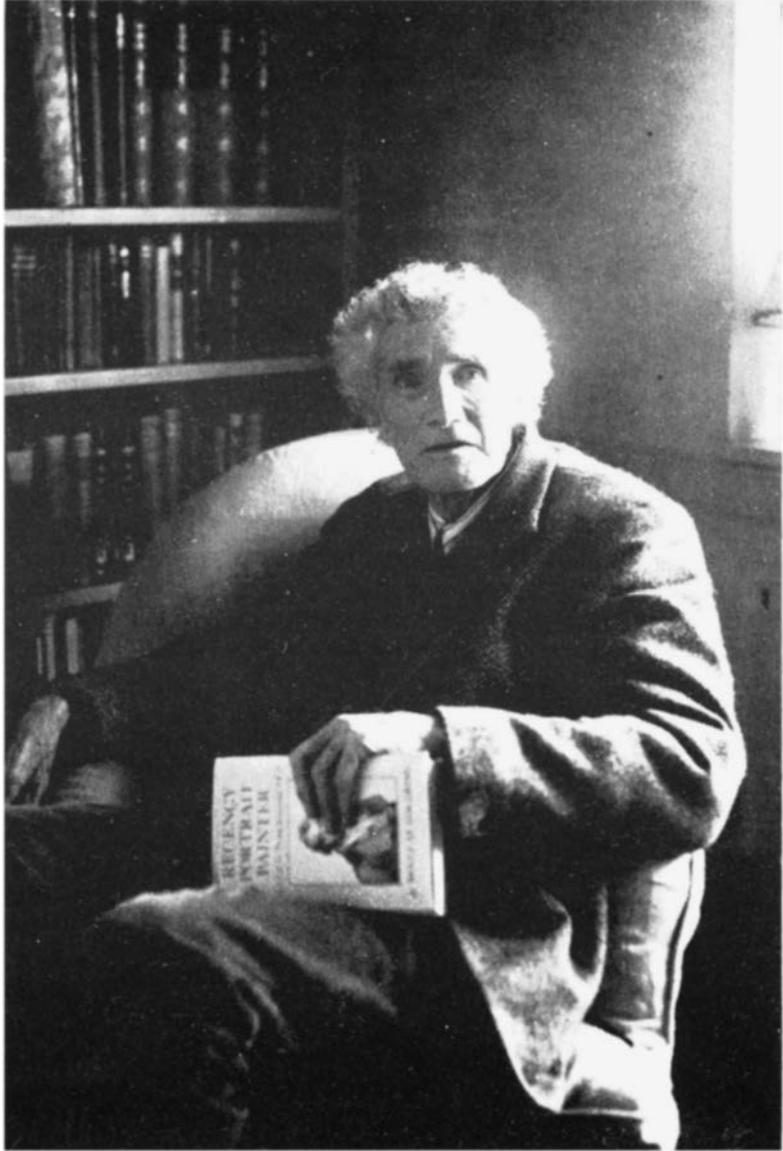
**Angus Wilson** Well, I don't find after *Wolf Solent* the use of Dualism, or "mythology" such as Wolf uses it. "Caveoseniargising" in *Porius* is a much more passive process of escape mechanism.

**Michael Greenwald** I think Dualism is always a starting-point for Powys's imagination, and it continues throughout his whole career. *All or Nothing* is a Dualism too. His very last unpublished story is called *Two and Two*. What he moves towards in his later fiction is a sense of the dualism fusing together. The very important statement he makes in his Preface to *Wolf Solent* about the necessity of opposites, that they have to be forced together . . .

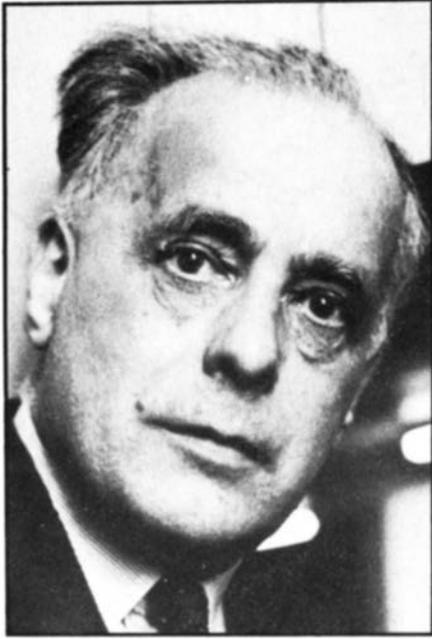
**Angus Wilson** . . . Powys does use this idea of a battle between Good and Evil in a way as a kind of power-mechanism for himself, doesn't he? And it's the getting rid of this sense of power, which Wolf still wants to retain . . .

**Michael Greenwald** . . . Wolf's "mythology" is seen to be inadequate . . .

**Angus Wilson** . . . And after that Good and Evil are both drawn into the whole compassionate scheme of things.



# G. Wilson Knight



## John Cowper Powys as Humorist

Angus Wilson (Chairman). This is a very great occasion for us, because, you know, *The Saturnian Quest* is the basis for all that we have on Powys. It gives me especial pleasure to be introducing Professor Wilson Knight, because long years ago, when I still worked in the Reading Room, and he was working on his book on *Lord Byron's Marriage*, he wanted to see a book, which the British Museum, but neither he nor I, judged to be an obscene book. I have had a great deal of experience in the British Museum of people who rightly wanted to be adults and see all the books they wanted to see, and I must say, I have never met anyone who was so determined, yet at the same time so totally courteous, as Professor Wilson Knight.

