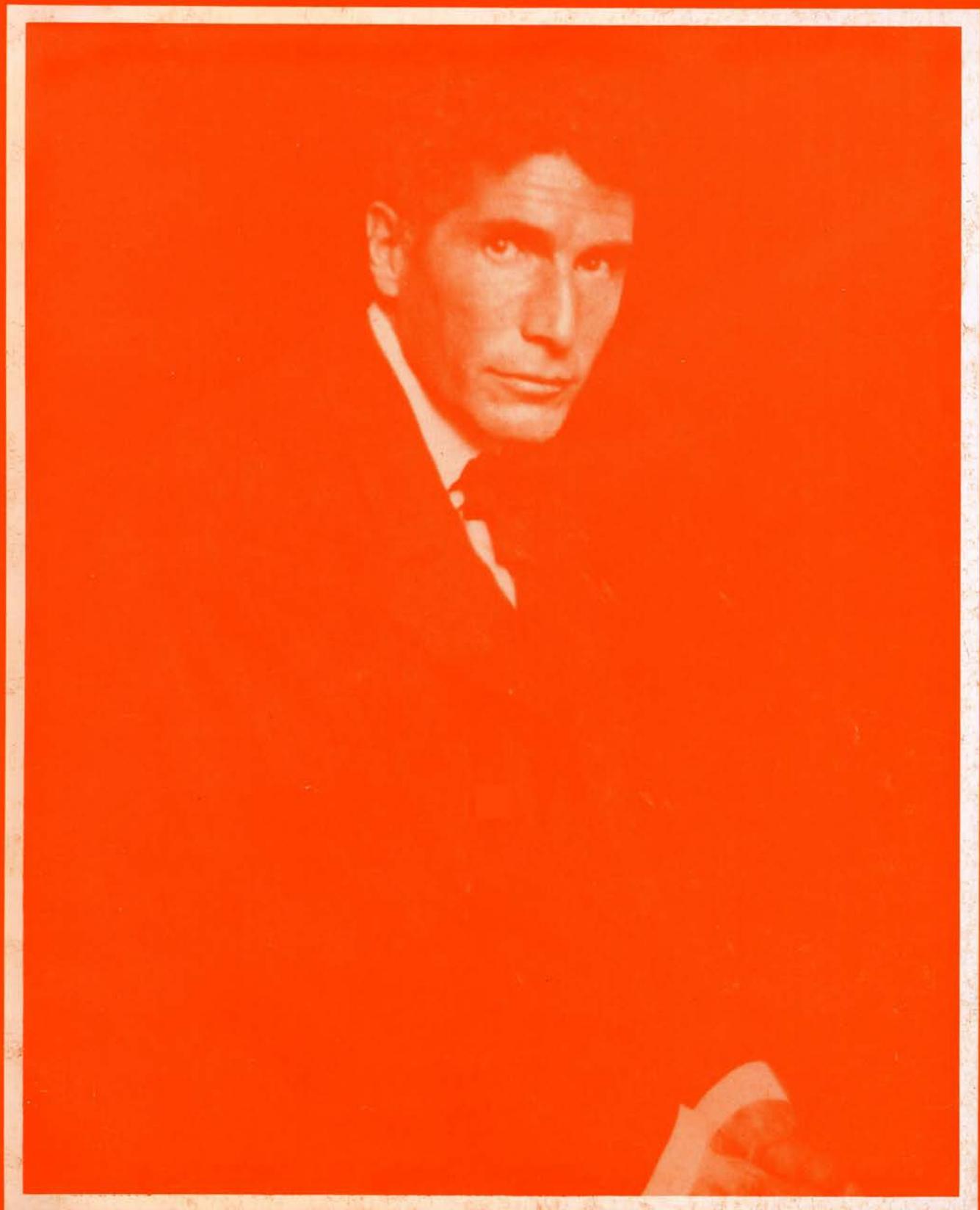


# The Powys Review

NUMBER FOURTEEN





# **The Powys Review**

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# The Necrophilias\*

Llewelyn Powys

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We were sitting together over a warm fire, two old friends. We had been recounting various love adventures; delightful golden incidents which hang about in the memory like precious stones, and make thrilling even the most commonplace lives. Certainly our store of such retrospective jewelry was no small one. There were adventures of every kind. Some fresh and beautiful as pearls; others hard and brilliant as diamonds; treacherous as opals; terrible and tragic as heavy-coloured sapphires.

I had just been relating a far-away boyish intrigue with a little servant girl, which had begun by my watching her dress and undress from the top of a thick yew tree opposite her window. My friend listened attentively, and when I had finished said gravely, "I always consider I have been peculiarly unlucky as far as chance windows are concerned, in spite of the fact that all through my life I have made a special point of discovering whenever I enter a strange room whether it is possible to see from it anything exciting." I laughed a little; it seemed so very queer that Fate's power of bestowing and withholding should possibly extend to this matter of libidinous window gazing.

For a while we were both silent, puffing at our pipes, then my friend remarked that he knew a story bearing upon this Prying Tom habit. I begged him to tell it, and he began as follows.

In a village in the West of England, many years ago, there lived an hunchback, who, when he was not drunk, did odd jobs for the neighbouring farmers. I remember the fellow quite well. He had the long arms of an orang-outang, the flat skull of a negro,

and the humped spine of a Yak or Sahara camel. I never in my life saw any one so deformed,—his shoulder blades and upper vertebrae seemed to have actually grown together.

The man was unable to read or write, but in spite of the fact he was intelligent in a sort of way, intelligent enough to devise a wire noose for snaring pheasants on bright moon-light nights, as they sat roosting like dummy birds on the bare boughs overhead . . . Yes, he could outwit and noose these game-birds with their bronzen breasts, just as easily as God could outwit and noose him with his humped-back.

He was suspected by everybody but hardly ever caught. He would rob the parson at church time and the farmer on market days, pick strawberries in the strange half light of dawn, and wall fruit at night-time when the moon was high. His brain, whatever he possessed, seemed to be exercised for evil only. One afternoon I met him staggering along the road, shouting at the top of his voice. When I drew near I understood that the black mouth of this abortion was uttering terrible blasphemies. Think of that! From this man, this dwarf, who could not even write his own name.

Well, one late evening, as he lurked about in the shadowy places of the Vicarage garden, behind the bay bush, under the Lauresteinas, he suddenly became aware of a light in one of the bedroom windows, the window of Christabel, a girl of seventeen, lovely as a delicate flower, fresh as a seashell.

Crouching there under the laurels, the stunted man would have appeared to any onlooker like a giant toad, with fixed bulging eyes.

The slender white figure flitting to and fro in the lighted room became lodged in his

\*This story is reprinted from *The Cerebralist*, December 1913.

brain. Every day he waited for the darkness, which always found him opposite that window. Christabel used to go to bed between ten and eleven, and, as her window looked out upon the garden, she never for one moment suspected the presence of obscene eyes.

Week followed week, and the deformed man became more and more obsessed by the nocturnal vision of the girl going to bed. Often on fine nights she would come to the window and gaze out upon the enchanted garden of flowers, of trees, of summer stars. But a worm! a maggot! a canker! was there, could she have known it. A canker with half-human eyes, never turning on their swivels. It was the first time the sexual instinct had asserted itself in the life of this brachycephalic, and evening after evening he squatted there in the dew-drenched dusk.

After a while a rumour began circulating through the village that the hunchback spent all his evenings out of doors. Nobody thought much about it; they merely supposed him to be busy poaching. Only one man, a clever, vulgar ne'er-do-well, out of idle curiosity, determined to follow him. He did so, tracking him to his obscure hiding place in the country garden. After this there were two instead of one at the evening vigil.

Now it happened that Christabel suddenly became very ill, with one of those inexplicable maladies that sometimes attack young girls. The blinds at night-time were closely drawn and other shadows passed behind them. Not understanding, the dwarf still watched.

At last an evening came when the window was thrown wide open. "Now she is coming! now she is coming!" thought the dwarf. But she never did come . . . She never again took off her summer frock.

With all the delicate grace of a dead child, she lay quite still between the fair linen coverings of her bed.

"She really was a most beautiful corpse," the undertaker thought, when three days afterwards he lifted her stiff statue into a polished resin-scented coffin. The body which he was arranging so gently was beauti-

ful, absolutely beautiful, except perhaps for certain faint, encircling bruises.

The next day she was borne out of the house, down the white, dusty road, to the churchyard. It seemed an awful thing to consign a being so youthful and radiant to the lonely corruption of such a place. So too, apparently, thought the hunchback, who in a state of acute mania was discovered that night sinking himself through the newly-dug mould of Christabel's grave. You know how the mole digs into soft ground with its extraordinary human hands. Well, at just such an occupation was the dwarf found. For as the wand of the diviner is drawn irresistibly towards the desired spring, so was the disfigured man drawn irresistibly towards the slim, white child, whose beauty had become lodged for all time in his flat, imbecile brain.

"Good Heavens!" I said, "I don't much like that story. Tell me what happened to the man in the end." "He is still alive," answered my friend. "Hunched and hoary, he is probably at this very moment trying to sink himself through the floor of a padded room in the county asylum."

"I learnt all this from that worthless rascal who used to share the watches with the dwarf. Some fellows seem to have all the luck," he added, with a gleam in his eye.

## A note on "The Necrophilias"

Peter Foss

Llewelyn Powys's two early stories, "The Stunner" and "The Necrophilias" constitute, together, his second appearance in print—in no. 1 of *The Cerebralist*, December 1913. Llewelyn's first published story had been "Death", printed in *The New Age*, 10 April 1913. "The Stunner" and "Death", were reprinted ten years later as part of the *Ebony and Ivory* collection, 1923, although "The Stunner" in *The Cerebralist* version is longer. "The Necrophilias", on the other hand, has never

been reprinted; and it receives no mention in the standard sources of Llewelyn's life and work. *The Cerebralist*, however, is mentioned in John Cowper Powys's letters to Llewelyn of 8 December 1913 and 4 January 1914 (*J.C.P. to Ll.P.* Vol. 1, 129, 137). The "some paper or other" which had accepted "The Stunner", and mentioned in the first of these letters from Chicago, is clearly *The Cerebralist*, and Frances Gregg's involvement with it is also clear. Two of her poems, "Song" and "Quest" appeared also in the magazine, along with eleven poems by Richard Aldington. It also contains a remarkable essay by "R.S." (Ralph Shirley?) on the "Imagistes" and an early piece by Ezra Pound (signed "E.P."). Apart from these works, the magazine is a bizarre publication, a kind of manifesto for "Cerebralism", a pseudo-occult movement founded to "regenerate the human race" by the "philosopher and theorist

of the Cerebralist movement", E. C. Grey. Their premises were on the Rue de la Boétie, off the Champs Elysées in Paris (where the magazine was published), and incorporated a lecture-hall furnished with black curtains, a copper-gold roof and a "Greek altar" at one end.

Llewelyn Powys's story "The Necrophilias" was probably written at the same time as the others of the "Ivory" series, in the summer of 1913 at Montacute, particularly in view of the Montacute setting. Its macabre element owes something to the influence of his brother, John Cowper, in stories such as "Romer Mowl", which Llewelyn was copying out in the summer of 1909 (*Life*, 67). Its intimation of a canker lurking at the heart of the "enchanted garden" is weighty with the significance of Llewelyn's ambivalent attitude at that time towards the home of his parents, and in a larger sense to the image of the paradisaical garden itself.

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# Glen Cavaliero

## The Novels of Phyllis Paul

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John Cowper Powys did not only read Rabelais, Homer and Cervantes. His taste was nothing if not catholic, and we find him enjoying with relish the novels of such popular women writers as Elizabeth Goudge and Norah Lofts. Indeed it is quite amusing to find him commending the last-named writer to the ultra-sophisticated Louis Wilkinson; but that amusement can lead the unwary reader to discount what Powys is saying. How many people have followed up the following reference in a letter written to Wilkinson on the 24 April 1954?

There's just lately come out a book by a Phyllis Paul authoress of 'Camilla' and some other good novel I forget the name of; but this one (her 3rd) is called 'The Lion of Cooling Bay', & it's a very weird occult exciting & startling book.<sup>1</sup>

Powys was apt to be more enthusiastic than discriminating in his praise of contemporary writers; but in this particular case one would be wrong to associate this author with her more successful companions in Powys's esteem. She is a writer who deserves to be taken with a total seriousness.

That her novels are now more or less forgotten was partly Phyllis Paul's own fault. Unmarried, and living quietly in the Home Counties, she resolutely maintained her privacy, believing strongly that a writer should be known only by his work;<sup>2</sup> and although her novels were admired by critics as diverse as Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West, she took no part in the literary life of the metropolis. Her first two novels had been published by Martin Secker in the nineteen thirties;<sup>3</sup> they have a primitive, obsessional quality comparable with that found in the contemporary novels of Margiad Evans. A thirteen year gap separates them from those published by Heinemann between

1949 and 1967; and it is these which constitute her real achievement. All eleven of her books differ markedly from the social realist novels of the more admired writers of the time. None of them to date has been reprinted, in spite of the fact that their 'Gothic' qualities would seem to be congenial to current reading habits.

The books are mysteries, not in the sense of being mystifications or puzzles to be solved, intricate and sometimes baffling though their plots are; but in the stricter sense of being enacted and embodied patterns of supra-natural events. Despite their frequently unnerving content, they are not merely thrillers; an undertone of deep moral seriousness sustains them all. In their sombre awareness of the absolute nature of good and evil they resemble the novels of Francois Mauriac, written from a militantly Protestant angle. But between Mauriac's Jansenist outlook and Phyllis Paul's wretched Calvinistic one there is less difference than might be supposed.

Phyllis Paul writes out of a coherent, consistent, obsessive imagination, one that circles round recurring themes and images: the death by violence of small children or young girls, the horrors of insanity, the dubiety of supernatural manifestations, the heartless triviality of insensitive people. She might well be castigated as morbid: certainly she is a master hand at portraying derelict gardens, decaying houses, dark woods and menacing skies. In her work the Gothic novel is revitalised, while it sounds depths as violent and tragic as those of Jacobean drama. The title of her first novel indicates its standpoint: *We Are Spoiled*. She believes in original sin. The spoiling of her characters is self-inflicted: careless upbringing, moral blindness, deliberate and envious manipu-

ation of the weak, all serve to produce the overgrown child, the irresponsible adult who in each successive novel is to prove an agent of destruction. And those people who do preserve a spiritual chastity only attract their opposite, so that the harm done to them by the exploiters devastates the weaker characters around them. Such an ambiguous approach to innocence recalls the work of Henry James and Elizabeth Bowen: one thinks of *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Death of the Heart*. Again, in Phyllis Paul's second novel, *The Children Triumphant*, a study of spiritual crippling, we witness the complete atrophy of the heroine's emotional life as the result of her being left with the care of a family of young children. Children in Phyllis Paul's world are frequently potential savages, their vulnerable energy a menace to adult rationality and sensitiveness to life. In this respect her work may be compared with that of Richard Hughes in *A High Wind in Jamaica* and, still more revealingly, with that of William Golding in *Lord of the Flies*.

The comparison with Golding is indeed instructive in more than one way. Both writers are concerned with the relation between good and evil, both make frequent use of flashback and linking symbolism; their view of human nature is austere pessimistic. In *The Lion of Cooling Bay* the girl Anne, embodiment of an innocence akin to sanctity, is, like Matty in Golding's *Darkness Visible*, found abandoned as an infant in the London blitz; while the name of that novel is anticipated in Phyllis Paul's final one, *An Invisible Darkness*. The two titles indicate the difference between their two methodologies as novelists. Where the symbols and notations in Golding's work are precise, and placed with the deliberation of mosaic, those of Phyllis Paul are ambiguous, shadowy, far less easily plotted and pointed out. She does not provide any convenient texts for 'A Level' exposition.

The first of the post-war novels, *Camilla*, constitutes both a programme and a model for those to come. Its two predecessors had been episodic in structure. They move swiftly from scene to scene, the intensities

being diminished by the gaps in time that separate them, with the result that their spiritual implications merely adhere to the action instead of being embodied in it. But in *Camilla* they encompass it. The adoption of a shifting time scale enables the author to evoke a world of spiritual cause and effect which lends depth and plausibility to the macabre events of the plot, wherein a confidence trickster's scheme to use his sister's psychic gifts to exploit a wealthy family, whose daughter has disappeared, results, through a double irony, both in the sister's writing the poem it has been her life's work to produce, and in the brothers' successful purloining of it as his own. Through its indirection, its reticences and moments of intense unease, *Camilla* proposes a world of cause and effect quite other than that of which one is normally aware, a world in which, for example, the girl whose death Hartley causes is the equivalent of, or is, his sister's muse. The poem that results might be regarded as itself this novel and the eight to come.

The latter fall into pairs, related thematically; and in each pair one sees the closer divining of the theme through the resolution of a dualism by means of literary technique. Thus *The Lion of Cooling Bay* and *Rox Hall Illuminated* are contrasting studies of the religious temperament. *The Lion*, the most apocalyptic of the novels, posits a diabolic presence among its characters. In *Rox Hall*, on the other hand, good and evil are less clearly distinguishable. A portrait of the outbreak of a religious cult centering on a dead nun, the book is more analytic, less stage-managed than its (as John Cowper rightly observed) exciting and startling predecessor. The structure is more tight, the moral vision at once more focused and more inexorable.

Again, *A Cage for the Nightingale* is a relatively straight-forward story of a concealed crime, a study of moral evasiveness in terms of clearly defined dark and light. Its companion novel *Twice Lost*, however, through a greater use of ambiguity, contrives a more searching and tragic enquiry into the same theme. In the first

book a child is murdered, and it is the identity of the killer which is in doubt; in the second the child disappears and whether she has in fact been murdered remains an unsolved riddle. When, years later, she returns, only to disappear once more, the question of external verification becomes urgent: guilt from the past results in blindness in the present; and the occult manifestations which may or may not be accompanying the girl's return serve less as dramatic interest than as clues to a reality from which all the characters are in flight. By the end of the novel two possible solutions to the mystery are offered, both of them plausible, both of them with backing from the novel itself. Only a careful reading can elicit what appears to be the author's intended meaning; the reader is thus made a participator in the action, which, in any case, is activated by moral rather than by logical concerns. Superbly controlled, astringent and at times sardonically amusing, this novel is an achievement of a unique kind.

However, *A Little Treachery* is Phyllis Paul's most moving and deeply felt book. Like the earlier *Constancy* (the novel whose title Powys could not remember) it deals with the fate of the mentally sick and with the suffering of their families, a subject of which the author appears to have had first hand knowledge. When choosing a cottage for their retirement, two elderly sisters are given misleading and irresponsible advice by a busy architect: the house he recommends to them proves to be ramshackle and inconvenient and to exert a baleful influence, so that the elder sister breaks down under the strain and disappointment. The efforts of the younger one to survive, her relations with a high-spirited but amoral girl who lodges with her, and her temporary but disastrous guardianship of the architect's son lead down to total loss. The little treachery at the novel's start is all-pervasive, and the ending is despair. "It happens; no one is there, no one hears." They might be the words of Beckett. But this is a naturalistic novel, one whose inescapable particularities afford no such alleviating distancing as do the protective abstractions of Beckett's

symbolic world. And yet, for all its closely detailed physical realism and its sharp psychological penetration, *A Little Treachery* has the quality of fable.

The book's effect is furthered by its style: Phyllis Paul writes with a remarkable sensitivity to verbal textures.

But she remained cold and sunken in her mind, like a person who has suffered a shock, looking askance at herself, sitting for a long while in the middle room between the two dark staircases, listening to the many doubtful creakings of the ancient house, and now and again hearing a dead leaf scud along the pavement past her door, like the slur of a light step drawing near home.

External event and interior feeling fuse continually in these novels.

The final one, *An Invisible Darkness* opens on to a relatively daylight world. In it all the previous themes are assembled and played off against each other—the lost one who seems to have come back from the dead; the spoiled, dangerous children; the faithful, saintly woman (as twice before, called Rose); the proud money-grubbing family; the lunatic; the sense of occult presences. But in this case the mystery is solved, so far as the plot is concerned, and a balance perfectly established between fiction and reality. It seems a fitting conclusion to the author's work.

That work has its limitations. The seclusion in which Phyllis Paul wrote reduced her imaginative range. When she moves outside it she sounds as Victorian as Charlotte Brontë; indeed, the fervent puritanism of her attitudes at times suggests that here are the novels of a latter-day Lucy Snowe. Too often a scornful dismissiveness of phrase masquerades as informed awareness, and her vocabulary can be mannered and archaic, rare dictionary words appearing alongside such dowdy phrases as "she was dressed smartly for the street in evening wear of good style". There is a marked absence of worldly sophistication in the novels.<sup>4</sup> More seriously, there is a good deal of limiting prejudice: dismissive, unplaced references to Jews and foreigners, and a tendency, increasingly marked in the later

books, for criticism of Catholics to degenerate into animus. Added to which one finds an implacability, a moral stance that to contemporary ears sounds governessy or merely pettish: to be tight-lipped is not an endearing trait in a novelist, unless offset by the verbal wit of an Ivy Compton-Burnett. Phyllis Paul's own humour is caustic, dry, below-the-surface: she relishes a villain. And all her limitations are made good by her piercing imaginative insight, sure of its purpose, cogent and of self-authenticating power. With each re-reading her work seems richer, more compassionate, and its limitations less important.

She has a Jamesian feeling for the potentialities of a situation, and the later novels especially are masterly in their handling of their plots. The total event which is the novel is revealed piece by piece, so that one deduces what is happening in the same way that one gradually makes out the picture in a jig-saw puzzle. Everything fits together in the end: the method is analogous to a depiction of providence and judgement. For what gives these books their most distinctive character is their sense of an unseen world shaping our understanding of the phenomenal one. They evoke with haunting and at times alarming power the terrors of the mind—the loss of belief in one's own moral identity, the deceptions of the senses, things half-seen, half-heard. All such intimations are rigorously analysed, in part discounted. In doing so the author both uses and provides against the inbuilt scepticism of the present time. The modes of awareness overlap.

In the novels of Phyllis Paul the spiritual world is the verdict on the one we know: she never makes the mistake of regarding spirit merely as an alternative to matter. She is a visionary novelist, not an occult one. Her religious standpoint tends to be dualistic, certainly where this world is concerned; and she is sympathetic to the solitary, portraying more than one victimised woman of the kind to be found in the work of the not totally dissimilar Jean Rhys. And her pessimism about the world is welnigh total, unless grace manifests itself, as it does in *An Invisible Darkness*, where the unhappy,

displaced protagonist responds to an upsurge of conscience that can offer only itself for comfort. Without recourse to dogma or to crude occult mechanisms, the struggle between good and evil is actualised in a way which makes the good persuasively redemptive through its afflicted and necessarily passive presence; and this is brought about by means of a narrative technique which, in its emphasis on the spatial rather than the temporal nature of the novel's structure, insists on the indissoluble tension between good and evil, and on their permanent inter-dependence in human experience.

In Phyllis Paul's fictional world the evil is not so much disorderly as malignant. A good instance occurs in *Camilla*, where a whispered conversation in a church porch is interrupted by the sound of footsteps:

the sound began to make an unpleasant impression of something let off the chain, loosed and hunting . . . A man passed by within a few feet of them, walking hurriedly. He was muttering to himself.

This man is never seen again: a wandering spirit of inchoate rage, he seems to come striding out of the book between the reader's eyes.

But a more tangible opening for evil lies in those morally undeveloped people who are the object of the author's particular scorn—slapdash, 'well-meaning' people like the unimaginative Pat Anderson in *A Cage for the Nightingale*; or the odiously cheap Mrs North in *The Lion of Cooling Bay*. Opposed to such feckless characters are the single-minded innocents, figures such as Rose in *Constancy*, who for love's sake is prepared even to kill the suffering lunatic it has been her life's task to protect. Between the two extremes of scrupulosity and carelessness the more readily exploited soon go under: Catherine in *A Little Treachery*, or the unfortunate Frank Rodney in *Pulled Down*, victim at once of a totalitarian religious system and of his own facetiousness and self-distrust. This particular novel inspires a Kafka-like dread of being caught fatally and finally in the wrong; all of them insist on an upending of normal worldly priorities. They are apocalyptic in their implications.

Yet they contain their share of positives. Phyllis Paul is a novelist with a sharply visual sense, and works with painterly exactitude.

At last, lifting her eyes, she was struck by the peculiar formation of this land seen by night. It was all in verticals. It was pointed, all streaming upwards. The trees by the water at the foot of the garden, the poplars and the willows, stretching their deep black limbs against the misty and rusty darknesses of the hillside, scored it through with upright strokes which seemed hardly to end with their visible height but suggested a passing upwards into the sky where the eye lost them.

(*A Little Treachery*)

All the novels are memorable for their settings: once encountered they are unforgettable—the huge nineteenth century house and sunken lanes in *A Cage for the Nightingale*; the lamplit London streets and terraces of *Rox Hall*; the rank, waterlogged garden of *A Little Treachery*; the abandoned Well House in *Twice Lost*. In each case the landscape both reflects and impinges upon a state of mind; the interaction between spirit and body is total. The author was right to maintain that her novels were poetic in spirit. They are poetic in their method as well.

Such a coincidence validates the claim

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson*, 1958, pp. 306-7.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to William Heinemann Ltd for permitting me to examine their correspondence with Phyllis Paul; and to her executor for such further information about her life as I have been able to obtain. Portions of the above essay first appeared in *Little Caesar* 12, to the editor of which acknowledgments are due.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of *Camilla*, none of Phyllis Paul's later novels carried the titles of her two earliest ones; hence Powys's assumption that *The Lion of Cooling Bay* was her third. She herself regarded the first two as works she had outgrown. *We Are Spoiled* achieved an American edition, as did the later *Twice Lost*.

<sup>4</sup> A question of readership arises here. Phyllis Paul writes as for a qualitatively provincial readership. And this prevents her from attaining the universal appeal of major literature, which any social group can read without making adjustments to its point of view.

that Phyllis Paul is a writer to be taken seriously. The moral rigour of her outlook eschews didacticism, but her books leave an uncomfortable mark upon the mind. Disturbing, often frightening, they possess a weird beauty of their own. Above all, amid the shoddy cynicism and knowing, easy disbelief that infests so much contemporary fiction, they offer an alternative challenge to the pain of being human, one found in their sacramental vision of a spiritual world transmitted through the material one of which we are most immediately and perennially conscious. The problem discussed by Sir Angus Wilson in his essay "Evil in the English Novel", the difficulty for the agnostic, post-Freudian, Marxist writer adequately to embody "the overflow that goes beyond social right and wrong",<sup>5</sup> is met here by an imaginative statement and analysis that is innocent of any doctrinal or philosophical explications. The novels are self-justifying in their imaginative power. John Cowper Powys was encountering not just an entertainer but a fellow artist, and one neglected and underrated for the same reason and by the same generation that neglected and underrated him. It is high time that these extraordinary novels were made available to a readership more likely to appreciate them.

Metropolitan sophistication is equally restricted, but since it is the voice of literary influence and power it appeals to moral snobbery, and thus its limitations are less immediately apparent.

<sup>5</sup> Angus Wilson, *Diversity and Death in Fiction*, 1983, pp. 3-24.

#### APPENDIX

*The Novels of Phyllis Paul*

- 1933 *We Are Spoiled*
- 1934 *The Children Triumphant*
- 1949 *Camilla*
- 1951 *Constancy*
- 1953 *The Lion of Cooling Bay*
- 1956 *Rox Hall Illuminated*
- 1957 *A Cage for the Nightingale*
- 1960 *Twice Lost*
- 1962 *A Little Treachery*
- 1964 *Pulled Down*
- 1967 *An Invisible Darkness*

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# Eigra Lewis Roberts

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## Words that Burn\*

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A friend of mine once accused me of being in love with my typewriter—what he actually said was “your bloody typewriter”. He meant, of course, not the machine itself but what is put into it—and taken out. And he was right. This love affair between words and myself has been a tempestuous one—as any worth while affair should be—with that love-hate relationship which is essential if it is to survive.

I write not because I am Welsh, but because I am me. I write in Welsh because I breathe, think and feel in Welsh. I have no ulterior motives. I write because I must. What I have done had to be done. I have worked for myself and I’m sure that every self-employed person would agree with me that the incentive to work for oneself is much greater than working for someone else. I work because I choose to do so and I have never tried to find excuses not to work. If it ever comes to that I’ll know that it is time for me to retire as graciously as possible. Graciously? I would probably rage and scream, for, without my writing, life would become merely an existence. But why worry about the “unborn tomorrow if today be sweet”? “The moving finger writes; and having writ moves on”. Tomorrow is a complete mystery but we have known our yesterdays and we cannot escape them. “We are not free to use today because we are mortgaged to yesterday” (Emerson).

So, to begin at the beginning. The town where I spent the first eighteen years of my life was a grey town, hemmed in by mountains and rocks and quarries. It is called Blaenau Ffestiniog. If you have heard of it you have also probably heard it said that it

always rains there. It could be true, I suppose. It has been called an ‘ugly’ town. In Welsh we have two adjectives—‘hagr’ and ‘hyll’. Both have been translated to mean ‘ugly’. The ‘hyll’ I can accept. But ‘hagr’ is far more complicated. This is the adjective that I would use to describe my town. One must live in it to know it. What seems grey and cold and indeed ‘ugly’ to the casual visitor has a dignity and a majesty of its own. This is how I wrote of it, once.

Those who knew no better were depressed by our town. A place of stone, austere in its greyness, it angered strangers. It had no wistfulness which they could approach with whispers; no quaintness which they could linger over and make memories of.

Often, they would bring with them the smell of the sea. We had listened to the sea caught in shells and in the sound had seen what we remembered of it. But the smell, dark and deep, held for us a terror of all strange and unfamiliar things.

Like the old people, they would call to us, the strangers who shivered through our town. The old we answered, when the mood took us, but strangers never. They would stare at us, the untamed mountain ponies of Wales. And they would wonder if their language was too intricate for our thick Welsh tongues. The more they stared, the louder and wilder we became, until we brought terror into their eyes and the gleam of victory into ours. For it was our town. We thought them stupid, the pot-bellied men in coloured shirts; the long, crackling women. The dogs, with shrivelled legs, showed mouthfuls of decaying teeth and all the children had prominent teeth and ears.

When we had mocked them, made certain that they would have no wish to return, we would slide, jump, rock and roll through our town. Down the quarry inclines, up the slate tips and across rocks, we ached to touch, feel, hold that which was ours. Our quarries had been cursed for the poison that was in them.

\*A paper read to a Conference of Yr Academi Gymreig on the subject of writing in the Welsh language, October 1983.

We had seen men spit blood. Fascinated, we had watched the frothy saliva being tinted, heard the hissing as it dropped. We had known, a long time, how the quarry dust was pressed and moulded into a tiny, deathly rubber ball. But death, then, held no agony for us. When we lost, there were so many things left. And time never lingered, as it does today.

In winter, old people crept through the streets, muttering, creaking, a disgusting sight. But in summer, that shameless season, they sat on council seats, their voices softened by memories. We caught their words as we passed, intending to ask their meaning when we had time. But there was no time to ask of things that were gone. They sometimes held us against their knees, hard and splintery, like wooden chairs, and spoke of being children. It would have been easier to age a child than to give them youth. Their very hardness; the spit of the old men; the mustiness of the women; their baldness; their raw, red gums, could never be accepted into our summer. And so we passed at a distance, from where there was beauty in them.

Always passing, to and fro, so many times, in many different ways, the same old people on the same benches. Catching the same words; snatches of the same memories. When evening came, they blamed the sun that it had lost its power, but it was the blindness in them, the chill that had set upon them, that was to blame. Often, at that time, they would speak of past summers, the dull, monotonous summers, when children were wizened creatures and the world had no colour but green. But the thought of those summers made old women blush and old men sneer. They gave the day no praise nor the sun its due, for the old have always known better. Yet, they sat on, annoyed that the day had ended, too obstinate to yield to its night.

We shared their stubbornness, for we, too, had thought that such a day could never end. We had been left with the lollipop stick, the paper bag, the empty bottle. All that remained of that wonderful day had been thrown clumsily, recklessly into the dustbins of our minds.

I was what the “Rhodd Mam”—a dos and don’ts publication of the Calvinistic Methodists—termed as a ‘good’ child. I never missed school; I attended chapel on

Sundays and weekdays; I respected my parents and feared God. I accepted the values that were thrust upon me and never thought to question them. Even now that my values have changed, the fear of a vindictive God, whom I find difficult to accept, still remains with me. But with the passive acceptance there came happiness and a contentment that I will never know again. When I moved away from my home I, too, felt that there had “passed away a glory from the earth”. But, looking back, I only remember the sad times, the disappointments and injustice, once I had stepped outside that little wooden gate that led to my home. Inside, I was safe and warm and wanted.

That was the beginning. That was what made me what I am today. That is probably why I crave for soft earth and colours and freedom. And that is certainly why I am riddled with fears and doubts and guilt. And it must have something to do with why I write. But I am not really bothered with the ‘why’. Sir T. H. Parry Williams, whom I always refer to as ‘my poet’ wrote a short poem under the title “Words”. In it he asks what right has he to juggle with words. From time to time, in cold blood, I have also asked the same question. What right have I to think of myself as a writer, to believe that I have something worth saying? But I usually avoid such questions for there is nothing I can do about it.

I spend my working days on my own, at my desk. This, again, is what I choose to do. There is no one to tell me to get on with it. I could dream the day away. But nothing can tempt me from my work. Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t mean to boast. It is just a fact of life. It has taken me years to reach a state of self-discipline which enables me to carry on with my work regardless of the many every day problems. I can assure you that it isn’t easy to combine being a wife and mother with being a writer. I won’t pursue that point, or we’ll be here until the next weekend. But I was determined, right from the start, that I would continue writing. I had a terrible fear that if I once stopped, even for a short while, I would never be able to get started again. This fear and determin-

ation kept me going through some very difficult periods.

I have no intention of going back over the years in order to give you some kind of literary autobiography. It is enough to say that my parents gave me every encouragement and that the school did nothing. The only teacher who made any lasting impression on me was Raymond Garlick. I won the prize for the Welsh essay three years running, and that was all. As no one took any notice, my feet were kept firmly on the ground, and, in Blaenau, that meant very hard ground indeed. But I inherited from my parents a strong need for competition. They had spent years travelling from Eisteddfod to Eisteddfod competing in the Prif Adroddiad (the chief recitation). Even now you can hear a pin drop when my mother takes the stage. They naturally wanted me to follow in their footsteps and while I was young and manageable I, too, took to the stage. But once I became aware of the audience I retreated as quickly as I could and took to competing in the literary competitions. This had all the advantages and gave me, in time, a degree of self-confidence which helped me to believe in myself and in what I was doing. If it wasn't for this competing I would probably still be groping in the dark.

It was while I was at the University in Bangor that I wrote a novel when I should, according to my tutors, have been concentrating on my academic work. I was given no encouragement. There was no time for creative writing. We were there to accumulate knowledge; to swallow it all and spew it back during the examinations. I am glad to say that things have changed to some degree. But I did what I wanted to do, and sent the novel *Brynhyfryd* to the National Eisteddfod at Caernarfon. It was published the following Christmas. And from then on there was no looking back. Over the years writing became a profession rather than a hobby although I could hardly have existed on what little money I earned. That, of course, didn't worry me in the least. I was doing what I wanted to do. In the meantime,

I lived, as all good 'housewives' do, off my husband's earnings.

I'm still doing what I want to do, but now I'm being paid for it. But let me assure you that even the advent of S4C—or S4Cheque as those people who would-if-they-could refer to it—does not assure a comfortable living for a writer. The money earned over two months, for example, may have to last for two years and more. There is no such thing as a regular wage and the people who believe that writers are making a packet out of writing for television would do well to remember that. You will never ever make a fortune out of writing in Welsh. What has changed is that the writer now has a professional status—something that I have clamoured for for many years. There are some who regard writing as a hobby but there are some of us who wish to be recognised as something more than mere dabblers. I believe it is only reasonable to expect some recognition for what is, after all, a job like any other.

Today, many Welsh people tend to measure success in pounds. To me, success is being able to do what you want to do in the best possible way. In a country like ours there is bound to be quite a lot of jealousy and bad feeling. But the little snide remarks, the prejudice, the digs and the spite have to be endured if one is to move on. They hurt, but if you believe in what you are doing it is possible to overcome everything. In many respects, Wales is a nasty little country. There are times when I hate the country and its people. But, again, it is this love-hate relationship that keeps us together.