The great thing so far as John Cowper Powys is concerned is that Professor Knight's two subjects are, first of all, the fantastic and wonderful discovery of the inner meaning of Shakespeare (and this does link John Cowper Powys with greatness, because although we've spoken of the many, many limitations

to his work in these days, he was a great writer), but also, Professor Knight is concerned with Byron, and although Byron was a great writer also, the essential thing about him in my opinion is that he was a very good man, one of the really good men that ever really lived in England. And I also think John Cowper Powys was a good man, and therefore it gives me enormous pleasure to think that someone is going to speak about John Cowper Powys who cares about Shakespeare and Byron — that great man and that very good man.

G. Wilson Knight. First let me pay tribute to this Centenary Concourse. It has been absolutely delightful, and I have never had a happier three days, and I would join myself in thanks and gratitude to those who have made it possible, with all the organisation that is involved.

Then, Mr Angus Wilson has very kindly spoken of my work on Shakespeare and Byron and Powys. I am very grateful for that too. And those three writers might be said to be those to whom I have devoted most of my attention, and I think they are three pinnacles in our Story of English Literature — I say 'Story' because the life comes into it as much as the work.

Literature in the West might be divided into three main branches, those following the Faust myth, those following the Don Juan myth, and those following the Prometheus myth. One is tragedy and evil, the second is sex and comedy, the third is a change of consciousness — Nietzsche's superman. Powys handles the first two in his novels, the third in certain parts of his philosophical work.

Tonight I'm going to talk about his humour. His letters are obviously very rich with humour. It is a humour turned against himself very often, as when he imagines a publisher saying:

*Oh, that terrible heavy-weather John Cowper. What I say is, he's the only*

*one of these buggers I know who has the gift of combining risqueness and dullness.*

— (which makes a certain critical comment of value about his work!) There are numerous half-denigratory phrases which you will all recognise. In the *Autobiography* and in the letters, he calls himself a charlatan, a zany, a clown. He likes clowns, of course, very much. In a letter to me of 11th December 1956, he says he's "a born actor but I suspect more still of a born circus clown". There is an argument in *A Glastonbury Romance* about whether a clown shall appear in the pageant as a counter or accompaniment to the Christ-story. There's a clown in *Weymouth Sands* as a fairly well-drawn character. Oh, Powys likes clowns.

Then there's a courtesy to the reader, together with this humility. So it's serious in a way. It leads to a prevailing kindness and respect for the reader in all he writes, both in his fictions, and his letters, and the *Autobiography*; he's always polite to the reader, and assumes the reader knows as much as himself, or more.

Powys's humour is of a kindly sort. I once, in writing of Byron's *Don Juan*, made a distinction between kindly humour and derisive humour. Now, this is a little bit difficult. The kindly humour tends to dissolve conventional judgements, taboos, religious or moral judgements, or just respectability, into some "golden centre", as I called it. But what is that golden centre? It is very often a sexual reality, or it may be just hard common-sense, some fact of the universe that you were neglecting. But it dissolves the conventional respectable judgements in this centre, and the result is joy, radiant joy.

The unkindly humour tends to bring conventional judgements, moral or religious, to bear on this centre, or some aspect of it, and that appears to me to be derisive humour, cruel humour, and

sometimes less healthy humour. Powys himself makes the point, when he says the sadistic humour of Marlowe's *Tamberlaine* repelled him. In a letter to Louis Wilkinson he writes:

*But I am still not a worshipper of your idol, your great Mongolian Tamberlaine the Great. I can't somehow feel at ease over the difference between his sense of humour and mine.*

Now I'm going to offer an example of this dissolution of conventional appearance in the golden centre. You can either take it as itself comic, or as the kind of event which is at the back of all good humour. It's the scene in *Wolf Solent* where the two boys are bathing. The respectable squire (who is also in part a Gothic monster, of course), Squire Urquhart, and the disgruntled unhappy poet, Jason Otter, are suddenly transformed by the sight of two village boys swimming in Lenty Pond. Of Otter's face, we hear:

*Every trace of nervousness passed out of it and every shadow of misery. It seemed to be illuminated by some soft inner light.*

That might by itself be called rather beautiful and charming, but the next is definitely, to me, very comic. The squire suddenly becomes a conventional schoolmaster-type, "calling out 'Well done, Weevil, well done! Well done!' as he watched the flexible muscles and slim back of the swimmer". It's a wonderful transposition of all that we've known up till now, to suddenly become a scoutmaster!

*The squire had the air of an innocent energetic schoolmaster superintending some species of athletic sports. Jason had the look of an enraptured saint, liberated from earthly persecution and awakening to the pure ecstasies of paradise.*

Such was the effect on these two of "the classic nakedness of the two

youths".