I am often asked—'who do you write for?' The only possible answer is—'I write for myself'. But not in a vacuum. One is always aware of an audience, there in the background. But how can one write to please an audience of individuals, expecting different things, reacting in different ways? My audience is Welsh, but I do not write for a Welsh audience. I write for people who are questioning, like myself; searching for answers; trying to understand. I write of people like myself, and like them, who are

lost, find themselves for a while, and then lose themselves again. F. A. Grundy said of Patrick Brontë, "He was no domestic demon; he was just a man moving in a mist, who lost his way". We are told that it is better to stay put in a mist but I could never agree to that.

There is an old Welsh poem that says—"Man is man on all five continents; man is man from age to age". I write of life as I see it around me, and there is, inevitably, a Welsh undertone. Although I could never belong to any party but Plaid Cymru I have no interest in politics and I could not and would not choose to write any kind of Welsh political propaganda. My people inhabit their own little worlds, hemmed in by their own problems and pain as I was hemmed in by rocks and mountains and quarries.

This is how I introduced my novel *Mis o Fehefin* (A Month of June) published in 1980.

The outside world is full of troubles and problems and pain, but it is all so far away that we but peer at them as if through a mist. We may feel pity at times and cluck our tongues and say, 'I don't know what this world is coming to', and then forget. After all, what can we do? Haven't we got enough troubles and pain of our own within our own little worlds? What little energy we have is needed to cope with our own problems. Only a few are able to look out. The eyes of the majority are fixed on their own confined spaces.

I adapted the novel as a series for S4C, in episodes of forty five minutes, over a period of eight weeks. It was, needless to say, an exciting and unforgettable experience. Next month I will be starting on a sequel. The novel has already been written. Although it is about people living in a terrace of houses in a Welsh town, I believe that it could easily be translated, for it is a novel about people, their loves and their hates, their disappointments and hopes. In it, as in everything I write, I have tried to find out why people act as they do; what makes them tick; why they feel the urge to hurt and revenge; why they feel compassion; why they cannot cope. I don't pretend to be able to answer any of

these 'whys' but it is at least a process towards understanding.

I am now working on a volume of twelve short stories. I have taken the title—"Take what you will" from a Chinese proverb—"Take what you will, says God, and pay for it". I would like to refer to two of these short stories.

"This is Siân; this is Gareth" (or, if you prefer—This is Peter; this is Janet—remember the Ladybird Books?) is a story about an ex-husband and wife who meet, for a few seconds, in a crowded street. The husband has since re-married and has a baby son; she lives alone.

Here is Siân. Here is Gareth. They have met, by chance, in the main street. It is mere coincidence, of course, although some may believe that fate has a hand in it. If Siân had loitered a few seconds in Marks or if Gareth had decided to buy the book he fancied in Smiths they could have avoided this. But they didn't. And here they are, face to face. The few words that are said are hardly worth repeating. But it's interesting to note their eagerness to stress how well the world is treating them. Has Gareth noticed, I wonder how sallow Siân's face has become or has Siân noticed Gareth's thinning hair? It's difficult to say. They seem to look past one another, but before they part their eyes meet, and lock, for a split second. Is that enough for them to see what the years have done to them both?

The story then follows Siân to a coffee bar and Gareth to the car park, where his wife is waiting. Gareth drives home and sits in the car for a while after his wife and son have gone into the house.

Here is Gareth, Enid's husband and Siân's ex-husband, sitting in his car. The car port is so clean that one could eat off the floor. But who, in his right mind, would wish to eat off a floor? Who but Siân and Gareth, in those early days of marriage. Gareth, the poor student, disowned by his parents because he refused their offer to get rid of his child if only he would get rid of the girl. Siân, the most promising student of her year, who sacrificed her golden future to marry her poor student, not because of the child but because she loved him. There, in that tiny room, where furniture would have been nothing but

a hindrance, Gareth had listened, his ear on Siân's belly, to the heart beat of his little daughter, who was born dead. But many years have passed since then and time heals, does it not? And Gareth now has a new wife and a fine, healthy son.

Siân walks slowly towards the station:

Siân, the promising student, who sacrificed that golden opportunity that will never return. Siân, a mother with empty arms, who still wakes in the dead of night to hear the heart beat of the little daughter in her womb. Siân, who is nobody's wife, walking a street that, a few hours ago, was but like any other street in any town. If only she had loitered in Marks, this afternoon would have meant no more than any other afternoon.

But they didn't. And because of that Siân and Gareth met, for a few seconds, to witness, as their eyes met and locked, the sallow face and the thinning hair and to assure one another how well the world is treating them.

Another chance meeting is described in my story—"Y Wraig" (The Wife), this time between two women who have been involved with the same man, one as his wife and one as his mistress. The meeting place is a railway station—where they can observe one another without having to communicate. The story is written from the wife's point of view. I have also written another story, using exactly the same background, where the mistress is the narrator.

The wife has been watching the mistress for some time, deceiving herself that she wants to attract her attention but knowing full well that she has no intention of doing so. She is remembering:

'seeing her once, with Emyr. By then, I knew, but refused to accept. It was in a seaside town. I had gone there for the day, on my own, to escape. They were arm in arm and she was all in red—dress, shoes, scarf. My husband was exactly as he had left the house that morning—the shirt I had ironed (it took me a quarter of an hour to get the collar to please me), the shoes that I had cleaned before breakfast, even the white handkerchief folded neatly in his breast pocket. I remember thinking that they made a handsome pair. That's all—no surprise at seeing them, arm in

arm, mid-afternoon, when he, at least, should have been working. I thought at first that they were going to walk past me. When they stopped she was a few paces in front of him and his arm reached out towards her. It was only then that I realised . . .

That evening, when he returns home, the wife has prepared a special meal for them both:

'candles, wine, the lot. I probably wanted to make it a meal to remember. But I would have remembered it even if we had eaten chips out of a newspaper. 'There's no point in beating about the bush,' he said, scraping the tallow off one of the candles. 'I'm sorry it happened that way, but I'm sure you must have had your doubts, or heard.' 'I heard.' 'It wasn't such a shock, then.' We were drinking the coffee when he asked for a divorce, as casually as if he were asking me to pass the sugar. 'Yes, of course,' I said, as casually as if I were passing the sugar. We washed the dishes, and went to bed—the same bed, as the other one wasn't aired. When I woke next morning, after a fitful sleep, he had his arm thrown over me and I thought, God help me, that I had been dreaming.

Later, during the train journey, remembering how the face that she saw had lost the beauty that had claimed her husband and that she had once feared, she thinks:

I never felt the urge to challenge the years. From the moment I told Emyr, as casually as if I were passing him the sugar, that I would give him his freedom, I knew that I was on the way down. And I let myself move, gradually, down the slope. What else could I do? I had never been one for heights. And I would have had to descend sometime, at a rush perhaps, bringing all the loose stones in my wake, and that at a time when a sharp knock on the ankle would have destroyed me.

The wife has come to terms with her existence in the only possible way; the mistress has not. But they are all lost souls and they are all mortgaged to the past. And there is, as always, that lack of understanding which is one of the tragedies of life.

This stormy love affair of mine has lasted now for about twenty five years—a quarter of a century. During that time I have written

thirteen volumes as well as stage, radio and television work, poetry, essays, school programmes, radio tales, reviews—you name it. What if I were to start counting those millions of words? They have burnt me and caused me great pain, they have angered me but they have also caressed and comforted me. One writer said:

A word is not the same with one writer as it is with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.

There have been times when I have taken the words out of my pocket, hardly feeling their weight, but mostly they have meant

sweat and pain. We have a saying in Welsh about someone who feels washed out: “Rydw i’n teimlo fel taswn i wedi cael tynnu ’mherfadd”. Roughly translated it means, “I feel as if I’ve had my guts taken out”. I have had that feeling, many, many times. If anything is to be done well it is to be done with the maximum of effort. Writing is a manual job and it can leave the body, as well as the mind, exhausted. In spite of that, or because of it, I would much rather be at my desk now, doing my work, rather than talking about it. But I hope that I have given you some idea of how and why one writer writes in Wales today.

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# A. Thomas Southwick

## John Cowper Powys in America: The Letters to Marian\*

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The letters of John Cowper Powys to Marian Powys from 1914 to 1934 give glimpses of the author in one of the most crucial and yet least documented periods of his life, the years of lecturing and writing in the United States. Furthermore they attest to the remarkable and important relationship between this brother and sister.

Powys felt closest to Marian, of all his sisters, and confided in her more intimately perhaps than in any other member of the Powys family, including Llewelyn. Their entire correspondence, comprised of almost weekly letters, spans nearly fifty years, to the time of Powys's death in 1963. Until the publication of his journal, which may supersede it, the picture given in the letters to Marian of Powys's works and days is the longest and most detailed continuous self-portrait of him that we have.

In the summer of 1914, when the letters begin, Powys was forty-one and Marian thirty-one. Both, in a sense, were in the process of escape from the roles that English society expected of them: Powys from life as the husband, father, and householder that that in fact he was; Marian from a life like her mother's, as a vicar's wife, which she indeed might have had, if she had wanted it. Powys would follow a catch-as-catch-can existence as lecturer and writer for another fifteen years in America, until fame freed him; and Marian, that very summer, would go to work for the Singer Sewing Machine Company in New York, at fifteen dollars a week. Soon followed her founding of the Devonshire Lace Shop, and its growth to further editions, until finally, by the nineteen-thirties, it had become established on

Madison Avenue. The letters, then, record the parallel grapplings with destiny out of which were created John Cowper Powys, the notorious sage and bard, and Marian Powys Grey, the most prominent lace-merchant and authority of her day.

She was still "little May" in 1914 however, to her family and to her brother Jack. Her independence had always astonished and appalled her parents, especially her mother. The purpose for her journey to New York had been disguised as housekeeping help for Jack. This indeed she gave, even after the six months of looking for work that preceded the Singer job. Some of those early letters contain pleas to mail a forgotten vest ahead to an imminent site on the lecture route, as Powys zigzagged north and south across the country and May maintained their quarters at "12 W 12" in Greenwich Village. She rapidly became *Marian* to him, however, a "Nietzschean" woman of blood-and-iron courage and sardonic clear-sightedness. Years later Powys would immortalize her as Mrs. William Solent, in his first great novel, *Wolf Solent*. Readers of that book will recognize the mastery, the grandness, of Mrs. Solent's original, and also the deep passional claims she exerted over its author.

Powys called Marian his "second wife" and sometimes signed himself as "your brother & lover". It was not true, as Louis Wilkinson liked to jest, that Powys was the father of Marian's child Peter; but he sometimes, mistakenly, in his letters writes "our son" and often, intentionally, refers to "our Peter". Add to a quasi-conjugal intimacy a sort of filial awe, like Wolf's to Mrs. Solent. That implacable sense of irony, with which Marian, without malice, could penetrate all the world's masks, was what

\*A revised and extended version of a paper read to the Powys Society, 1983.

Powys had loved to engage in speaking and writing to his mother. In Marian he had an audience and a co-conspirator entirely to his taste. No wonder he spoke of Peter as his rival, as well as his son!

How Powys must have lived and died for Marian's letters! Powys's lecturing career is remembered today chiefly in terms of the celebrity and controversy that surrounded it. There is almost nothing of that in these letters. Instead we read the words of a miserable man, lonely, often sick, who longs for Marian and their friends in the Village and a life of writing. The itineraries, as one can glean them from postmarks, were killing and without geographical logic; triumphs—and there were some—go completely unremarked. Rather there is nostalgia for the life that he and Marian sometime shared—and a constant anxiety over money—money for England, for his wife, for his son's tuition. The bookings never seem to amount to enough; in California, in 1921, Powys jumps ship, leaves Arnold Shaw for a new "girl-manager" and even for a time takes a regular job writing light essays for a San Francisco newspaper. All comes in the end to naught, another disappointment, and Powys returns to the East and—at Marian's urging—to more proficient management than either Shaw or the Californian.

The distress in these letters from the early lecturing years bespeaks a different man from the confident, whimsical gent of later, published correspondence or, for that matter, of Powys's books. That man did not emerge—not fully at least—until later; the letters of 1921-22 are tantalizing in their suggestion of how, when, and why.

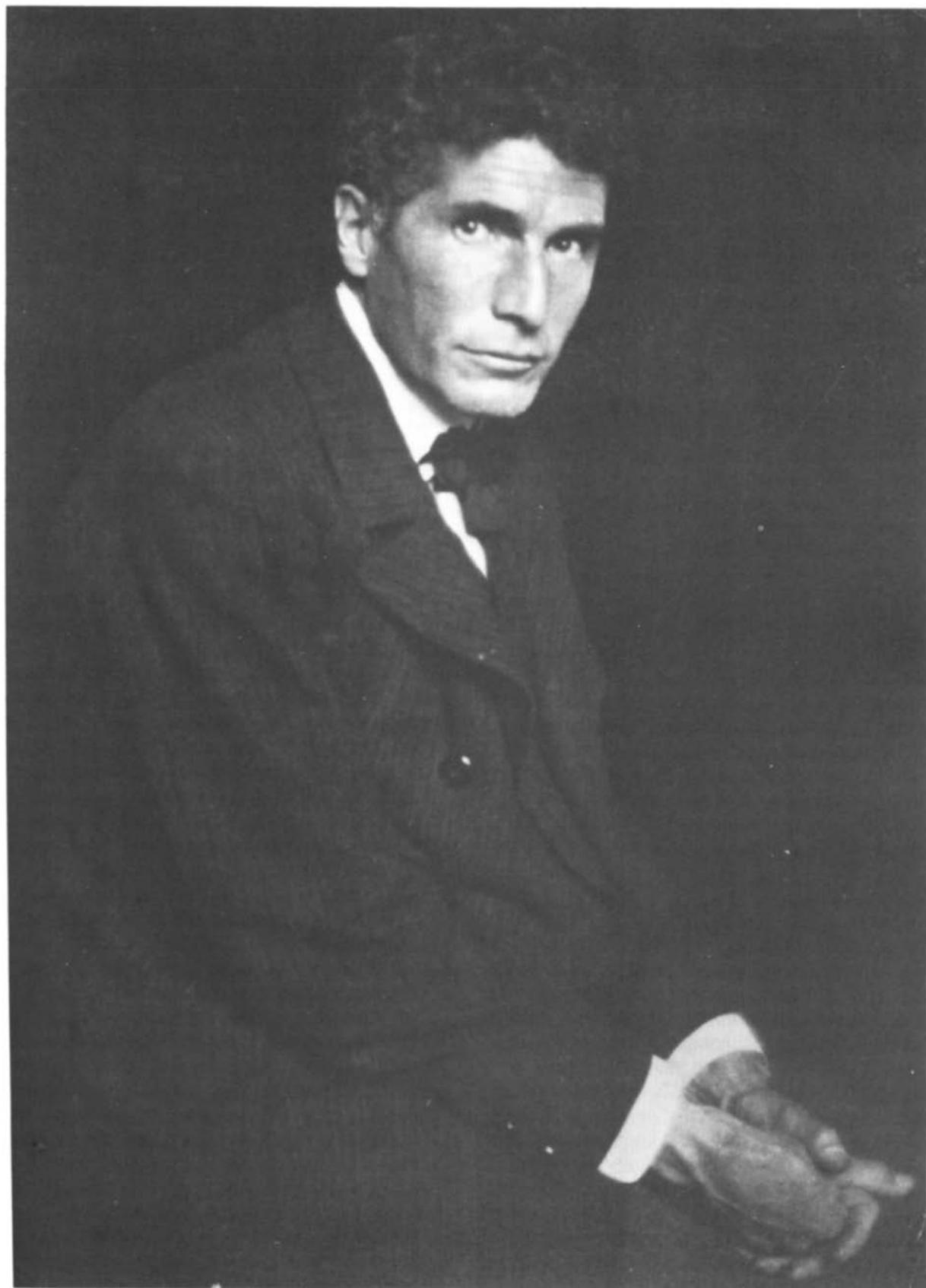
Powys had long loved Frances Gregg—after his fashion that is: ideally, romantically. He had encouraged Frances to marry Louis Wilkinson and remained devoted to her. By the early twenties Frances and Louis's marriage was faltering; also she was sick and, one gathers, mentally troubled as well. In the East, Powys played the part of loving helper; when that spring he had established himself in California—and after much indecision—he had Frances come to live with him in a house in Marin County.

Not only Frances: her son and mother and nursemaid as well. It is clear that he was happy—and also ashamed and confused. He means to have his wife and son join them in their valley; he feels he had been untrue to the humble spirit of his mother and instead followed the "egotistical", "selfish" spirit of his father. He laments how his every grasp for happiness must mean suffering for someone connected with him—and by autumn he has let Frances return home.

Powys turned to Marian in his shame and uncertainty over Frances. He must learn how, like her, to seize happiness, no matter what the cost—to accept (in a different idiom) the aggressive parts of his psyche which he had tried always previously to dismiss.

Whether in fact under Marian's influence or not, a great change now affected Powys's life. After his "third wife" Frances came his "fourth wife" Phyllis Playter—the "shadow" who would "mend" his life. That, it appears, she did. They were in love in 1922 in San Francisco; when Phyllis was forced to return home to Missouri, Powys cursed the circumstances that kept them apart. This time he would not submit—and of course he did not. For the rest of his life, she was his.

The life that Powys made for himself and Phyllis does no discredit to the author of *The Art of Happiness*. Indeed the letters from Hillsdale that Powys wrote Marian might be read as the living embodiment of those books of his that describe culture, sensuality, and solitude; by themselves they constitute an idyll. There are vignettes of the rural life around Phudd Bottom, descriptions of visits from the surprising number of guests, both familiar and strangers, who found their way to the cottage, and most of all nature in all her moods and seasons, as Powys on his strenuous walks encountered her. One of the secrets of Powys's joy, throughout a later life that contained many hardships and setbacks, was an unflinching interest in everything and every living soul around him. This comes through—with a gusto and generosity that is no less exhilarating today—as Powys describes for Marian a conversation with a neighbour boy or the



discovery of some fox tracks in the snow. They seem to inhabit some indomitable secret dimension, compounded of their memories of their life together as well as an unending mutual delight and rapport with one another; from it they spy on comings and goings in the Powys family and on the world stage with an interest that is no less sympathetic and alert because of its constant good humour.

Certainly these were years when the news, public and private, was not itself always good. The Depression cut deeply into Marian's lace sales; Powys was often sick and bedridden. Peter, always an object of pride and concern for Powys, made his way through the large and small crises of childhood. (He would make a terribly fussy parent, if he really were Peter's father, Powys once confessed to Marian.) All of these events—as well as the rise of Naziism, the first hints of Soviet tyranny, the terrible suffering at home—were recognized and somehow put into their proper relation to the unflinching personal happiness that is the dominant theme of these letters.

Of course Powys was writing all these years at Hillsdale. He rarely fails to mention how much he is enjoying what he is writing, particularly if it is a novel; surely it is that joy, as well as his loving interest in all things and all souls, that makes so appealing the great books written at Hillsdale: *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands*, the *Autobiography*.

Several interesting facts about those books come to light in the letters. For instance, Powys gave his last New York lectures on the legendary background to *A Glastonbury Romance*, though he turned down an offer to broadcast about it on the radio—he thought that would be inconsistent with his role as a solitary who had retired from society. *Weymouth Sands*, begun hard on the amazingly rapid composition of *Glastonbury*, was totally scrapped and recast after Powys realized how exhausted he had been when he started. As for the *Autobiography*: the letters suggest how cannily Powys knew who would be offended by his self-portrait and why.

Powys's return to Britain in 1934 came, it seems, wholly at the behest of his imagination. A review in a Cardiff paper of *A Glastonbury Romance* had enchanted him above all others; soon thereafter Marian had sent, at his request, two books on Wales, from which Powys made his first plans to do research in the land of Mrs. Geard, Mr. Evans, and the Princes of Powysland. Several books would intervene, but Powys had already hit upon the idea of a romance about Owen Glendower; it was chiefly a matter of finishing the *Autobiography* and selling Phudd Bottom before the move could be made.

However, Powys's ultimate destination was still uncertain when he sailed with Phyllis in June 1934. His main concerns, he indicated to Marian, were to fight the libel suit that had arisen from *A Glastonbury Romance* and to settle where he would cause his wife and son the least embarrassment. Perhaps he would have stayed longer in Dorset had not such agitation surrounded Llewelyn, now seriously ill at Chydyock. As it was, Down Barn nearby proved unsuitable, but both Powys and Phyllis loved Dorchester, with its gaily decorated shops at Christmas and the sound of the great churchbells tolling in the night. Nevertheless that summer, excited and anxious, Powys took a cottage that James Hanley had found for him in the Welsh town of Corwen. At sixty-two, he was following his fate to another new start.

A writer's inspiration is stubbornly anti-pathetic to analysis, and the joy or sorrow of a particular work may be the counterweight to opposite emotions in the author's life. Nevertheless, I was struck, in reading Powys's letters to Marian, how developments and atmospheres described in them seemed to parallel the moods of his books. The time of great personal crisis, a crisis of self-definition, finds its counterpart in the turmoil and in the carefully restricted narrative consciousness of *Wolf Solent*. A sense of great powers used with ease and confidence pervades both *A Glastonbury Romance* and the letters that began to appear from Powys's retirement in Hills-

dale. The terrain these letters survey—farm animals and children, rustic story-tellers and spring floods—may have helped to provide the background to the *Romance* as much as did Powys's memories of the Somerset countryside. *Weymouth Sands* may owe something of its convincing portrayal of simple characters to Powys's feelings of familiarity and affection towards the little community of farmers around him. Finally, of the American books, the *Autobiography* quite strongly seems to take its freedom to treat its subject as if a character in a novel from Powys's knowledge that a certain phase of his life had ended and therefore lay available for the sort of detached observation which he had come to practice in letters to his "second wife"; he could now be just that ironical in print towards himself.

Most revealing of all is the background to *Maiden Castle*. This book has long troubled me with its sense of claustrophobia, of the characters so ceaselessly living on their nerves, the unprecedented bleakness of it all. Previously I had put it down to Powys's anxiety about writing a broad-scoped romance after the Glastonbury libel suit—and also perhaps his dissatisfaction with England and with the sort of fiction he had made a practice of writing. Certainly the Depression in England and Powys's own financial losses in court played some part in the shape of the novel, as did his ever-growing eagerness to explore the ancient Welsh background he would develop in *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*. More directly responsible for the atmosphere of *Maiden Castle*, I now believe, was the situation at Chydyock after Powys arrived there in 1934, as he reports it in several long letters to Marian. Llewelyn had had hæmorrhages and was believed to be close to death. Around him were gathered four women of strong, sensitive, and divergent personalities, each dedicated to his care and frequently at odds with others as to the best course. In *Maiden Castle*, where the dying Uryen Quirm draws a group of similarly devoted and rattled women to him, Powys I believe transmuted his anger and anguish into a most disturbing work of art, one in which maniacal extremes

of attachment must somehow be broken if the characters are to live.

As a reader and as a practising novelist Powys most highly prized the sort of book that created its own unique, enveloping atmosphere. His letters to Marian go a very long way towards documenting the daily climate that contributed to the great romances which many of us inhabit to this day.

### Selfishness and Submissiveness: A Theme in the Letters

I should like these letters to speak for themselves of the personalities that are present in them.

To begin: in pain in his stomach and shoulders, writing from the remote and obscure desert town of East Las Vegas, New Mexico, where the Keedick Bureau has booked him to lecture throughout the summer of 1927, John tells Marian:

How I think of Mother when I write to you in the 'descriptive' vein—I am glad she left a daughter whose irony has the same flavour—dearly loved by me & very necessary sometimes—as the world goes on—Peter & I have *that* at least in common [,] have mothers who take us seriously—up to a certain point! Aye I recall how she only said 'very like you my dear John' when I protested against that positively maudlin photo of me in one of the groups. She never let us get too conceited, ha? Not even her 1st born. But O dear me! Twere another tune with He in the study!

The Reverend Powys, that "He in the study" figures over and over again in the letters, very often in contrast to the ironic Mary Cowper Powys, with whom "Twere another tune". (The "tune" of this He seems distinct in two ways: John could expect no playful irony from his father; and—John notes perhaps jealously—his mother assented to all the Reverend Powys's claims to dignity.) Many of the letters present John and Marian as united through their mother against their wilful and earnest father. A rather early letter, from Chicago in January 1916, emphasizes this bond. Powys speaks of the tedium of lecturing and

wishes for a life of “writing—writing—writing”. John recalls Frances and Louis Wilkinson and his own flirtations in New York.

“But,” he concludes, “in the end it is to my ironical May that I finally turn. Aren’t we both born in October and don’t we both remember the lined forehead & the great wild eyes—under the brown shawl?”

To Marian in the “wild” and “ironical” spirit of their mother, J. C. P. writes often as the feminist or “Cowperist”, as he calls himself elsewhere, in the name of the restriction of the women of the family to the roles dictated by duty and social convention. On black-bordered stationery, from Montacute in May 1915, ten months after their mother’s death, John writes to Marian:

Gertrude is a saint—no other word suits her. Her devotion to Katie & her tact in dealing with her fear pass all admiration—& how well she manages Father—the Village—and everything—and yet she hates it so! Well—I am glad you at least are out of all this—what an escape! I think of our happy flat & carefully arranged parties free from all discordant elements with such relief now!

This letter presents Gertrude’s unhappy submission to duty as the “discordant” condition of life at home from which Marian—and John—have made their escape. In later letters the “discordant elements” from which they have escaped seem clearly to be the sex roles represented to them by their mother and father. This escape, however, appears—to John at least—often ambiguous and at times illusory. The nature of their escape is a continuing theme of these letters.

Before we turn to John’s meditations on this conflict, I should like to turn aside to a remarkable imagining which J. C. P. presented to Marian at the time of their father’s death, in 1923. I call it remarkable for the variety of emotions that succeed one another in it and for how eloquently it testifies to John’s mixed feelings towards his father.

The letter begins with a sober, literally telegraphic report of the event, before

spinning into fantasies of the funeral and a last image of the man. John writes: “The telegram only said ‘Father died last night peacefully tell May’.” He goes on to wonder if their father died in his sleep and then imagines the mourners at his funeral: “Will Gertrude be angry with Ellen for ‘looking sentimental’ & will Bertie & Margaret quarrel straight away over the silver? And will they remember that John wants the Gilded Chair?”

A new paragraph, in much smaller script, follows the large script above:

And will they remember that Marian wants the—and the—and the—and the—and the—and the—etc. etc etc! And will anyone remember how the old man used to rub his hands and poke out his upper lip as he walked past the Portugal Laurel and clicked the gate on a heavy-dew September when a letter had come saying ‘that the Parishoners of Montacute wished to give him a present in Recognition of etc. etc.’—Ech! ech! ech! ech!

“Recognition” of their father seems, indeed, to be the concern of this letter. It also includes the statement, “My first thought was now Gertrude will be free and Katie will be freer!” Since their father’s death allows Gertrude’s liberation, John perhaps anticipates her dissent if he should “look sentimental” in remembering him. To evade sentimentality, then, there is the attempt to distinguish the father and vicar from the man in nature and his enjoyment of nature, as represented by the laurel, the hands rubbed together, the protruding upper lip: tokens repeated in descriptions in Powys’s published writing, including the affectionate portrait of the Reverend Powys in his *Autobiography*. These tokens work to associate the father with the animal and vegetable worlds. This attempt is in contrast to, and a reaction from, the earlier association of the man with his household goods, his silver and his chair—and yet it leads, with conscious irony and a good deal, I think, of benign amusement, to another instance of mis-recognition, in the form of a present from his parishioners. It is the man apart from his role in the family and from

his social role that John wants to save for remembrance, and he does so touchingly.

And yet we see in what way this remembrance is an evasion of the dominating figure for whom Gertrude will brook no sentimentality. John implicates his own desires in the general mis-remembrance of their father—and it is for a specific cause of shame that he indicts himself, before moving directly to Marian's unspecified and innumerable objects of desire: "And will they remember that John wants the Gilded Chair?" His father's "Gilded Chair" suggests in this context a throne. It is his father's power that John wants (and that, he fears, is what others will "remember"), yet it is his father's power particularly within his family and in his parish, that he eliminates from the presentation of his own, true, remembrance.

The conflict that desire and power caused in J. C. P. is most clearly articulated in the letters that he wrote to Marian in 1919 centering on his relationship to Frances Gregg. While living with Frances in California, he writes to Marian of his struggles with himself, the "war" within him of "CFP vs. MFP"—his father against his mother—"selfishness & stupidity" versus his "better self". The terms with which the conflict is identified would seem to make obvious the conclusion that John should follow his mother's example. However, a speculation that immediately follows throws this simple dualism into question: John writes, "Possibly my 'inhumanity' is part & parcel of all that is best rather than worst in me." By "inhumanity" John seems to refer to the "selfishness" that he associates with his father and by this, I think, he means his father's wilful desires. Yet the term by which John speaks of his own desire, "inhumanity" in its primary sense, cruelty—would seem to bar desires from the realm of moral actions. Furthermore "inhumanity", in the literal sense of the word, removes John's desires from the world of human relationships altogether in a way similar to that by which John's remembrance of his father strove to view him independently of his authority over others. John's desire, he

would seem to conclude, because it might be cruel, had best be referred to nature, where, as with his father's enjoyment of nature, it can then be seen as part of what is best, not worst, in him.

John's need to reject the "selfish" role represented to him by his father was especially complicated by his relationship to Frances. In a way different from Marian, Frances too reminded John of his mother: his desire for Frances seems somehow to have offered John the means to compensate for a failure in his love for his mother. Describing the time he spent with Frances in the East, writing in the period before he had acted to bring Frances to join him in California, John laments to Marian: "I had those three weeks; which were like those funny exquisite dreams when people, like mother for instance, that one had thought lost for-ever, are really alive again." John's identification of Frances with his mother grows stronger, though with something of an obscure note, in his next letter, after he has sent for Frances to join him: "I am going to make the happiness of Frances the thing that I am going to consider. I am not going to be fooled by death again as I was in the case of Mother, my other 'mad-woman'. Well—darling—You know how these things are and what I am thinking about." Exactly how did death fool John in the case of his mother and how does it threaten to do so in the case of Frances? It may help in reading this letter, to recall how Wolf Solent, in Powys's fiction, will demand that death not fool him when he vows, at his father's grave, to grasp all the happiness that he can. Similarly John determines to struggle for a life of happiness against the knowledge that death must bring these efforts to an end. But the phrase "fooled by death" may be seen to have a yet more precise meaning when we return it to its context in these letters. Frances as an object of desire is thought lost forever, as John's mother truly is. John can act to possess Frances, though, as he can no longer act to show his love for his mother. "Death" would seem to refer, however, not simply to the physical death of Mrs. Powys, but rather to an abiding prohibition on

John's desires that has its origin in his being prevented from really giving his love to his mother while she lived. The power that blocked John from his mother was his father's "selfishness"—identical here with the death that "fooled" him. And frightened him: we see now the source of the connection between desire and cruelty.

To act to have Frances would mean that John must follow his father's example and reject his mother as a model for the bemused acceptance of restrictions placed upon the pursuit of one's own happiness. "Oh I haven't struck out for myself half enough," John complains to Marian in the same letter that speaks of Frances and his mother as two "thought lost forever". When John had acted on his own behalf, however, by having Frances come to him, his attempts at self-justification contradict the aggressive motivations suggested by the idiom, "to strike out". "I am going to make the happiness of Frances the thing that I am going to consider," John declares; the repeated phrase "I am going to" recalls the formula of a vow or resolution (such as those Powys in his autobiography describes making as a Cambridge under-graduate). His concern, it would appear, is to expiate self-incriminations caused by having acted, this one time, for his own happiness. In a further attempt to distance himself from the aggressive motives of his act, John plans shortly after Frances has joined him in California, to bring her husband and his own wife and son to live with them as well. This selfless and impossible scheme, described in a letter to Marian, seems to have as its purpose emotional reparations for the "selfishness" of John's original act. Finally, in his relationship with Frances, John finds himself growing uncomfortably and uncontrollably to resemble his father. "So deep does my unpardonable 'CFP selfishness' go," he tells Marian, "that once or twice even Frances has observed crossing my curious physiognomy the shadow of 'that face'"—"that C. F. P. expression". As the summer spent with Frances draws near its end, John passes a bitter judgement on himself: "my queer inhumanity seems to hurt every

person that comes into my existence". That autumn Frances and John separate; she returns to England, and he travels east after new lecturing work.

In the same letter in which John berates himself for his "inhumanity", he presents to Marian a resolution in fantasy of the conflict represented by his father's "selfishness" and his mother's "submissiveness". As Gertrude is a "saint" in enduring their father's domination, so John would be a "monk" in abiding the inevitable constraints upon his sexual desires. "Maybe I was a quiet hedonistic monk in my last incarnation," he speculates, "content to see the nun St. Frances pass demurely between convent walls on her way to Mass: content to have long talks thro' a grating with the Marquise May married to the Doge of Venice." The irony here hinges on the discrepancy John implies between the asceticism that he feels would be best for him and the sensuality that he would like to enjoy within this confinement.

With a recognition of the irony with which J. C. P. liked to present himself to his sister, we return to our starting point in this perusal of their letters, and to the essential point, perhaps, in characterizing the nature of their bond. To use irony, for John, implies resources of detachment, self-awareness, and endurance of one's lot in life, despite all conflict and contradiction. Irony is life-preserving, sanity-preserving. It is her sense of irony that John salutes in Marian while recalling, during the period that we have been looking at, their life together a few years earlier.

"Do I forget the lovely & profound irony with which—like M. C. P. but with an added spice of mischief—you have watched my vain attempts to escape the inherited prejudices of C. F. P.—& those rages against the crowd which sometimes were sheer temper? . . . No one—no woman—my dear—and no man save only Lulu—has ever loved me or I suppose ever will with the unselfishness with which you care for me. That little spice of mischief made it all the more precious—because it made it the love of an intelligence not to be fooled . . .

Certainly if there were more like you—oh I most freely admit it—the anti-feminine prejudice which I have inherited & not even yet sufficiently stamped out—those selfish evil prejudices—would be not only wicked but quite mad. But there are not many like you, my old companion.”

Marian’s special sense of irony is the “mischief” that distinguishes her from her mother. Escaped from the authority of her father, and an independent agent in the masculine world of action and power, loving John with “unselfish” love, Marian represents to John freedom from the selfish masculine wilfulness to which he remains a prisoner. His father’s power, through the beliefs that John has inherited from him, keeps John from any appreciation of the

feminine but a wicked one. Marian has allowed John a perspective from which to view his own submission to the masculine authority from which she is free.

Earlier I attempted to suggest the many valuable details that J. C. P.’s letters to Marian may offer to the biographer—including those pertaining to the genesis of his books, his habits of work, and the texture of his daily life. In following the evidence in his letters of the conflict between masculine and feminine roles, as John believed that his parents represented them, we have, I think, sought out the path of a “discordance” that both troubled Powys and moved him to much in his writing of what is most strange and, to me, most deeply affecting.

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J. C. Powys to Marian Powys on the death of A. R. Powys,  
their Brother: a Letter\*

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March 15th 1936  
7 Cae Coed  
Corwen  
Merionethshire

Marian Dearest

What a thing its been Bertie's death! Who wd have supposed he'd be the first of us—the next after Nelly?

Let me just say in passing though that I've never had well, not since you wrote to me in those "hectic" days—as our Helen always used to say in her excitements—at the time Peter was begotten!—a more thrilling and dramatic letter than these two last—and this last of all such a long one—& full of such wierd drama (like a Novel of that crazy & unreal romancer John Cowper!) with Uncle Lee & Young Lee & your teeth & the wild & lovely "Frances"—a name to conjure with for me!—that ere I finished it I got quite confused as to the various acts & scenes & reactions & re-reactions, but the end seemed *all right* as is rarely the case; & all *as before*, which doesn't often happen in such psychic-erotic ups & downs! But I do profoundly rejoice—sister, & heart's crony, & dear & steady flame—that you should have such passion-sport to quicken your days in your, in *our* Peter's absence! Old Littleton tells me that he too has had wondrous fine letters from the boy that have astonished him as much as mine have me. I know this. That I couldn't & *didn't* write such letters at his age & certainly old Littleton didn't either! Nor did Lulu.