Well, that is an example of good humour. The agent is an instinct, not altogether a respectable instinct, but an instinct which dissolves the habitual evils, and gives place to a radiant joy. We find something similar, with a sharper play of actual humour, in an incident in *Weymouth Sands*, where a girl entranced by the bodies of boys bathing asks the philosopher, Richard Gaul, if it is wrong of her? He replies:

*It seems to me, Peggie, what you represent at present is the third rung of the philosophic ladder to the contemplative ecstasy. When you have reached the ninth rung you will find – you will lose – I mean you will gain –*

That difference between loss and gain in the platonic sense is beautiful, I think. Fortunately, he's interrupted.

Now it need not be a matter of *voyeur* instinct, though we know how strong such instincts were in Powys, and it's true that his revelations throughout the *Autobiography* are basic alike to his humour and to his humility. We must never forget that. But we have a more philosophical point to consider. Nothing is more important to Powys, philosophically speaking, than the difference between universe and multiverse. Universe, whose sign is the number three, multiverse whose sign would be the number four. Well, now there's a passage in *Porius* where a passionate priest inveighs against Merlin for his position in this argument. I believe that the rhetoric piles up in this speech in a rather wonderful way.

*Oh, how that unholy, huddled-up monstrous toad hates the very name of the Blessed Trinity! He has even dared to declare, as Christ's poor servants in Caerwynt and Caerlleon and Caerloyw and Caerlyr have told me, that one of the worst of these devils in human flesh that those twice-accursed Greeks called "Philosophers", a prize-devil, a master-*

*devil, a dragon-tailed devil, a great ramping, roaring ram's horn devil called Pythagoras, swore that the number four and not the number three was the servant of God's most holy cosmos!*

There is a play of humour there, playing over one of Powys's own most cherished beliefs, but nevertheless the beliefs of all being dissolved in humour. All philosophy to Powys was in historical terms anyway, a little bit suspect. He was more interested in the real forces of life.

And that is why he was so devoted to Rabelais. That is what the humour of Rabelais meant to him. And I would urge that the numerous pages on Rabelais, in the book he published called *Rabelais*, are among the very best of his literary critical writings. They are quite amazing in discussion of broad, great, obscene humour, and I know no-one else who has ever done it. Rabelais, he saw, stands for life-worship against all tyrannies of sex-taboo and religious taboo. The dominant note, the key to him, he sees as a child-like quality, a child's innocence. He is "the humorous prophet of the new federation of the world." It's a wisdom coming from below rather than from above – a wisdom which is close to instinct. It leads to a multiverse of unsystematised possibilities. He urges "the unfathomable well-spring" of creative power within us.

And Rabelais as humorous prophet is the liberator of that power. There's a poem which illustrates this, "The Classic Touch". Powys is himself in misery in a crowded town, hideous iron railings, crowds of repellent people, all the miseries of city life around him. And on the railing or on the wall, he suddenly saw an obscene sketch.

*And there an indecent sketch  
Limned by some laughing boy –  
O lovely and obscene wretch!  
Swept from me all annoy.*

*And the hideous iron place  
 With its monstrous crowds and cars  
 Was whirled into outer space  
 And diffused among the stars.  
 And alone by the fire with you  
 I sat and read Rabelais –  
 Rue des Beaux Arts, mon loup!  
 And my soul was once more gay.  
 And the old great shades returned  
 And the large sweet thoughts flowed  
 free  
 And my heart within me burned  
 And that town was nothing to me!*

An interesting poem which shows how deep in Powys was that idea of liberation through facing certain, normally considered obscene, realities.

In *Morwyn*, Rabelais turns up in the sadists' hell to urge the frank enjoyment of all sensual pleasures, provided they contain no element of cruelty. Well, this is all very well, but supposing they *do* contain an element of cruelty. What becomes of our humour then? Instinct can be cruel. No-one knows that better than Powys. What becomes of our golden centre? Is it still golden? The world of comedy comes bang-up against the world of tragedy when you consider this.

Well, now I must diverge a little bit, and give a little talk on Mr. Evans, because it's relevant to this paper, as you will see before I've finished, perhaps more relevant than you might expect. I believe that the study of Mr. Evans in *A Glastonbury Romance* is a profound study of evil. I would go so far as to say, if it wasn't that my own reading is so limited, that it's the most profound study of evil ever written. But how can I say that when I don't know what has been written? I form this judgement not only because of the surface impact, but because of the details of the treatment; the description of Mr. Evans' obsession with bad books and dangerous pictures; the whole story of his temptation, the way he's tempted to see the hideous act which he doesn't want to see, but is impelled to see. Powys is

never more staggeringly acute than when he says it's not happiness to be like this, it's being driven on to be like this which is not a happiness.

The extraordinarily clever way in which Mr. Evans persuades himself that it would be better not to do this but to do that, because he's not giving way to the temptation. In other words, he wants to be up and see it all the same. Very cunning that! And then, the physiological detail. He is sexually impelled to see the deed, but then comes the moment, exactly true to life, when he is wholly decided to do it, and at that moment there is no physiological effect at all. And Powys makes the remark, that "had he undressed, there would be nothing indecent to show". That is extraordinary, because it is true. When the whole body is suffused by the instinct, and the determination to act is complete, no more physical prompting is necessary, but you go remorselessly ahead, to do it or to see it.