Well, I had on Monday the 9th the day Bertie died a sad letter about his prostration & extreme weakness from Faith that made me decide to go down there to see him at once hoping to buoy him up as Walt Whitman describes himself doing to such an one—but I really decided to go without the faintest thought that he was as bad

\*This letter was kindly sent to the Editor for publication by Eleanor Walton, A. R. Powys's daughter.

as he was or as near the end. I wrote in my diary, "I'll show the Old Bugger that I'm enough attached to him to journey against the grain for a whole day!" But at the moment I was deciding he was dying. I started on Tuesday March 10th (Clare's Birthday) but only discovered there was no station at Hindhead Surrey! I took a train to Haselmere & got out in the dark & took a taxi for six shillings to the Nursing Home which belongs & is run by Faith's sister a stately formidable woman with white hair & a countenance *exactly* like coins of the early Georges! I told the taxi to wait & sent in my name & this lady Miss Oliver came to me & said "I can put you up, for "they" leave tomorrow at 4.30 a.m.". I was a bit staggered at this but supposed Bertie was better or had suddenly taken a dislike of the place—but then Faith came and said, "Don't you know? He *went last night*". & by her look I knew he was dead. She said, "do you want to see him. I expect not." I said, "Certainly I *do*!" So she took me into a room up one flight—Room 1 or 3 in this ordinary house & there was a sheet on a bed & a form with a handkerchief over its face. Faith kept hanging back & indeed she couldn't bear to see him & this was the last time she ever did. So I took off the handkerchief & *it was not Bertie at all!* I can't tell you the change. His whole face was thinner smaller and as it were withered & he had the beginnings of a black beard and his cheeks were so thin that it was as if he had a slight frail oval face, his hair darkish & very short. In fact to tell you the honest truth though I've told this to none but my secret diary he looked like *Walter Shirley* & not in the remotest way like our Bertie. I kissed his forehead three times & made a sign on it and uttered my usual prayer more optimistic than the church's "eternal rest, eternal peace"—"Rise to Immortality & Intense Happiness!" but Faith's being there at the back of the room made me reluctant to stay & indeed soon she made a sign for me to put the handkerchief back for she seemed unable to touch Bertie or draw near—& I hardly wonder; though seeing him daily she couldn't have felt the shock of the change as I did. I got

the feeling that his *whole* personality was in our memory of him as he was and in the impact of his character on everybody and *in his work* & that all this made a strong and emphatic "Bertie"—his real identity—that had succeeded in escaping & throwing off or shedding this ghastly husk which was not he at all. I had a wierd feeling of well not exactly hostility but not piety or reverence for this husk or shell that had totally ceased to have the remotest connection with Bertie & I felt strongly strengthened in my preference of the old Homeric way of *cremation & Urn-Burial* as if in the ashes or *over* the ashes there wd hover the pure & liberated & still active spirit of our brother—that must now be rushing away from this simulacrum—this ghastly misleading mask! It made me feel *heathen*, in the sense of the old urn-burial and "funeral blazes" as it says in "Hydriotaphia", and just the opposite of that pious tender feeling for the body of your dear one that Pater talks so much about in *Marius*.

This shock & revulsion towards the undying memory of the most *living* spirit & emphatic sturdy character of Bertie—away from the terrible reality made me so grim that not a tear did I shed, nor had a quiver, not the least quiver of the lip to suppress. I felt in an odd way angry & indignant & cold & aloof & very hard & stark & grim.

The death-certificate from the Nursing Home Doctor simply said "Duodenal Ulcer & interior haemorrhage"—but this does not really cover it. Littleton's Doctor Rickett went down at the last and was so disturbed as a scientist by the unknown cause of his death that he begged them to have a Post-Mortem but Miss Oliver refused & Faith (naturally enough) didn't want that nor did Old Littleton whose view was "Bertie's dead, so it's no good! It can't bring him back, to know". It may well be that if he had gone to a *Hospital* & had had an operation and X Rays it *might* have saved him—But I couldn't get a chance to talk to Dr Rickett alone to ask him that. . . . Rickett said he must be regarded as a war-victim and that "he died for his country" as much as if he'd been killed in the war.

\* \* \*

His actual death was very easy for he really died of weakness and loss of blood I think. He said to Faith on Sunday "It is near". She said What do you say? And he said "Will you solve for me this knot? Between the two sides, *for and against*, which will win?" (What do you suppose he meant by that Marian dearest?) And then Faith

said, "I must go & lie down; good-night", and he said, "we shall meet again somehow, somewhere". *Evelyn Powys* a trained nurse and a sweet girl, or woman—*most* wise & tactful—held his hand after that & felt him pressing it: & then all Monday he lay not knowing anyone, till, with Evelyn (his Dorothy's sister) still holding his hand, he died in the evening & she went to tell Faith.

It was strange that long drive with Faith & Evelyn and Bertie in his coffin in a car in front & I could see the coffin thro' the back of the car all the way from Surrey past Winchester to Dorset. I remained cold & hard till we reached the church of a Mr Davies an eccentric clergyman admirer of Bertie near the old Winterbourne Tomson where he had told everyone he wanted to be buried and Gertrude says she wants to be buried there too for he restored this tiny little ruined Norman church with Hardy's money and he had told Mrs Hardy who came to his funeral that he wanted to be buried there and *not* at Montacute. This excellent clergyman-friend of his was waiting for us in *his* church, near the old restored one, and had tressles put in front of the altar ready and the taxi men & the sexton carried him in and laid him down. This was about 9 o'clock or 9.30 a.m. and this most excellent cleric whose admiration for Bertie knew no limit held a little private extempore service for Faith & Evelyn & me all alone behind the coffin & read out of the Revelations that passage about building the New Jerusalem in the style of William Blake—and this—for the first time broke me down and I had that sort of sobbing and that feeling of—well! you know what I mean! What Nature's Reality could not do—that old poetry did—lifted the whole thing a little back and up and away into the long riddle & hope against hope of all the generations. "And I John saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I John saw the holy city—the New Jerusalem . . . and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes & there shall be no more death or sorrow or crying neither shall there be any more pain . . . and he measured the wall thereof and the building of the wall was of jasper and the city was pure gold like unto clear glass and the twelve gates were twelve pearls and I saw no temple therein for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it and the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon—and the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day for there shall be no night there . . ."

After that long wierd drive behind Bertie's coffin now resting in front of us—these old

poetical words did quite break me down & that heathen & grim Homeric temper melted.

Then we all drove to Sherborne leaving Bertie there—& Mabel put up Faith & Evelyn to look after her in one room & gave me her own private upstairs sitting room to sleep in having borrowed two small extra beds from Mrs Carey. and I went a walk round by Milborne Port or Osborne way—for old Littleton was not yet strong enough to accompany me tho' *he* is ever so much better and I found the first celandines, only two little buds. I walked and walked like Father after Nelly's death!

Theodore came to the funeral in that little church; and first Faith & I & then later Old Littleton chose—independently—exactly the same spot for the grave outside the south wall of the little building. Lucy came alone in a taxi. I talked a lot to her—and she begged to be let go back alone to Wimborne to go and be alone awhile in the Wimborne church. That little church of Winterbourne Tomson had *high pews* and they were all crowded. In the front with others was Faith & Evelyn & Mrs Hardy & Littleton & Mabel & in the second Bertie's Society people and in the third Gertrude & Lucy & Mr Marks (Isobel's time for her new child is too near for her to come) and the gardener from Montacute House and behind Theodore & Alyse & Bernie & the great nephew of old Drayton who buried

Nelly & Mr Taunton of Montacute. Katie & Lulu did not come. Lulu has *not yet* begun to walk & the shock of Bertie's death has upset him & Katie couldn't bear to be there & anyway someone had to be with Lulu. Theodore hurried off to drive with Alyse back afterwards but Gertrude stayed to take Mr Marks back to Chydyok; for that Jewish temperament (which we know so well from ourselves!) broke *him* down and Gertrude had to hold his arm.

Then they all went (including Faith) to the Crown Inn in Blandford for tea—for Bertie's admirers had come from *Cornwall & Norfolk & all over England*—for they had put the place & time of burial in the Obituary in the papers—& Old Littleton felt it was wrong to let them go who had come so far—& *I talked to Bernie there for an hour.*

Well! I must stop now. I have thought (you can believe) what *you* out there will be feeling. Well I don't forget 'ee, my friend among women—you know that! Your faithful bad-good camerado J. xxx

P.S. My son was being *inducted* into Wiston & *closing up at Oxford* so he couldn't come; but he said he said a Requiem Mass. I had faintly hoped he might have; but it was on the edge of impossible!

## L. A. POWYS

A Poem for his Father, John Cowper Powys on his Birthday, 8 October, 1948

Whether the wind had slain it or the stars  
Or the cold snow or banks of trodden grass  
Bordering white roads upon the chalky hills  
Or tides of rivers salted by the sea  
I know not, only felt along my bones  
Some substance of me die within the womb  
That carried me and clothed me with being.

Rocklike thyself, thou who hast gotten me  
Stand by the high rocks where the ravens call  
And in some secret confluence of the hills  
Cry out and shout to the encircling air  
What we have known, a love that laughs at  
death;

And on the edge of the Before and After  
Have lived and loved and smelt the mossy places  
Splashing through pools on muddy mountain  
paths.

Cry out the prayer! and let your lone voice  
rumble

Over the mountains, that the silence after  
May hold it there living though now unheard;  
A sound unheard as of the earth's own motion  
Or of the sunbeams lighting on the stones  
Forever unheard yet forever there.

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# T. J. Diffey

## John Cowper Powys: Some Thoughts about his Imagination\*

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People drawn to John Cowper Powys quite often make sharp distinctions between the various kinds of book that he wrote. Some read the novels but have no interest in his philosophical works. Others prize his philosophy but do not care for his fiction. Speaking for myself, I find John Cowper exciting in all his forms: novels, philosophy, autobiography, poetry, literary criticism, letters, and can never have enough of his writings whatever their form. If our eye is on making the best critical case for John Cowper, perhaps it will not do to plump for all his work in this indiscriminating manner, but in this talk I am less concerned to make critical judgements and more interested in setting out a few impressions of what I find striking in his writings and some reflections which those impressions generate.

The first impression I have is of John Cowper's identifiable presence or voice in everything that he writes, everything at any rate apart from the space fiction of his old age. Now in our time critical theory has made strenuous efforts to distance the work of art from its creator, indeed to shoo off the artist altogether. But when it comes to John Cowper, these hard-won distinctions between the artist and the art seem irrelevant. There seems to be no significant break between his life and his art. This has not come about by chance for it was John Cowper's intention to put himself in his books.<sup>1</sup>

For one thing, he refuses to claim his work is art. "To the devil with 'art'! . . . My writings—novels and all—are simply so much propaganda, as effective as I can make it, for my philosophy of life."<sup>2</sup> When he was writing *A Glastonbury Romance* he said in a

letter to Llewelyn, "I am anyway no artist; but rather a Stonehenge Bard of Interminable Prose-Narrative . . . The Wanderer relegates Art to the minor place in his life."<sup>3</sup> According to John Cowper, "it is possible for a responsive and sympathetic reader to know at once for an absolute certainty . . . *where* and *where not* the author's personal thoughts are revealed, his personal feelings exposed, his intimate prejudices betrayed."<sup>4</sup> Here he is taking issue with "a certain type of Smart-Alec intelligence, sometimes with an academic degree" which "tells you that it is absurd to attribute to Homer . . . the ideas set forward by Odysseus . . . because the spokesmen of these ideas are merely dramatic personae, not only uttering nothing in the least coincident with what the author himself holds, but often uttering ideas in direct contradiction to what the author holds."<sup>5</sup> It is interesting, by the way, that John Cowper should here stress *the presentation of ideas* as being what the role, or a role, of characters in literature is.

An illustration of the continuity of his life and writing, of his refusal to sacrifice his imagination to his art, a refusal which the hostile critic must find sentimental, is nicely brought out in a letter he wrote to Llewelyn while composing *Wolf Solent*:

I think it is not that I take my people seriously enough, but so seriously that I can't bring myself to sacrifice them in cold blood to an artistic finale, unless I were heroic enough to be prepared—if you catch my meaning—for such a suicide or for such a tragic end myself. I have a scruple about making my characters (for the sake of a dramatic role) go through what (D. V.) I trust I shall have cunning and luck to avoid myself!<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis that I'm putting on the continuity of John Cowper's life and art is an

\*A paper read to the Powys Society, 1983

old-fashioned way of thinking about literature, and that will be the tendency of this talk—to go back: to go back to literature before romanticism; back to the philosophy of mind before Kant and Coleridge; back to the aesthetics of the late nineteenth century, the time of Powys's young manhood. I see in everything that Powys wrote a personality expressing, not of course abstract thought for the sake of thought, but communicating what it is to achieve and to live a philosophy of life; and I take seriously what were commonplace ideas about style when John Cowper was a young man. In one of his last letters to Llewelyn, John wrote:

The truth is there are in these days a great many very well meaning gravely virtuous anti-Fascists who are entirely wanting in the old-fashioned love of literary style in which the two Domes were brought up: and I am emboldened to add, not a little lacking in any strong response to old-fashioned poetry.

You see your style is the person, the character, the opinions, the be-all and the end-all here, but here, upon this bank and shoal of time.<sup>7</sup>

The chief impression that John Cowper's own style leaves, for all his self-deprecation that he is a windbag and no artist, is of extraordinary flexibility combined with precision and exactness. His sentences, however long, sinuous, flowing and fluid, are never vague, messy or imprecise. The style works to capture states of consciousness that may themselves seem vague, imprecise, at the margins of intelligibility, and this is because the language of our daily transactions is not fashioned for discriminating and savouring the psychic enjoyments John Cowper puts at the centre of reality. But his style itself is in no way vague; it is as precise as the champions of modern poetics, such as Pound and Eliot, themselves could wish. Indeed what energizes John Cowper's writing is the combination of a perfectly definite style, rational, unhurried, of much dignity, placed in the service of what, by common-sense standards, are perceptions at the margins of socially sanctioned consciousness. His definite style charts these margins with a remarkable speculative freedom.

Powys's imagination tends to be solipsistic; that is, his characters are real to themselves, in the end alone as independent centres of consciousness. His imagination is mistrustful of the social. He does not care for society, whether one means this in the restricted and older sense of higher social class—see for example his treatment of Mrs. Shotover in *After My Fashion*—or whether by society one means something more comprehensive, as denoting the entire matrix within which we live, which defines us and which determines our perception of what is real. Society does not create our reality; our own imagination does that and we can with practice escape the trammels of society. Powys's emphasis on the reality of individual consciousness makes him an idealist in the derogatory sense of that term that Marxists use when they want to be abusive. To say that Powys is in this sense an idealist is to say that he takes the consciousness of the individual as fundamental, that is, as prior to and independent of economic structure and social class. Only his minor characters are social types. His major characters live as it were in repudiation of Marx's law that "The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness."<sup>8</sup>

A good way of emphasizing the anti-social nature of Powys's imagination is to contrast what a worldly mind such as that of the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume thinks are the human virtues with the characters that people a Powys novel. Hume<sup>9</sup> admires discretion, industry—for that helps in the acquisition of power and fortune,—spirit, dignity, proper pride, wit and conversation. "Among well-bred people", Hume says, "a mutual deference is affected; contempt of others disguised; authority concealed; attention given to each in his turn; and an easy stream of conversation maintained".<sup>10</sup> I introduce this merely as an example of the kind of 'men-of-the-world-values' that Powys and his characters

are in flight from. Of conversation, for example, John Cowper once said: "The art of conversation is an odious nuisance to me, —as disagreeable as cards;—and how any intelligent person can prefer it to reading a book, or indulging in a flirtation, I cannot conceive".<sup>11</sup>

The most interesting contrast, however, between Hume's conception of personal merit and the kind of character Powys imagines, is to be had from Hume's attempt to construct a theory of human virtues which is not warped or distorted, as Hume sees it, by religion. Religion of course is Hume's code word for Christianity; his idea is that Christianity has warped natural human virtue.

And as every quality which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? . . . A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself.<sup>12</sup>

I'm not suggesting that Powys endorses this whole train of monkish virtues. He is as strongly against puritanical denial of the body as Hume, but there is no denying that much that Hume's "men of sense" would reject commands John Cowper's allegiance and imagination. Exactly that which does *not* advance a man in the world or make him useful to society is what interests Powys in his fictional characters. Like Hume, on the other hand, he *is* interested in what fosters self-enjoyment, though the answer he gives in terms of the solitary cultivation of sensation to the question of what does foster

self-enjoyment is vastly different from Hume's essentially social vision of human life.

Indeed one of the threats to self-enjoyment, as Powys sees it, is precisely this setting up of ethical standards or ideals by philosophers such as Hume. Powys decries all dogmatic pronouncements about what life *ought* to be, for wherever philosophers, preachers and leaders dogmatise about what life must be like and what the good is, a class of failures and misfits is thereby defined, namely those who can't or won't live up to the supposed good that is championed. In fact it may be suggested that John Cowper's imagination is at its most powerful when its subject is failure; he is repelled by success. The exploration of failure is the master theme of *Wolf Solent*; Rook Ashover in *Ducdame* meditates on how little the struggle for success, achievement, matter: "Better, far better, to live harmlessly in some quiet untroubled place, watching season follow season . . . aloof and detached" (p. 301); in the earlier *Wood and Stone* the theme is handled in terms of a Nietzschean distinction between the well-constituted and the ill-constituted or pariah persons of this world. Hume's vision of the good is a typical vision of the well-constituted. John Cowper, on the other hand, writes for and takes himself to be one of the ill-constituted, one whose weaknesses unfit him for coping with the world's ways. This is not a pose but it is a paradox, for John Cowper himself seems to have won through to an extraordinary sanity, balance and productiveness that is scarcely the mark of an ill-constituted in defeat. It is as if John Cowper himself cannot be located in the psychological dichotomy of *Wood and Stone*, however obvious it is initially that his starting point is himself and the question of psychological adjustment to the world, which is in its typical social aspects alien. This brings us to the vexed question of reality and escapism.

Powys describes story telling in these terms: "if it transports us safely out of the real world, if it heals us and drugs us and anaesthetises us, if it sets us dreaming, it has

served the most important purpose of art, it has drowned us in the kindly waves of illusion!"<sup>13</sup> He attacks philosophers "and even the poets" for trying to convert us to their visions, the sort of thing that I quoted from Hume.

They want to make us moral or immoral. They want to thrust their mysticism, their materialism, their free love, or their imprisoned thoughts, down our reluctant throats.

But the great novelists are up to no such mischief; they are dreaming of no such outrage. They are telling their stories of the old eternal dilemmas.<sup>14</sup>

When John Cowper says in the *Confessions of Two Brothers*: "My whole life has been one long running away",<sup>15</sup> I assume that this includes and also guides his writing and reading of fiction. This gives rise to at least three questions. First, is it right that John Cowper's fiction is escapist; secondly, is art revelatory of reality and therefore not escapist; or, and this is my third question, can there be escapist art? To begin with the last question, the poet W. H. Auden says, "There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach a man to unlearn hatred and learn love".<sup>16</sup> It is quite unusual to find writers on art after the Romantics making provision, as Auden does here, for a category of escape-art. The emphasis placed on art as imagination by the Romantics and their successors has inclined us to think that escapist-art is a self-contradiction. It is more often assumed that entertainment or amusement is the means of escape and that amusement should be distinguished from the work of the imagination in serious art. The philosopher of art, R. G. Collingwood, for example takes this line. Amusement art, a Hollywood love story for instance, is not real art but works through portraying make-believe situations. These arouse emotions that are then discharged back into the make-believe fantasy. Consequently amusement is hermetically sealed off from the wider fabric of our lives. Amusement constitutes as it were an island of emotion aroused by the

make-believe story merely for the sake of enjoying the emotion.<sup>17</sup> Emotions aroused in amusement are frivolous in the sense that they are not channelled into our practical life, nor do they clarify the emotions as, according to Collingwood, real works of art do. One of the legacies that the Romantics have bequeathed us is a tendency then to distinguish between imagination as amusement, frivolity and make-believe on the one hand, and often called by some other name than imagination, such as fancy, and on the other, imagination as bearing some connection with truth because it is held to be revelatory of reality.

Imagination was not always taken so seriously by writers on art. In his *Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination* Joseph Addison in the eighteenth century observed: "There are, indeed, but very few who know how to be idle and innocent, or have a relish of any pleasures that are not criminal; every diversion they take is at the expense of one virtue or another, and their very first step out of business is into vice or folly. A man should endeavour, therefore, to make the sphere of his innocent pleasures as wide as possible, that he may retire into them with safety, and find in them such a satisfaction as a wise man would not blush to take."<sup>18</sup> John Cowper writes in terms not altogether dissimilar. His account of the imagination has at least as much in common with eighteenth-century pre-Romantic writers as it does with Romantic claims for the imagination, and a good deal more in common with Addison than, say, Coleridge. I have already drawn attention to the phrase from the 1923 *Art of Happiness* about storytelling transporting us safely out of the real world; and in a passage in *100 Best Books* with Addisonian references to innocence, and which sets its face against Romantic claims for the imagination—what I'm tempted to call the German high seriousness view of imagination of Kant, Coleridge, Schiller and the idealists that followed them in aesthetic speculation—John Cowper says this:

Our 'One Hundred Best Books' need not be

yours, nor yours ours; the essential thing is that in this brief interval between darkness and darkness, which we call our life, we should be thrillingly and passionately amused; innocently, if so it can be arranged—and what better than books lends itself to that?—and harmlessly, too, let us hope, God help us, but at any rate, amused, for the only unpardonable sin is the sin of taking this passing world too gravely. Our treasure is not here; it is in the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom of heaven is Imagination. Imagination! How all other ways of escape from what is mediocre in our tangled lives grow pale beside that high and burning star!<sup>19</sup>

Is John Cowper's art "escape-art" in Auden's sense then? One can't be sure, because although Auden allows the category of escape-art he does not stay to define it. I think, however, that the answer is no. John Cowper's art is not merely escapist, for all his genuine praise and attachment to the theme of escape and his own emotional need for it. First, the passage I have just quoted goes on to suggest that there is something more to imagination than amusement: "With Imagination to help us we can make something of our days, something of the drama of this confused turmoil, and perhaps, after all—who can tell?—there is more in it than mere 'amusement'. Once and again, as we pause in our reading, there comes a breath, a whisper, a rumor, of something else; of something over and above that 'eternal now' which is the wisest preoccupation of our passion, but not wise are those who would seek to confine this fleeting intimation within the walls of reason or of system."<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, John Cowper takes a more complicated view of escape than I've suggested in my tendency to identify escape with amusement. Escape is not the trifling matter I may have made it seem: "The underlying purpose of everybody's life is twofold", John Cowper Powys says, "an intensification of life, and an escape from life, and these two are really one."<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, the attack on amusement by writers such as Collingwood elides amusement with unreality, with unreal emotions,

unreal situations, make-believe. One can see why escape through amusement has come under attack: the stern moralist will say that you should stand and face your problems, not run away from them into a world of make-believe, of pretence. And the stern critic will say that the idea that imagination in art drugs or anaesthetizes the mind degrades art and is offensive, for, on the contrary, art enhances perception and is revelatory of reality not an escape from it. However, the escape that art offers, Powys points out, is not achieved *merely* by running away:

Art . . . is an eternal escape from actuality; but the strange thing is that it does not become this escape until it has taken up into itself the very sting and tang and cobra-poison of the actuality it spurns.

This is the everlasting contradiction; and all aesthetic criticism hovers wavering at this cross-road. Art creates a new world through which we move at our leisure in large forgetfulness; but in creating this world it must use . . . no other materials than those provided by Nature and by human nature!<sup>22</sup>

But above all, the reason we cannot conclude that Powys's fiction is escapist art is that we do not respond to it as if it were. I will come back to this point.

If Powys's fiction is not escapist art, does it belong to the other category Auden offers, parable art? The answer to this has, I think, also to be no. Parable art teaches us to unlearn hatred just as Freudian psychotherapy does, by drawing the patient towards an understanding and acceptance of himself. The reference to Freud is not fanciful here since Auden puts forward his distinction between parable and escape art in an essay devoted to showing how Freud has deepened our understanding of art and the artist. There are two notions, then, at the centre of Auden's idea of parable art: love and Freudianism. Powys was sceptical about both. He often wrote sceptically about love: about its entanglement with power, cruelty and religion and about the superiority of kindness to love in human dealings. And unlike Auden, Powys did not admire Freud. Indeed about Freud Powys has considerable

reservations and the exploration of these would make an interesting study in its own right.

Here I can make only one or two brief points. Powys acknowledged our "incalculable debt to Freud and his followers in ridding us of the vicious idealism of the Christian idea that sensual pleasure is wicked" but he was wary of Freudian catchwords for spoiling "the romance of our erotic life".<sup>23</sup> And he said, "as pupil of Dostoevsky rather than of Freud, I believe in a much deeper power of diving into our soul on the part of our conscious mind than it is the fashion to attribute to it."<sup>24</sup>

Certainly when I read John Cowper I have little sense of his novels as backed by forces of the unconscious. Everything seems rather to be on the surface, a theme I'll come back to. It is as if in John Cowper, memory replaces the unconscious as the source of power, reparation and renewal.

In the essay on "Psychology and Art Today" from which I have taken Auden's ideas of escape art and parable art, Auden gives prominence to the famous remarks made by Freud about the artist in the Introductory lectures. The artist, Freud says, has not far to go to become neurotic. He turns away from reality and creates the wishes of his life in art; this creation is important not only for himself but also for his audience, for the artist can draw on springs of fantasy which bring comfort and consolation to the audience, consolation which is ordinarily barred to the non-artist. For people who are not artists, Freud says, are in the grip of inexorable repressions which prevent the enjoyment of all but the most meagre day dreams which can become conscious. There is something here that Powys agrees with: namely the idea that art brings comfort and consolation. But Powys would not care for Freud's insistence that the artist finds the way back to reality. He does so, according to Freud, by opening "out to others the way back to the comfort and consolation of their own unconscious sources of pleasure, and so reaps their gratitude and admiration; then he has won—through the phantasy—

what before he could only win in phantasy: honour, power, and the love of women."<sup>25</sup>

My own view is that Powys would reject Freud's assumptions here about what reality is. According to Freud, what the artist wants but can't have, at any rate not until he has won them through his art, are the things that the well-constituted of this world want and get—honour, power, fame, riches and the love of women. In other words, Freud is interested in success and in success stories. Powys is not. Freud's definition of reality is that of the well-constituted. Powys is the better philosopher in that he regards reality not as something unproblematically known but as an open question to be explored. And I have already suggested that Powys's imagination is fired by the weak and the rejected, by misfits and pariahs. He does not value success or getting on, but nor in exploring the nature of the ill-constituted does he portray a prettified or sanitized world. He has no wish, as say William Morris does in *News from Nowhere*, to present a world where there is no failure or weakness. Rather his fictional worlds in which his characters—too thin-skinned and ill adjusted to live—are harried by themselves and others, are explorations of weaknesses held up to our contemplative gaze. In Freudian terminology, though emphatically this is *not* how Powys himself would put it, it is as if Powys is interested in documenting or exploring the neurosis, not in its cure. Indeed it is clear in John Cowper's writings that no system, Freudianism, Marxism or whatever, can ever solve all our problems and that in any conceivable state of life human beings will always have their troubles. The supreme philosophical question for Powys therefore is how a man or woman might live with his or her troubles without these robbing existence of enjoyment and happiness. This provides one of the strongest motives for Powys's questioning of the nature of reality: for very often it is precisely that conception of reality that is current in a society that robs a person of his happiness. This reality seems to be all that there is, but then so much the worse for any

person excluded from the socially sanctioned vision of the real. Powys's own reply to all-spokesmen for reality, of whom Freud is merely one of the more recent, who say: 'this is what there is', is to whisper to himself and others: 'and there is something more too'.

I have suggested then that far from accepting any definition of reality a good deal of John Cowper's writing is devoted to raising the question, what is reality, or if you like, to not taking reality as something given but treating it as something problematic. Of course, he begins (and ends) with a few unwaveringly held convictions: a hatred of cruelty, a belief in personal liberty of a kind which he honourably shares with the classical liberals such as John Stuart Mill, and a love of imagination. Now our first supposition about the imagination is generally to contrast imagination with reality. The result is that imagination becomes identified with unreality, and for many kinds of philosophical mind unreality means falsity, triviality, childishness or whimsy, and I dare say lots of other evils too. One response to this is to insist that, on the contrary, imagination in art, when properly understood, is revelatory of reality, not the antithesis to it. This is what I call the German high seriousness view of imagination, though one doesn't have to be German to subscribe to it. In England Coleridge is a good example of a follower of it and more recently Iris Murdoch. She sees the imagination in art as a corrective to our self-pitying failure to see the world as it is because of our escape into our own make-believe fantasies. Art, far from being escapist fantasy, counterposes it. Freud too belongs to the high serious party, for, as we have seen, he thinks that the artist gets back to reality whereas the uncured neurotic is forever lost from it.

Now John Cowper shares with German high seriousness their veneration for the imagination, but he does not share their philosophical account of imagination. His account of the imagination works through questioning the nature of that reality with which imagination is usually contrasted, to

the detriment of imagination. John Cowper does not belong to the German high seriousness party because that party, although serious about imagination, is also desperately serious about reality. John Cowper is not: about reality he is irreverent and unlike the Germans thoroughly sceptical. And scepticism is a thing the German metaphysicians are very bad at. The British are better. What I have suggested then is that many thinkers have criticized imagination because they say it traffics in unrealities. Other thinkers, especially the German idealists, have defended imagination against this charge by arguing that imagination, far from dealing in the unreal, gives us, through imaginative art, the best insight we can have into reality. John Cowper thinks the imagination is supreme, so he disagrees with rationalist philosophers who attack it; but unlike the German idealists, he holds no brief for reality. His method of justifying imagination is to call into question that reality which is usually contrasted with imagination to the discredit of imagination. Admittedly he *could* write in despair at the victory of reality over imagination. This is what his poem "At A Grave" in *Wolf's Bane* is about:

For Imagination's dead,  
And her body, strewn with balm,  
Lieth lovely in its bed,  
Safe from any further harm.

Deep they drink, the rabble-rout,  
Of reality's dull lees.  
'Give us life and truth!' they shout;  
'Give us freedom; give us ease!'

And she lieth in her place,  
Fair and terrible and cold,  
Graved upon her marble face  
All the lines of sorrow old.

And reality and truth—  
Hideous monsters—howl and rage,  
Lapping up the sweat of youth,  
Draining down the tears of age.<sup>26</sup>

But this is not typical of his considered attitude towards reality, which is well caught in his book, *The Meaning of Culture*:

What this act of scepticism implies, with reality, is the rejection, of a very curious malady of the human conscience, namely the notion that one ought to accept what is offered by life, at its face-value. Not at all! It is the privilege of the solitary stoical soul to re-create such reality according to its own secret will; its privilege to make a clean sweep of what it has decided shall be irrelevant; its privilege to live surrounded by the essences of the exclusive universe of its choice. And, be it noted, this exclusive world, wherein the stoical soul obstinately wills to live, is not in any sense the mystical 'over-world' of oriental philosophy. It is a world of presences which remain concrete, palpable, circumstantial, material even, although so scrupulously selected!<sup>27</sup>

The same theme is explored in another of Powys's books from the same period, *Wolf Solent*. Of Wolf it is said: "His whole philosophy had been for years and years a deliberately subjective thing. It was one of the fatalities of his temperament that he completely distrusted what is called 'objective truth'. He had come more and more to regard 'reality' as a mere name given to the most lasting and most vivid among all the various impressions of life which each individual experiences".<sup>28</sup> And this is developed later into the subjective idealism of Wolf's declaration: "'I refuse to believe,' he said to himself, 'and I will never believe, until the day Nature kills me, that there's such a thing as 'reality', apart from the mind that looks at it!'"<sup>29</sup> Dostoevsky is considered in not dissimilar terms. His power as a novelist, John Cowper says, "is shown first and last in his understanding of what *real reality* is. The real reality of a person's life is not what they work at but what goes on in their mind."<sup>30</sup>

John Cowper's tendency then is to widen our sense of reality so that it centrally includes the contents of our own minds: fancies, day-dreams, illusions. He is also includes the contents of our own minds: fancies, day-dreams, illusions. He is also the single-minded pursuit of truth by philosophers and scientists at the expense of everything else. I see it as a major theme in

Powys's writing to reassure people who fear imagination because they think that it distorts the truth. It is perhaps a common fear which keeps us in thrall to a fanatical servitude to fact, and this at the cost of enjoyment and happiness. We are afraid to make more desirable worlds in imagination because such worlds can only be false illusions. The force of John Cowper's writing, however, is to make this fear of illusion seem absurd. To destroy illusions and live free of them is the aim of all rationalist philosophers. We must be disabused of our illusions and grow up; this is the message of all realists and all rationalists, including Freud. But to make this war on illusion, Powys suggests, is itself to be in the power of an illusion itself more fantastic and more formidable than many of the illusions that belong to his fictional characters. Indeed a good title for a book of Powysian philosophy would be 'In Praise of Illusion'. Powys's idea of the life-illusion is only the most conspicuous example of his understanding of the necessity of illusion.

It is not surprising then that Powys is not among Freud's admirers. For one thing Freud explores depths—psychoanalysis is sometimes called depth-psychology—but Powys's imagination is much engaged with surface. It is as if everything in his books is revealed, as an open secret. Intellectually I believe that Powys detested mystery, for all the druidical, alchemical and occult side we may associate with him. Romance he loved but not I think mystification. At any rate this sense of surface that I find in him is one of the reasons why, for all the vast differences, I come back to affinities between John Cowper and the ideas and sensibilities of the pre-Romantic eighteenth-century writers.

He wrote in *Suspended Judgements*:

I hold the view that in the larger aspects of the creative imagination there is room for many free margins and for many materials that are not slavishly symbolic. I protest from my heart against this tyrannous 'artistic conscience' which insists that every word 'should tell' and every object and person referred to be of 'vital importance' in the evolution of the 'main theme'.

I maintain that in the broad canvas of a nobler, freer art there is ample space for every kind of digression and by-issue.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis on digression here is as much backward-looking, to Fielding say, as it is forward-looking; indeed it looks back more to the loose prose epics of the eighteenth-century than forward to the tight sensibilities of the twentieth-century poetic modernists.

“Mature and civilised man”, Louis MacNeice said, “is concerned with the surface”.<sup>32</sup> John Cowper is less high minded, perhaps, but an interest in surface runs unmistakably through his work. In the *Confessions of Two Brothers* he declared:

But though my vices are on the surface, they are not the less imperious. It is on the surface that I ‘live and move and have my being’. It is on the surface that I lead my queer subjective life of sense-impressions,—that life from which my errant reason is continually escaping.<sup>33</sup>

Surface is the subject of the poem “Eternity” in *Mandragora*.

Eternity is a wind-blown husk  
And fools run after it;  
And when a sand-storm brings the dusk,  
They call it the infinite.

On the surface—the surface—is Beauty found,  
And the surface of life goes deep;  
For where it is lost in the underground,  
We sleep—we sleep—we sleep.