As for the Iron Bar, it may not be sadistically titillating, romantic, but then we have Powys's account in the *Autobiography* that in writing *A Glastonbury Romance* he was particularly careful not to make the sadism infectious. He points out that in many books that are highly respected, he can detect the sadistic thrill transmitted infectiously and dangerously to the reader. In *A Glastonbury Romance* he is at pains to describe sadism, the way it works and its effect, but not to have an infectious effect. That would be my defence of the Iron Bar.

But now you will say that I'm running away from a paper on humour altogether. But I don't think that's entirely true. Because there's an incident that I want to highlight which concerns Mr. Evans. He's in a group where they're discussing the formation of a commune in Glastonbury. Now he himself has not much interest in that – he himself, who is in touch, terribly in touch,

with the evil in the universe, the evil side of the "first creative cause", whatever that may be. Much more involved with the devil than ever Faustus was, Evans is to that extent the wisest person in the book. Perhaps the wisest almost in Powys, because he knows at first hand what is responsible for the torments and agonies of the world. It's so all-important, and he's experienced it. Doesn't it seem a little bit funny that people should work themselves up about political realities? He is himself in touch with the "basic Secret of Life" expressed in the ancient poem, "The Harrying of Annyn" (that comes into it, but I don't know much about it, I won't say much about it, nor about the "Secret of Life").

But it's certainly something to do with the liberation of evil in himself, and certainly the two come close. Now in the company of people discussing the commune, he is suddenly struck with some nameless absurdity about it:

*He suddenly burst into a spasm of suppressed laughter which had an extremely disconcerting effect upon the ears of his hearers. Mr. Evans was evidently on the edge of a shameless and vociferous laughing-fit caused by some interior vision which struck his mind as a monstrous Rabelaisian jest .... It was as if he had suddenly been permitted by a special dispensation of Providence to catch a glimpse of the monstrous cosmic joke, abominable, heroic, megalomaniacal, into which the whole creation resolved itself!*

It strikes him as just impossibly funny that people should worry about these things. When he quiets down, he urges that it is not "money .... that makes the difference between happiness and unhappiness. It's something else .... and when I think of how unimportant all these questions are in comparison with ...." He doesn't say in comparison with what. But he knows, and the reader knows, the terrors and the horrors of Mr. Evans's existence. He breaks off.

*His face which at this moment was a mixture of Don Quixote, the Devil, and Dean Swift, broke into certain deep wrinkles, evidences of another laughing-fit, which contorted it considerably, while he controlled and prevented the outburst.*

I suppose Don Quixote is for Mr. Evans's genuine battling with the evil in himself; the Devil for the evil nevertheless inextricably entwined with him; and Swift, for the legitimate scorn he can direct on society as a result of the interplay between the good and evil of these other two.

Now you may say my thesis doesn't hold water here, because the humour's derisive; but it does, you know, because it's derisive in the cause of the sexual centres, because Mr. Evans is, I propose, saying something about the appalling necessity of knowing these deeper realities before you attempt to legislate for humanity. If he's thinking of his own ingrained evil, sex must certainly be involved; and we must face it honestly, in this book, and wherever it occurs, if we're going to get our human wisdom straight.

Well, that is how comedy and tragedy meet head-on as it were. In Powys's later work the Rabelaisian gospel, of course, wins altogether. Zeuks in *Atlantis* is a humorous person as against Enorches, the prophet of the mysteries, and Zeuks has all the writer's favour. Enorches puts up a good fight, Powys is just to him, but Zeuks the laughing-man is favoured. And this is the key to all the later works. All this work is humorous of course; at any moment you can catch undertones or overtones of cunning in him, of humour, however serious the matter discussed. But more than ever in his later works, humour, I think, dominates.

Ajax, at the point of death in *Atlantis*, says he once dreamed of a "laughing-man" at the bottom of some mysterious hole, at the end of life's quest. He says to Zeuks, "A power tells me, O laughing-

one, that you are my dream come true." It's a small but key incident, significant of the way Powys's work is developing towards humour.

In that fascinating collection of letters to Nicholas Ross, Powys acknowledges his debt to Charlie Chaplin:

*What I am primarily and by nature is a mixture of a born clown and a born story-teller, and this was evidently clear to Charlie Chaplin when we met, for he taught me more of this art of combining clownery with oratory and with drama in my quarter of an hour with him, than I have learnt from any other person save Rabelais his wone self.*

Then, again:

*Yes I am a born clown, and therefore just suited to write fairy stories, as I have done since I was ten years old.*

Humour and fairy-stories involve each other. The relation of clowning to fairy-stories is very interesting. Powys's last books were given a fairy-story structure and planning. In them fantasy, which is a brand, or branch of humour is unfettered, as in the essential child-like fantasy of Rabelais, and the absurdities of his book. It all comes together. Powys believed in children, and in old age as second childhood, and he even brings in this belief as a challenge to the sadistic horrors. Writing to me in 1957, he wrote as follows, urging that "sex-maniacs" should "use their imagination on themselves and not on others"; and he continues:

*I bet if Gilles De Retz had been willing to learn from me, from Jack the Imaginary Ripper, his 250 victims would have descendants still alive! But notice the proof that the wisest people in the world are children – I must not add old rogues in their second childhood! – and what are the wisest books in the world? Not the Bible or the Koran or the Vedanta but Grimm's Fairy Tales and Mother Goose, tales including Blue Beard in their scope. Jesus was right there. We*

*grown-ups have no idea of what children see and know.*

*Bluebeard* is a horrible tale, but, as we know, nursery rhymes have horrors in them, over and over again. Somehow they appeal to children.