There is nothing else but the surface of life,  
Nor ever was nor will be!  
—Except the sleep that endeth life;  
And may that fall gently on me!<sup>34</sup>

John Cowper praises Post-Impressionism (Ralph Dangelis in *Wood and Stone* is a Post-Impressionist painter): it “has a fine barbaric sense of the splendid magic of the surface of things—that surface of things where I habitually live”.<sup>35</sup> Nelly in *After My Fashion* thinks: “How peculiar men are! Everything seems on the surface with them . . . I suppose their surface is the same as their depth. I suppose they’re all surface”.<sup>36</sup>

Wolf Solent exclaims: “It’s absurd to talk of souls being inside things! They’re *always* on the outside! They’re the glamour of things . . . the magic . . . the bloom . . . the breath.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most interesting are the lines in the middle of Taliessin’s litany:

The centre of all things, yet all on the surface,  
The secret of Nature, yet Nature goes  
blabbing it.<sup>38</sup>

For all John Cowper’s scepticism about reality, and his regard for “kindly” illusion, it should be observed, however, that he can be critical of unreality too. Several passages in his writings suggest that he is not especially respectful of the unreal. About the emotions, for example, he wrote to Llewelyn:

I refuse to obey any aesthetic rules or moral rules or philosophic rules as to my life. If Nature has made certain emotions wonderful to me, well then, let her justify me! She’ll see to it that they don’t cheapen or vulgarise anything. What cheapens and vulgarises is the untrue, the unreal, the false, the conventional, and it would be false and conventional for me to try to pose as a cynical and worldly wise philosopher. To hell with philosophy and with cynicism! They are not everything.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of *The Complex Vision* John Cowper enunciates the law of life: “that what we contemplate, *that* we become. He who contemplates malice becomes malicious. He who contemplates hideousness becomes hideous. He who contemplates unreality becomes unreal”.<sup>40</sup> Now what is so striking about Powys himself from a reading of his letters and other writings is the reality of his personality. Evidently he was a good and decent man with a marked sense of justice and who lived not by watchwords, lip service and professed ideals but by kindness, an unusual sensitivity to the feelings of other people and conscience. He seems to have acted out of direct sympathy for people caught up in the cruelties of life or oppressed by its burdens.

In no sense then are his letters the letters of a man who has so far retreated into the unreality of make-believe that he has no

understanding of the realities of his own situation and of the world he lived-in. On the contrary, for a canny shrewd eye on what was going on in the world I should trust John Cowper before almost any other writer of his time. His gaze did not miss much in the little tricks and ways of humanity. Note too that his political and moral convictions bear scrutiny in a way that Eliot's and Pound's, say, do not. I have heard literary critics express sorrow over the fact that the leading writers in English literature this century, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, were illiberal and anti-democratic. But of course modern literary history is distorted by its failure to acknowledge another of its leading writers, John Cowper. To recognise him would be to modify the illiberality the critics regret.

I am not suggesting Powys's moral decency makes him a good or great writer but merely that this fact about him shows that he was not overwhelmed by the unreal. I said that he was sceptical about reality and now I seem to be saying that he did not surrender to unrealities. I believe both statements to be true and do not think that there is a contradiction here; I think, though Powys would not have put it like this, that he was a sceptic in theory but not practice. By this I mean that his tenderness towards illusion and his suspicion of rationalist truth did not apply to conscience and moral conviction. He speaks somewhere of the reality of conscience and towards its dictates displayed an unsophisticated obedience worthy of his father. He is sceptical about claims to know all that there is, but not sceptical towards the necessity of helping fellow creatures in distress. I must be careful, however, not to exaggerate. I'm not suggesting that Powys was some rather pious or incredible saint, merely that he seems to have had a strong and unsophisticated sense of duty. Indeed one way to correct this rather saintly portrait of him that is threatening to emerge here is to remind ourselves of his dislike of *all* action in so far as it could be avoided, and his love of contemplation. This brings us squarely back to our topic of imagination.

Powys calls the imagination anarchical and irresponsible. By "irresponsible" he means more than "failing in responsibility"; rather his point is that the concept of responsibility applies to action not to imagination. To imagine is not to act and therefore not to be responsible. Thus Powys thinks of imagination, contemplation, time spent free of action as it were, as "irresponsible". In *Ducdame* for example, the word is used in this sense. After Corporal Dick has fired at but failed to hit Netta Page, Powys writes:

If only she *had* been hit, how lovely to die just here; especially if Rook came to find her when she was dead! It was with a queer detached observation, almost as if she had been an *irresponsible onlooker* instead of a muffled-up white-faced woman kneeling in the snow, that she watched the tall form of Corporal Dick emerge from the bushes.<sup>41</sup>

It is part of John Cowper's "life-illusion" that he is the irresponsible onlooker. The word is also found in philosophical usage that confirms John Cowper's sense. In an influential article in philosophical aesthetics Sir Stuart Hampshire says of the critic: "he is a mere spectator and he has the spectator's total irresponsibility; it is only required that he should see the object exactly as it is".<sup>42</sup>

The point is worth stressing because in ordinary usage "irresponsible" is used to censure failures in or of responsibility, cases where a responsible action is called for; but in Powys's sense imagination is exempt from responsibility because outside the sphere of action altogether. The term occurs several times in *Ducdame* as well as in other works by Powys. A particularly interesting example, because it trades on the ideas of memory and association, which are fundamental to Powys's imagination, occurs when Rook and Cousin Ann set out for the Drools's house:

The touch of his cousin's cold cheek, the familiar associations aroused in him by the smell of the Irish-tweed jacket she wore, as they leant together against one of those rough tree trunks, plunged him into the irresponsible security of remembered things.<sup>43</sup>

No doubt John Cowper undertook action when he had to, but by temperament and inclination he confesses that his preference was for contemplation, and thus for the irresponsible imagination rather than action.

I am naturally averse to any kind of drastic action. In fact I dislike all action, whether drastic or otherwise. My atavistic reversion, if we all do really have so quaint a thing, is towards the passive, rather than the predatory world. I suppose my ideal existence, out of the human circle, would be that of some happy iridescent jelly-fish, expanding its sunlit body in placid warmth at the bottom of a rock-pool, hurting nothing and being hurt by nothing—and living entirely for sensation. Apart from the jelly-fish, I find the life of a Prairie-Bison a very desirable one . . .

This singular reluctance on my part to strike out and mould . . . my own life, is connected I fancy with every one of my profoundest instincts. I cannot endure the idea of giving people violent jerks and blows. I cannot endure the effort, the action, the dealing with material difficulties, that such movements require. I long for things to change; but to change things one has to have the energetic will-power of a demiurge and there is absolutely nothing demiurgic about me. I like the sensation of being 'created'. I do not at all like the responsibility of 'creation'. I am always sceptical too, about any change.<sup>44</sup>

Later he says: "I was born for sensations rather than for action. I was born to enjoy sensations, to analyze sensations, and turn sensations into verbal and literary rhetoric".<sup>45</sup>

The attachment to contemplation is of course no passing fancy in Powys. He continued to regard it as fundamental. In the 1935 version of *The Art of Happiness* for example:

This momentary sinking away from the whole world of action into a complete relaxation of body and mind, and into an hypnotic stare upon any little object within sight, can become, when you set to work to cultivate it, not only an important act of awareness of the deeper life-flow, but a most comforting and healing refreshment.<sup>46</sup>

I have suggested then that John Cowper's fiction is not parable art because it does not

have the double commitment, perhaps in the end they are one, to love and reality, which I have taken as central to Auden's concept of parable art. But I have suggested too that John Cowper's fiction is not merely escapist art either, for all his own attachment to thoughts of escape and dislike of the will and of action. My reason for denying that John Cowper's fiction is merely escapist is simple: we do not find ourselves treating his fiction as if it were mere escape. We do not respond to it as if it were mere make-believe done to titillate the emotions; indeed one may wonder how central the business of emotion is at all to understanding Powys. He projects, or sees himself as projecting, a cool Saurian detachment and I have stressed his leisurely ample preoccupation with surface. One feels with John Cowper that something more formidable than pure make-believe or mere illusion is afoot. Part of that 'something more', I have suggested, is an imaginative campaign by John Cowper to make us more sceptical of reality and more hospitable to illusion than my phrase 'mere illusion' suggests, or than our philosophical traditions allow. A good example of what I mean about John Cowper's attitude to illusion occurs in *Ducdame* in the comment the narrator makes about Rook Ashover during his conversation with William Hastings in his search for Netta Page:

It was as if 'the still small voice' of the very planet we live upon, when, in the absence of wind or storm, it makes itself felt from its inmost interior integrity, were saturated with some irremediable ultimate evasion. It was as though this old protean universe, when once you reached its native inherent character beneath all its masks and transformations, had its own secretive life illusion, its own eternal magic-bestowing falsehood, from which the subterfuges and equivocations of the human race drew living nourishment.<sup>47</sup>

And this passage is as good an example as any why we do not, cannot, treat John Cowper as mere entertainment, mere escape. His novels set our minds in motion leading our reflective imagination to ponder on the relationships between people, including the power they exercise over one an-

other, on the earth as our planetary home, on what kind of future mankind is entering upon, what new epoch is in the making. Powys is not then mere entertainment in the sense in which I have been using that term from Collingwood, because although the worlds of his fictions are not our world they do not remain insulated from our world. Weymouth, Glastonbury, Nevilton, Ashover, King's Barton, these worlds are not our world but they have the power to insinuate themselves into our experience of our so-called real world and make it more strange, more dramatic, more—in one of Powys's words—more magical. Or to use another of his words, which not accidentally has been made unusable by the entertainment industry—more glamorous. But what Powys does is not so much create glamorous fictional worlds as imagine worlds which then have reciprocal power over our own experience, entering into the constitution of that experience. On the other hand an account of an indisputable or pure entertainment, such as a television soap opera, which launched into heavy philosophical questions such as the place of truth, or conversely the place of illusion, in human life would be pretentious and not a very good account of the show. But when we read Powys these are the things our imaginations are invited to feast upon.

John Cowper's fiction then is not mere escapism but nor, seriously though he takes the imagination, does he make for imagination the claims that the German metaphysicians and Platonists go in for concerning the essential connection between imagination in art on the one hand and truth or reality on the other. For one thing, there is nothing in John Cowper about the moral seriousness of the imagination. On the contrary, he celebrates, so I've suggested, its irresponsibility. There is a passage in *Wood and Stone* which brings together several of the themes I've suggested, the love of surface, the denial that the imagination is morally serious, the sense of taking a broad and comprehensive gaze at the life of humanity on the planet Earth. It comes when something

is being said about Ralph Dangelis's aims as an artist:

His imaginative purpose, as it defined itself more and more clearly in his mind, during his solitary return through the evening light, seemed to imply an attempted reproduction of those aspects of the human drama, in such a place as this, which carried upon their surface the air of things that could not happen otherwise, and which, in their large inevitableness, over-brimmed and overflowed all traditional distinctions. He would have liked to have given, in this way, to the figures of Gladys and her mother, something of the superb non-moral 'insouciance', springing, like the movements of animals and the fragrance of plants, out of the bosom of an earth innocent of both introspection and renunciation, which one observes in the forms of Attic sculpture, or in the creations of Venetian colourists.<sup>48</sup>

If John Cowper's fiction is not escapist and not parable what is it? To answer this question I have to give yet another negative answer, but one that I regard as fundamental to understanding what John Cowper is doing as a writer: namely he refuses to distinguish imagination and fancy. It was Coleridge who introduced the distinction and it has been influential in English criticism ever since. John Cowper on the other hand not only treats the words 'imagine' and 'fancy' as synonyms<sup>49</sup> but his whole mind operates in such a manner as to show that he would see no significant distinction between imagination and fancy. This is a good example of what I mean by going back in order to understand John Cowper: in this instance we have to go back to what people thought about the imagination before Coleridge introduced his seminal distinction between imagination and fancy.

This is not the place to explain in detail what Coleridge meant by the distinction, if indeed that ever could be done to everybody's full satisfaction. But some things must be said. Coleridge is generally taken as meaning that fancy is trivial and whimsical whereas imagination in poetry is mind working to its fullest capacity such that it gains a virtually religious insight into the moral *and*

metaphysical significance of the universe.<sup>50</sup> Milton for example is a poet who had a highly imaginative mind and the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet Abraham Cowley, Coleridge says, had a very fanciful mind. For poetry of fancy Coleridge gives the example of Otway's line,

Lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of amber,

and for imagination, Shakespeare's,

What! have his daughters brought him to this pass!<sup>51</sup>

The catalogue of things in Otway's fanciful line suggests to me a certain aspect of Powys's imagination, including his imagination at work in his late 'space-fiction' stories. Indeed Coleridge's notion of (despised) fancy may hold the key to these stories. Consider for example the catalogue of "terrestrial milestones" that Oom in *The Mountains of the Moon* has collected "during my long life". These include the Sandal of Mahomet, a crust from one of King Alfred's cakes and the core of the apple that Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>52</sup> But I want to make the wider claim that many of the elements that Coleridge criticises as fancy, criticises because he ranks imagination as a higher power than fancy, are to be found at work in Powys's imagination. Indeed Coleridge's definition of fancy directs us to some of the most central features of Powys's imagination. Coleridge said:

Fancy . . . has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.<sup>53</sup>

"Memory" and "association", words in Coleridge's definition of fancy, are key words in understanding the workings of Powys's imagination. It is inconceivable that John Cowper was not perfectly familiar with Coleridge's distinction; indeed he is not

above using it himself for polemical purposes.<sup>54</sup> I have not, however, come across any direct repudiation of the Coleridgean distinction by John Cowper, though I have found several declarations by him in favour of fancy which in effect set Coleridge's distinction to one side. And, as I have mentioned, Powys's habitual use of "imagination" and "fancy" as synonyms testifies to his seeing no need to make a distinction.

In *Mortal Strife* John Cowper sums up his position well when he describes himself as "being irrational, illogical, and obstinate, imaginative rather than creative; in being fanciful rather than mystical, and in having a fatal tendency to be flippant where a sublime seriousness would seem the only appropriate tone".<sup>55</sup> And instead of plumping for the German high seriousness of Kant and the idealists it comes as no surprise to find John Cowper following another German—Goethe of course. In a poem in *Wolf's Bane*, significantly entitled "To an Idealistic Poet" he sides with Goethe:

O why, dear heart, drag in  
The over-soul—and why  
Must that poor phantom-thing  
They call democracy

Crow in your verse and fly  
Skyward on barn-door wings?  
Each is a lie—a lie!  
And lies are ugly things.

Do you not know—with all your iteration—  
You who have lived so long  
Listening the Muse's song,  
What is the rôle of true Imagination?

Goethe to Eckermann  
Said once;—and he was wise,—  
'Avoid high thought and scan  
Nature with both your eyes.'<sup>56</sup>

Many philosophers, and even idealists who admired imagination, have feared or distrusted fiction. The tendency in philosophy when not damning imagination has been to find it acceptable only if it is made to serve some definite and useful purpose such as the cause of morality. Philosophers try to minimize the place of fiction in human life; Powys reverses the trend. We can live our

own lives as if they were fiction. In romance “We can live in the lives of people who resemble ourselves and yet are not ourselves. We can put our own misguided life into the sweet distance, and see it—it also—as an invented story; a story that may yet have a fortunate ending!”<sup>57</sup>

Powys’s attitude towards the imagination is closer to Keats than Coleridge. Keats in defence of his poem *Endymion*, significant-ly a long poem, asks:

Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading; which may be food for a Week’s stroll in the Summer? Do not they like this better than what they can read through before Mrs. Williams comes down stairs?<sup>58</sup>

Keats’s attitudes here capture something of the experience of reading Powys too. Again Keats, like Powys and unlike Coleridge, treats imagination and fancy, if not exactly as synonymous, then at least as functioning in co-operation with one another and certainly not as different in kind: in the same letter Keats writes, “Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder.”

This attitude of wandering in a little region is central to the experience of romance. A key image for Powys is of the wayfarer, the wanderer through the world on an indefinite pilgrimage with no responsibilities and of no fixed abode, letting the world take his fancy howsoever it will. Christie’s attitude to philosophy, which plainly she shares with her creator John Cowper, is a good example of the use of imagination in romance way-faring:

I regard each philosophy, not as the ‘truth’, but just as a particular country, in *which I can go about*—countries with their own peculiar light, their Gothic buildings, their pointed roofs, their avenues of trees—But I’m afraid I’m tiring you with all this!<sup>59</sup>

On this warning note of Christie’s, it is time to bring these reflections on John Cowper’s imagination to a close. My themes have been: the continuity between John Cowper Powys’s life and books; his mistrust of the social; his explorations of weakness and failure; the fascination with surface; the fact that the novels are neither merely escapist entertainments nor works of parable art dedicated to the revelation of reality and moral seriousness; the sceptical questioning of received notions of reality; John Cowper’s love of contemplation above action and the fact that he writes and thinks as if there is no significant distinction between fancy and imagination.

Coleridge identified fancy with the work of memory and with the business of associating whatever the mind was contemplating with some further memory, recollection or association.

“Who was the mother of the immortal muses, if not Memory?” John Cowper asks.<sup>60</sup> And in a letter to Llewelyn he said:

you’ve got a unique divine gift, full of poetry and humour and beauty . . . And of what substance is this made? Ever the same! It is made of your memory—it is made of the inspiration of Mnemosyne, the Mother of the Muses—Memory, Memory, Memory.<sup>61</sup>

John Cowper tells Llewelyn, in your books, you draw on the details (tho of course winnowed and sifted a bit) of your Memory of actual experiences and impressions of people and things and situations, it is the same—always this wonderful unique glamour, this magic touch!<sup>61</sup>

John Cowper might here have been describing his own imagination. Goethe wrote in his *Venetian Epigrams*,

Alles, was ich erfuhr, ich würtz es mit süsser  
Erinrung<sup>62</sup>

All that I experienced I made savoury with  
delightful memories.

It would make a good motto for the imagination of John Cowper Powys.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See for example his account of "Remembrances": *Weymouth Sands* in *The Modern Thinker* (November 1933), reprinted in *The Powys Review*, 11, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup>*Autobiography*, Macdonald, 1934 & 1967, p.641.

<sup>3</sup>*Letters to His Brother, Llewelyn, Vol. 2, 1925-1939*, Village Press 1975, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>*Dostoevsky*, Bodley Head, 1946, & Village Press, 1974, p.162.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup>*Letters to Llewelyn*, 2, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>8</sup>*Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, eds. T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, Penguin Books, 1963, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Clarendon Press, 1902.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>11</sup>*Confessions of Two Brothers*, Rochester, N.Y., 1916, & Sinclair Browne, 1982, p.162. John Cowper is not, however, always consistent. In the Preface to *100 Best Books*, written about the same time, he says that anyone who reads these books "with reasonable receptivity . . . must become, at the end, a person with whom it would be a delight to share that most classic of all pleasurable arts—the art of intelligent conversation."

<sup>12</sup>Hume, op. cit., p. 270.

<sup>13</sup>*The Art of Happiness*, 1923 version, Village Press, 1974, p. 19. See also *Suspended Judgements*, Village Press, 1975, pp. 164, 434.

<sup>14</sup>*Suspended Judgements*, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup>*Confessions*, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>W. H. Auden, "Psychology and Art Today" in Geoffrey Grigson, ed., *The Arts Today*, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1935, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup>R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1938.