Well, now. Powys wrote fairy-stories at the end of his life. I must confess, I love them. I see in them a great deal. They have so much in them. They have so much ponderous stuff lightly handled. In *The Mountains of the Moon* for example, those wonderful "Terrestrial Milestones". (The moon, by the way, in literature traditionally has been associated with the other-worldly, the after-life, the "mountains of the moon" often occurs almost as an etheric or spiritual dimension.) Well, these "Terrestrial Milestones" are bits of Earth's history, collected up in the moon somehow, so that they give an outline of what terrestrial life's about. They're a wonderful collection. The core of the apple that Eve ate is one of them. A table of one of the Commandments is another. Then, the white feather and the black feather of the raven and the dove in the story of the Ark in the Old Testament. Achilles' heel, you want that of course. A string from Nero's fiddle. One of King Alfred's burnt cakes. When you've got these, you've got Earth's history.

Those two feathers are alive, and they are, their interplay with each other is simply marvellous. I almost feel inclined to say they're better realised than any of Powys's human figures. The white feather and the black feather, that have been parted for so long – but they're coming together in this book. Is there an undertone of good and evil coming together? I don't know. It can't be read to you, it would take too long, but read *The Mountains of the Moon*, and read the interplay of these two feathers, who talk to each other, calling each other "my love" and so on occasionally, as live beings. Powys can make dead things, the inanimate, live and he doesn't say he believes it. He, as far as may be in

literary terms, enacts it.

But there's much else in these fairy-stories. There's very acute argument about space and time, and in *Up and Out*, time is swallowed up by space, or by eternity, I forget – and then eternity swallows itself. Wonderful things happen. This question of space and time is very exciting and interesting to Powys, and it can only be resolved, if at all, by a humorous treatment. This is all very funny, and meant to be. But you see, where space and time is concerned, we can't get beyond time easily. J. B. Priestley talks about an after-life in terms of a timeless existence, or another dimension without time; you can talk about that, but you can't go on thinking about it. It's quite impossible. Robert Graves and others have stated it; timelessness is the secret of life after death. Once you've said that, yes, it is so. No more time: eternity (if it wasn't such a well-worn word). But next, you're thinking in terms of time.

Well, Powys has said we can't get beyond space and time in *Mortal Strife*. He says we can't form any conception of what there is after death, simply because space and time get in the way. Towards the end of his life, in these fantasies, he's battling out that question, and he does succeed in getting rid of time, but not of space. Space is the more fundamental. And he himself refuses at the end of his life to think of an after-life, because the spatial reality of the universe is so vast and so wonderful that he's content with the moment in space.

So at the end of his life he is struggling with the fundamentals, and trying to make them real forms in every way he can. Space comes in again in *All or Nothing*, where it's even dramatised as a "Space-Monster", not a very attractive one. He'd like to get rid of space too, no doubt, but to get rid of time, that's as much as you could expect of one man.

Oh yes, and then there's God. Yes, God

comes in, and discusses – oh beautifully – discusses theology in *Up and Out*, discusses the problem of this world. They're all discussing it, lots of wise people, whether it would be better for the whole universe to commit suicide, and God's in two minds about it. God takes in all, treats everybody as an equal, and admits that he's made a hash of it. But he thinks there might be a possibility of making *another* universe, without any animal slaughter, for one. And would they all live for ever, insects as well? Certainly, says God, they'll live for ever.

Well, that is God in *Up and Out*. In the next one, God turns up again; this time, he takes the form of a cockroach. Now Powys loves insects, you see; it's quite natural that God should appear as a cockroach. I want to make a reservation here: that Powys is not good at the higher animals. He's good at insects, but he's not got a good array of cats; he's got dogs, good horses, very good horses, but there's precious little between horses and insects in Powys. And here (because some nasty things have been said about him, I think we should do him honour in this), D.H. Lawrence is simply superlative with animals. No-one but Byron could possibly touch him. I think after Lawrence's poor disgruntled unhappy strugglings with people, it's rather like Squire Urquhart, when he sees an animal, all his bitterness is gone, something falls off Lawrence, something radiant, perfect, blissful.

But for these last tales, again, there's more to be said for them. The last one especially. The Giants! Oh! All sorts of giants he's got in them! What wonderful names he's got in them! Oh, names, in *Mountains of the Moon*, they all have moony names, Yoooom, Zooooom, and so on, wonderful names, fitting inhabitants of the moon. In *All or Nothing*, we have Lord Urk Cad, and there's a bad giant called Bog, and a good giant, the Cerne Giant. Now all Powys's life he's concentrated on the Cerne Giant; but it's not till this last fairy-story

that we have him, alive. They go to a distant star, the four children, and there they find these giants, and among them the Cerne giant. That surely is enough to put these stories on the map as a wonderful addition to Powys's work, if the Cerne Giant can be introduced to you, as it were.

Not only that, but he delivers here, for the first public time, Powys's gospel of masturbation. He learnt it, it's true from the bad giant Bog – there's an anomaly for you! – the Cerne Giant killed Bog eventually, because he couldn't stand his ways. Well, Bog wanted to eat the children, you see, and he thought that was so unpleasant he killed him. Nevertheless, he remembered what he'd taught him, because, in Shakespeare's language, "There is some sort of goodness in things evil / Would men observe it and distil it out".

So this bad giant Bog taught the Cerne giant some wise things, and the Cerne Giant accepts it as wisdom, and delivers it again. Well, the gospel is only given about four lines, where he says that masturbation is a more creative act than anything else you can do. Now, what he means by that would take a lot of argufying, and I have argued it out in a recent book, so I won't go into that; but I would point to the fact that it's in this fairy-story he delivers this gospel, as he'd never dared to before. He got a lot of it implicitly in *A Glastonbury Romance* and the *Autobiography*, but the use of the word – funny, how the use of a word makes so much difference! – "masturbation" had never occurred before.

So these fairy-stories have something in them. Above all, they whittle things down to simplicities, ultimate simplicities, All or Nothing. Oh, there's a lot in them provided you can be amused at them.

They're only serious in so far as they're comic, and there's nothing more serious than comedy. What comedy does, it

sees the serious things below, it's above them all. It's the greatest of human attributes. And in these last fairy-stories Powys is above his whole universe, as never before.

It's a child-like business, it needs a child-like reception. You've got to become as a little child to like them. Powys wrote to me, about writing "something in praise of second childhood."

And in another letter:

*I'd love to write a book entitled Second Childhood wherein I shall show the weird, strange, curious, magnetic, psychic understanding that exists between really old people such as I am. . . and babes and toddlers and all children up to four! It is a most interesting thing. A week ago I went to see a doctor . . . and in the surgery waiting-room we were about a dozen adults or even fifteen and one tiny child of about two. It and I sat gravely in the circle. Then very gravely I waved to it. And with equal gravity it waved back at me. It was just as if we had both said to each other: "Lord! What fools these grown-up mortals be!*

Later on, in another letter, he says it's "the happiest of all the epochs of my life . . . which I know I am being absolutely correct in calling second childhood." And he describes how he waves from his window to "tiny toddlers between one and three-and-a-half" and they wave back (and he notices that the boys wave with their hands one way, and the girls the other way — I forget which way it is).

Well, folly must become wisdom, and wisdom folly, you can see that. Powys is an outsider, an anarchist almost, with a child-like wisdom guiding him, a clown-like wisdom guiding him: a clown and a child and a maker of fairy-stories. But you know we have a very great

tradition of this. The New Testament — all about it. The Gospel is delivered to people who have to accept it as a child. Then look at the Romantics, Look at

Blake! Wordsworth's child, Shelley's child in *Prometheus Unbound!* You get them all over the place. Nowhere is this child-emphasis more powerful than in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, that great poem of love, not of — oh! people get things so hopelessly wrong — not of power. You are first a camel he says, then you become a lion; then you become a child. Camel, beast of burden; lion, strength; but finally, the child.

Powys's wisdom in this, in which he develops the thought of the child as wise, though it may not be the whole truth, yet it has some truth that is vital for us all. Now, I talked at the beginning of three myths: the Don Juan myth discovered in Rabelais and in comedy; the Faust myth of course, as in Mr. Evans; but there's the Prometheus myth still to be considered. The idea of man becoming greater than his present stature. Colin Wilson was on

that, he does believe in that. Byron, especially, is the archetype in Europe of the man of Promethean stature.

Anybody who lives out all Shakespeare's tragic heroes — and comic too! — on the stage of Europe, has as good a title as anybody to be called a superman! (Nietzsche was thinking of Byron when he formed his conception of the superman.)

Now Powys "has that covered" by his philosophic books. At their most potent, they do urge you to form a basis for something higher. And in *In Spite Of* he definitely does talk about an evolutionary step towards a higher type of human being. Or perhaps we can best call it "a change in consciousness", which you get in Shelley, at the end of *Prometheus*; how labour and pain sport like tame beasts: "None knew how gentle they could be". That's when Prometheus is liberated, and a new world comes into being. Pain and pleasure don't necessarily vanish, but "none knew how gentle they could be"!



John Cowper Powys receiving the Plaque of the Free Academies of Art in Hamburg from the Secretary of the Academy, Rols Italiaander.

Papers Read  
to the Powys Society, 1968-1976  
Checklist of Writings on J.C. Powys  
and his Critics, 1972-1976

# Papers Read to the Powys Society, 1968-1976

(\* indicates papers not distributed to members)

1968

\*C.Benson Roberts and others, *Recollections of John Cowper Powys*.

Glen Cavaliero, *Wolf Solent*.

1969

\*Robert Adkinson, *The Literary Criticism of J.C.Powys*.

Rosemary Manning, *Llewelyn Powys: Some Extracts from Alyse Gregory's Journal*.

1970

Kenneth Hopkins, *Louis Wilkinson*.

Timothy Hyman, *Powys's World Book*.

Kenneth Hopkins, *A Miscellany concerning the Houses in which the Powyses lived*.

1971

Timothy Hyman, *The Modus Vivendi of John Cowper Powys*.

John Boulton, "The Market Bell", *T.F.Powys's Unpublished Novel*.

Harry Combes, *Reserve and Ebullience: two brothers in literature*.

1972

John Toft, *Atlantis*.

\*Glen Cavaliero, *The Powys World*.

\*Gwyneth Miles, *John Cowper Powys: Landscape, Romance, and the Regional Novel*.

(At the Centenary Conference on J.C.P. the principal lectures were by George Steiner, Angus Wilson, Colin Wilson and G.Wilson Knight: three are published in *The Powys Review*, No.1.)

1973

Michael Roulstone, *Llewelyn Powys*.

Ben Jones, *The Disfigurement of Gerda: Some Moral and Textual Problems in Wolf Solent*.

At the regional meeting, Swansea, there were five papers.

\*Roland Mathias, *The Poems of J.C.Powys*.

\*Kenneth Hopkins, *Will the real T.F.Powys stand up?*

Michael Roulstone, *Love and Death*.

Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys, Novelist?*

1974

Susan Huxtable Selly, *Mysticism, Trivia and Sensuality, a Study of Weymouth Sands*.

A.B.Gourlay, *The Powys Brothers at Sherbourne School (Reminiscences read by Kenneth Hopkins)*.

At the regional meeting, Cheltenham, there were four papers. Timothy Hyman, *Powys's Transition to Myth*.

\*Gerard Casey, *John Cowper*.

Rosemary Manning, *A Man Who Used to Notice Such Things: Notes on the Work of Llewelyn Powys*.

Glen Cavaliero, *T.F.Powys*.

Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys and David Jones*.

1975

Cicely Hill, *Life, Death, Books and Heroes: a Study of Ducdame and Rodmoor*.

(Papers from the Centenary Conference on T.F.Powys, Weymouth, will be discussed or published in a future number of *The Powys Review*.)

1976

John Hodgson, *John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson*.

# Checklist of Writings on J.C.Powys and his Critics, 1972-1976

Books

1972

Humfrey, Belinda (ed.) *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff (University of Wales Press).

1973

Brebner, John A. *The Demon Within* (Macdonald)

Cavaliero, Glen. *John Cowper Powys, Novelist*, Oxford (Clarendon Press).

Hooker, Jeremy. *John Cowper Powys* (Writers of Wales Series), Cardiff (University of Wales Press).

Articles

1973

Knight, G.Wilson. "John Cowper Powys as Humorist", *The Contemporary Review*, Vol.222, No.1285, February. (A version of the lecture given at the Centenary Conference, 1972.)

Nye, Robert. "Tatterdemalion Taliessin: a note on John Cowper Powys and his critics", *The London Magazine*, February/March. (A review of *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, 1972.)

Margerie, Diane de; Gresset, Michel; Jacyard, Francis Xavier (eds.), *Granit* No. 1/2, Autumn/Winter (470pp., distributed Nouveau Quartier Latin, 78 Boulevard Saint-Michel, Paris 750006, 45 francs), contains nineteen critical articles old and new (in addition to extracts from a wide variety of J.C.P.'s poetry and prose, including some unpublished letters).

1976

Knight, G.Wilson. "J.C.Powys and T.S.Eliot", *The Contemporary Review*, Vol.228, No.1321, February.

Newspaper Reviews of J.C.P. and his Critics

1973

*Le Monde*, 8th November, review of *Granit* double number on J.C.P.

*The Guardian*, 29th November, Robert Nye on books by Brebner and Cavaliero, and *Rodmoor* (Macdonald).

*The Observer*, 2nd December, Angus Wilson on Brebner, Cavaliero and *Weymouth Sands* (Rivers Press).

*The Sunday Times*, 9th December, George Steiner on Brebner, Cavaliero and *Weymouth Sands*.

*The Times*, 20th December, Richard Holmes on Cavaliero, *Rodmoor* and *Weymouth Sands*.

1974

*The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 25th January, John Holloway on Brebner, Cavaliero, *Rodmoor* and *Autobiography* (Macdonald).

*The Times Literary Supplement*, 8th February, review of Brebner, Cavaliero, Hooker, *Rodmoor* and *Weymouth Sands*. The *T.L.S.*, 15th February, carried a letter from George Steiner, commenting on the review of 8th, which points to the struggle to obtain recognition for the stature of J.C.P. and the struggle to get his works into print. On 8th March the *T.L.S.* Commentary referred to the publication of *Granit*, No. 1/2, devoted entirely to J.C.P. It went on to refer to other volumes of tributes and studies commemorative of Powys. In 1963 *A Review of English Literature* honoured

him; *Philobiblion* did likewise in 1966; in 1970 Colgate University Press commenced an annual *Powys Newsletter*; in 1972 the University of Wales published a collection of seventeen essays concerning Powys under the editorship of Belinda Humfrey whose introduction is itself a concise critical study of Powys.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31st August, Clement Zimmler on Brebner and Cavaliero.

1976

*La Libre Belgique*, 4th February, review of *A Glastonbury Romance*.

*Le Figaro*, 14th February, André Boincourt on *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*.

*Le Figaro* (date unknown), Guy le Clech on *A Glastonbury Romance*.

*Le Monde*, 12th March, Hubert Juin on *Les Enchantements de Glastonbury*, trans. Jean Queval, and *Apologie de Sens*, trans. T.van Khai, preface Diane de Margerie (Gallimard).

*The Times*, 3rd April, Tim Heald on *Wolf Solent* (Penguin).

*Aften bladet*, 19th May, review of *Wolf Solent* trans. into Swedish by Sven Erik Täckmark.

### Reviews in Periodicals of J.C.P. and his Critics

1974

Hopkins, Kenneth. G.Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys, Novelist*, *The Cambridge Review*, March, pp.105-107.

Weber, Horst. B.Humfrey(ed.) *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, *Erasmus*, May, pp.350-354.

Jones, Ben. B.Humfrey (ed.) *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, *Trivium (University of Wales)*, pp. 174-176.

Humfrey, Belinda. J.Hooker, *John Cowper Powys and J.C.Powys, Obstinate Cymric* (Village Press repr. 1973), *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol.24, No.53, Winter, pp. 220-223.

Hooker, Jeremy. *John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54*, ed. I.C.Peate, Cardiff, 1974, *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol.24, No.53. Winter, pp.216-217.

1975

Mahanti, J.C. "Beyond Yes and No: the Novels of John Cowper Powys" (includes a review of J.Brebner, *The Demon Within*), *International Fiction Review*, Vol.2, No.1, January, pp.77-79.

1976

Humfrey, Belinda. *John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54*, *Trivium*, pp. 156-158.

Knight, G.Wilson. J.C.Powys, *The Complex Vision; Real Wraiths; Two and Two* (Village Press repr.), *The Contemporary Review*, Vol.227, No.1317, October, pp.219-220.

### Descriptions of the Centenary Conference, 1972.

*Aftenblad*, 7th October (by Sven Erik Tackmark).

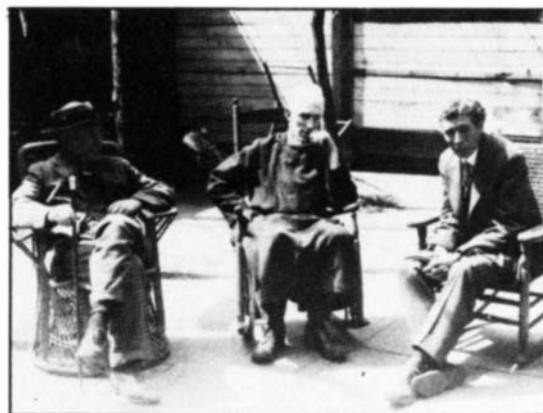
*Le Monde*, 3rd November.

*Le Figaro* (date unknown) (with a note on the availability of two translations, *Givre et Sang* and *Les Enchantements du Glastonbury*).

*The Powys Newsletter*, Three (by Michael Greenwald).

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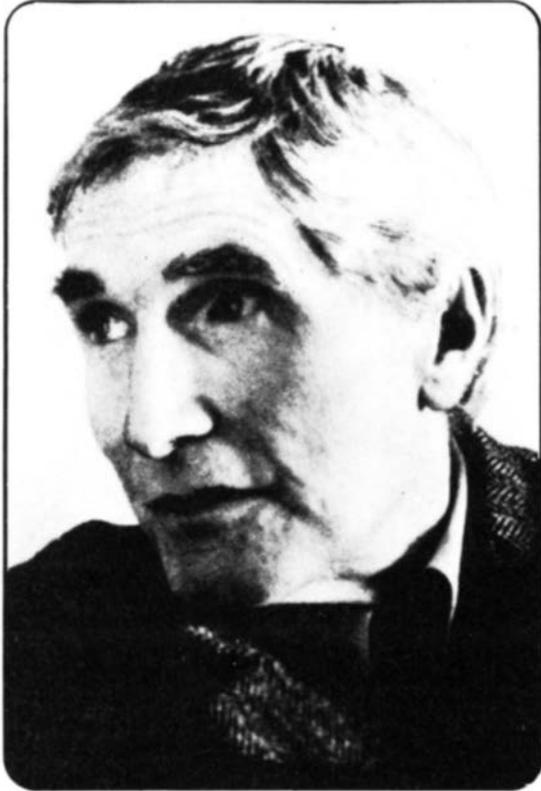
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Three Mountains Press, A DRAFT OF XVI. CANTOS, 1925

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Cuala Press, MOSADA, 1943

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