<sup>18</sup>Joseph Addison, "Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination", *The Spectator*, No. 411. *Collected Works of Addison*, ed. Hurd, 1899, Vol. III, pp. 395-396.

<sup>19</sup>*100 Best Books*, 1916, Village Press 1975, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>21</sup>*Mortal Strife*, 1942, Village Press, 1974, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup>*The Art of Happiness*, 1923, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>*The Art of Happiness*, 1935, Village Press, 1975, p. 207.

<sup>24</sup>*Dostoevsky*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>25</sup>Freud, quoted by Auden in Grigson, *The Arts Today*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup>*Wolf's Bane*, 1916, Village Press, 1975, p.50.

<sup>27</sup>*The Meaning of Culture*, 1929, Jonathan Cape, 1930, p.132, Village Press, 1974, p.109.

<sup>28</sup>*Wolf Solent* 1929, Jonathan Cape, rev. ed., 1933, p. 302, Penguin, 1964, p. 298.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, Cape, p. 353, Penguin, p. 349.

<sup>30</sup>*Dostoevsky*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>31</sup>*Suspended Judgements*, op. cit., pp. 122-123.

<sup>32</sup>Louis MacNeice, 'Poetry Today' in Grigson, op. cit., *The Arts Today*, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup>*Confessions*, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>34</sup>*Mandragora* 1917, Village Press, 1975, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup>*Confessions*, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup>*After My Fashion*, Pan Books, 1980, pp. 118-119.

<sup>37</sup>*Wolf Solent*, op. cit., p. 441.

<sup>38</sup>*Porius*, Macdonald, 1951, & Village Press, 1974, p. 418.

<sup>39</sup>*Letters to His Brother Llewelyn, Volume 1, 1902-1925*, Village Press, 1975, p. 327.

<sup>40</sup>*The Complex Vision* 1920, Village Press, 1975, p. 369. On the subject of unreality Powys confesses in his *Autobiography*: "the difficulty that I have always found in avoiding, when I have a pen in my hand, a certain facile obviousness, an obviousness which springs from thinking of what would be the nice, friendly, unctuous, appropriate, human thing to say, rather than what had the teeth-marks of reality in it" (p. 83).

<sup>41</sup>*Ducdame*, Grant Richards, 1925, & Village Press, 1974, p. 109, my italics.

<sup>42</sup>Stuart Hampshire 'Logic and Appreciation' reprinted in William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language*, Blackwell, 1959, p. 165.

<sup>43</sup>*Ducdame*, p. 116.

<sup>44</sup>*Confessions of Two Brothers*, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101. For a good account of the importance of sensations to Powys see Elmar Schenkel, "A Sense of Connectedness: Hugo Kükelhaus and John Cowper Powys" in *The Powys Review*, 11, esp. p. 66.

<sup>46</sup>*The Art of Happiness* (1935), op. cit., p. 192.

<sup>47</sup>*Ducdame* 1925, Village Press, 1974, p.283.

<sup>48</sup>*Wood and Stone*, 1915, Village Press, 1974, p. 132.

<sup>49</sup>There are many examples of this in his writing. "A fanciful imagination might indeed have amused itself" and "Such an imagination would have been able to fortify its fancy" (*Wood and Stone*, p. 9) are merely two of many possible examples.

<sup>50</sup>These views and the Kantian influence behind them make Coleridge a distinguished spokesman of the tradition of German high seriousness in the Imagination. The most recent philosopher in this tradition is Roger Scruton. The argument is his 'Photography and Representation' (*Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1981, Vol. 7, No. 3) will serve to show how much at odds John Cowper is with this tradition for all the attachment he shares with it to the idea that imagination is important. The affinity goes no further. Indeed as might be expected from John Cowper's cool attitude to T. S. Eliot and to rationalism generally, e.g. the Christian Rationalism of Charles Williams, he is at odds with this school, not a sympathiser with it.

Scruton says that photography is wedded to the creation of illusions or life like semblances of things in the world. "Such an art, like the art of the waxworks, is an art that provides a ready gratification for fantasy and in so doing defeats the aims of artistic expression. A dramatic art can be significant only if it is in some sense realistic; but to be realistic it must first forbid expression to those habits of unseriousness and wish fulfilment that play such an important part in our lives . . .

Art is fundamentally serious; it cannot rest content with the gratification of mere fantasy, nor can it dwell on what fascinates us while avoiding altogether the question of its meaning. As Freud put it in another context, art provides the path from fantasy back to reality. By creating a representation of something unreal, it persuades us to consider again those aspects of reality which, in the urgency of everyday existence, we have such strong motives for avoiding. Convention in art, as Freud saw, is the great destroyer of fantasies since it prevents the ready realization of scenes that fascinate us and substitute for the creation of mere semblance the elaboration of reflective thought", Scruton, *Critical Inquiry*, p. 602. And later Scruton says: "Why not resuscitate Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination? It is vital that philosophy should find some means to distinguish the flight from reality (and the creation of substitutes for it) from the imaginative attempt to understand it."

<sup>51</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Everyman Library Edition, Dent 1906, p. 46.

<sup>52</sup>*Up and Out and The Mountains of The Moon*, Macdonald, 1957, & Village Press, 1974, pp. 152-156.

<sup>53</sup>Coleridge, op. cit., p. 160

<sup>54</sup>*James Joyce's Ulysses—An Appreciation*, 1923, Village Press 1975, p. 4:

“And imagination is not just invention or fancy. It is an impassioned intellectual energy, which half-reveals and half-creates a certain essential aspect of the universe.” This is not John Cowper’s usual view.

<sup>55</sup>*Mortal Strife*, 1942, Village Press, 1974, p. 103.

<sup>56</sup>*Wolf's Bane*, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>57</sup>*Suspended Judgements*, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>58</sup>John Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey 8 October 1817.

<sup>59</sup>*Wolf Solent*, Cape, p.88, Penguin, p.91, my italics.

<sup>60</sup>*The Art of Happiness*, 1923, op cit., p. 28.

<sup>61</sup>*Letters to Llewelyn*, 2, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>62</sup>*Goethe, The Penguin Poets*, ed. David Luke, 1964, p. 128.

## Roy Fisher

### A Poem from *Diversions*, *Second Series*

Masterpieces in my sleep. A suppressed novel by John Cowper Powys

the core of its mystery  
a high green mound that covers  
legendary rumour;

at its climax  
old Powys with his one  
visionary eye  
raised up a beam of energy  
that blasted away St.  
Alfeah's, or whoever's, Tump  
with a great cry and  
revealed for an instant, Yes!  
the buried church, complete, the lost chapel  
and the mound  
within the mound; all seen  
clear for first and last  
as they vanished. For  
the sake of the transfiguration  
he annihilated the evidence  
beyond all commentary. Maybe  
that page of the text itself  
never had empirical existence. I talked  
in the dream with a divine,  
worldly and humorous, the prime  
scholar. He couldn't even *mention*  
that apocalypse; it was something  
deeper and more frightful than an  
embarrassment.

But we spoke easily  
of the round grey nondescript mere  
the author had left undisturbed  
right through the action  
in a dull meadow off to one side. “It’s  
the only true *Pool*  
in the whole of our literature!”  
cried the scholar. Both claim and pool  
seemed still to be there  
to be agreed with.

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# Some letters from J. C. Powys in Wales to Hal and Violet Trovillion, Illinois

Edited and Introduced by Paul Roberts

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Hal W. Trovillion (1879-1967) was born in Norris City, Illinois where, after attending the University of Indiana, he began his career as a journalist. In 1904 he moved to Herrin, Illinois and within a short time he had acquired two local newspapers, *The Herrin Daily Journal* and the *Egyptian Republican*, so called because this area of Southern Illinois was known as Little Egypt.

He began to publish small booklets for distribution to his friends in 1908 and later established his private press at Thatchcot, his house in Herrin. There, with his wife Violet taking an equally enthusiastic and active part in the proceedings, they began to publish, "At The Sign Of The Silver Horse", a series of books and brochures which they edited, designed and sometimes wrote themselves, as well as reprinting old gardening books and collecting into anthologies little known pieces which they had discovered in their explorations of bookshops and libraries in both Europe and America.

One of the most important of the books to be published by the Trovillion Private Press was *A Baker's Dozen* by Llewelyn Powys, a signed, limited edition which they published in 1940. Llewelyn had died in December 1939, some months before the book appeared, and signing the sheets for this first edition was one of his last acts.

The correspondence as we have it between John Cowper Powys and Violet and Hal W. Trovillion begins just over a year before the death of Llewelyn, in September 1938 and continues, with occasional interruptions, until January 1962. Since John Cowper and the Trovillions were already acquainted when the correspondence begins, it is possible that there are other letters which remain undiscovered. The letters we have, however, tell the delightful tale of the grow-

ing friendship between John and Phyllis and their American friends and frequently gives us illuminating pictures of life at Corwen and Blaenau Ffestiniog—of Phyllis coming home from a shopping expedition, or distributing chewing gum to the local children, of John taking his morning walk in the hills or thrilling to the sound of a Paul Robeson record playing in the room below.

There can be few who will doubt the importance of the letters of John Cowper Powys and few who will be able to resist their humour, their charm and the excitement and joy they express simply at being alive.

Among the many thousands of letters that he wrote, these to his American friends Violet and Hal have a lasting place. The sixty-seven letters which have been preserved, of which the following are a selection, are to be found among the Trovillion Papers in the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, to whom we offer thanks for supplying copies of the originals.

7 Cae Coed  
Corwen  
Merionethshire  
N. Wales  
Gt. Britain.\*  
28 June 1949.

My dear V. & H. W. Trovillion,

*100000 Thanks to you Both* for the Precious Sugar not to speak of Soup & Tea. Also for the Papers wch. are very good to get too, my *kind friends*.

I will append a word to be printed—alas! not *more*, for, as I guess I've mentioned before, I am now totally blind in one eye & have to hoard up the other terrible careful!

\*The following four letters bear this address.

I think as I get nearer death my hope of surviving it diminishes with each year! Yes Llewelyn was a dogmatic annihilationist like Catullus: “*Soles occidere et redire possunt* (suns can return) *Nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux*”, (for us when once has gone our short light) “*Nox est perpetua una dormienda*”, (there must be slept by us a perpetual sleep!). But I don’t go as far as to be quite so roundly absolute . . . I’d say about 5 chances in a *hundred*!

Well! long may you two remain in happy uncertainty many many years!

yrs always  
John Cowper Powys

*An Offering betimes—*

It was indeed a lucky day for all of us grateful Fans of the wonderful Private Press of The Sign of the Silver Horse when Forty years ago our inspired friends V & H Trovillion decided to drive their car up the slope of Parnassus. Since then among such Exceptional Marvels of Literature as King Harry’s *Love-Letters* to Queen Elizabeth’s *Mother!* [and] the Happy Prince & Selfish Giant by *Oscar Wilde* my own fortunate family has been rendered specially happy & proud by the appearance in this stately and arresting “format” of our dead brother Llewelyn’s “Baker’s Dozen” with an introduction by my personal friend & expertest & most erudite of bibliographers Mr Lloyd Emerson Siberell.

So it is with all gratitude that I lift my glass of pure Heliconian white wine and goat’s milk to the long life of the *Trovillion Press!*

*John Cowper Powys*

The lines from Catullus (84-85? B.C.) which Powys quotes are from “*Carmina V*”.

Passages from this letter appear in an essay by Hal Trovillion entitled “Eternal Life”, published in the 1955 edition of their annual “brochure”, *At The Sign Of The Silver Horse*.

*Love Letters of Henry VIII* was published by The Trovillion Private Press at Christmas 1936.

[In a letter dated 3 June 1951 Hal Trovillion wrote: “Did not get to discuss everything I wanted to when I visited you. So wish you would answer the enclosed questions when you write.”]

He included with the letter a questionnaire which John Cowper Powys completed in the last part as follows.]

17 June 1951

5. What is your opinion of the poetic writings of T. S. Elliot [sic], now a British subject, and Ezra Pound? They seem to be far more rated in England than in the states, where both were born.

A. I have always admired Eliot’s *Wasteland* and have always particularly enjoyed *reading it aloud!* and I was delighted when I heard him read it himself over the BBC to find I read it *almost precisely as he did!*

Of Pound I have not so greatly been thrilled by his poems as stirred to admiration by the disinterested, unselfish, crusading ardour with which and piercing prophetic insight with which he *spread the Gospel of all the Best New Movements* in Art & Letters of our Time. I’ve been more nearly linked with *his* early associations than with Eliot’s—in fact I met his parents in Philadelphia.

3 November 1953

My dear H.T.

Don’t ’ee I beg you enter upon—O generous hearted and kind hearted friend—any campaign or crusade on my behalf. Of course I can’t speak for my brothers and sisters and I have heard from Siberell about his Powyseana Society so I do know what, with all the good Intentions in the world and with all his remarkable powers for carrying arduous & hard enterprises through, Siberell is undertaking on behalf of the Powys Tribe. But it still remains, my dear H.T., that I have yielded in my old age so completely, yes! have yielded myself up so wholly & entirely—*body, soul & the rest!*—to this life of a Recluse and a Hermit—I don’t even “go down the hill” these later years, into the town, “where other folks do bide” as we say in Dorset—and I confine my air & exercise to the early two hours between 7 a.m. & 9 a.m. (in spite of being too late for the *sunrise!*) when, as I climb the foothills of our Berwyn Range, I don’t nowadays *even meet foresters!* (a harmless & nice lot of men to meet as they are!)—that I’ve developed various queer *neuroses* and *manias* not entirely unlike those of *Kafka* and not entirely unlike

those of my poor brother Theodore who is, I regret to tell you, extremely weak and failing in health and my own son, The Roman Catholic Priest, is suffering from a hopelessly incurable & very strange illness, while my brother Littleton is half crippled with arthritis—so you can, and your dear lady too I am sure will, understand that even if I hadn't myself got these weird neurotic manias and become a complete recluse it would be hard to—yes! hard for me to—feel the gratitude I daresay I ought normally & naturally in the struggle of life to feel for Siberell's kindly intentioned Powyseana society idea.

With the best from us both to yourself and  
your dear wife, yrs as  
ever J C Powys

Theodore Francis Powys, born 1875, died 27 November 1953.

John Cowper's son, Littleton Alfred Powys, was born in August 1902. Following a motor-cycle accident in 1952 he developed a wasting disease. He died in 1954. For accounts of his last days and the composition of his posthumously published poem "Ode To The West Wind" see *The Aylesford Review*, Vol. V, No. 1, Winter 1962/3.

18 December 1954

I really must tell you my dear friend how wonderfully thrilled we both were with your incomparable & unequalled Xmas Box. Those surpassing *Dish Clothes* [sic] most especially put in so happily and wisely by the Lady Violet & how beautifully I see them hanging up! and the chewing gum & the cough drops and the Ham & Dried Beef—but to my ignorant & rather subdomesticated or say stray-off domesticated Masculine Artful Shirker & old Dodger mind to see that grand round Box with a *Marshall Field* Cake in it was exciting *just to have such an object on view*.

I do really think old friend you & your Lady are very good & very generous and I am sure we both send you together & *so would* (& maybe *he does*—in some *Realm of Saturn Incarnation*) our *old Dog* who lies buried in this garden join too!

Our best strongest-rushing wild-wind prayers for the happiness of you & yours this Xmas!

I can see clearly that we shan't be getting into

our tiny little Hermitage for two until the very end of Jan & *probably not* till February!

yrs with old & new gratitude  
Old Friar John Powys  
& Sister Phyllis Playter

It was not, in fact, until April 1955 that John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter were able to leave Cae Coed to move to their "tiny little Hermitage" in Blaenau Ffestiniog, which had been in need of considerable alteration.

1 Waterloo  
Blaenau Ffestiniog  
Merionethshire  
North Wales\*

5 December 1956

My dear Friend,

Indeed our best of all American Friends Phyllis & I do so *thank* you for all the papers you send us. *But listen now!* We are beginning [to] be a bit *overpowered* by Papers! And I want to beg you to go on sending us the St Louis papers which we especially enjoy but to *stop* sending us the *Chicago* papers which please us O so very much less!

One of the most exciting things I've heard for many a long year I found in one of the *St Louis papers* the news of which I owe entirely to your generosity in sending us those St Louis papers. It must have been I *think* in the St Louis Despatch—anyhow it was in a St Louis paper I know for sure. I speak of a new *world-language* by *signs instead of words*. I wonder if you or Violet noticed it? It was invented (the paper said) by a Dutchman called *Janson* and it is called *Picto*.

I have learnt from the examples of it that were given to write in "Picto" the happy expression which expresses my feelings every morning between 8 and 9 a.m. when I turn to come home, after my morning walk in this heavenly "nephelocucogyia" as Aristophanes calls a town in the air in his Comedy of *The Birds*—which our modern journalists are always referring to namely "*cloud-cuckoo-land*" but whereas it was a real place in the air in Aristophanes and its king was a *Hoopoe* a real bird it has come to be used nowadays as an ideal humbug town an

\*The following letters bear this address.

26 October 1957

*impossible utopia* or Ideal Republic in the clouds, the dream of swollen headed idealists—*exactly what it was not* in the mind of Aristophanes who invented it! In Aristophanes the point of the joke was that *it intercepted* the incense from the slaughtered beasts *offered up to the gods* so that the gods were cheated of their favourite smoke of broiled sheep and oxen! The gods got so angry that they invaded it from heaven but its inhabitants defended themselves so well with the help of two elderly Athenian gents who had somehow found their way to nephelocucogyia just as we found our way here to Blaenau!

Now let me parade with pride to you, my dear friends Hal & Violet, what I learnt from the St Louis paper and owe entirely to you.

I = I

♥ = love

↘ = walk

🏠 = home

I ♥ ↘ 🏠 which means “I love to walk home”

Phyllis is still a staunch American Citizen just as I am a loyal subject but we both support Eden & Israel against Nasser. *My* feeling has a lot to do with my mania for the Bible in Welsh which makes me think of Nasser as Pharaoh and Eden as some ally of *Joshua the son of Nun*.

I have always harboured a hope that I might even have myself a drop of Hebrew blood as my great-grandmother's name on my mother's side was *Livius* and when I lectured in Hamburg when it was a Free City I used to be hospitably entertained by a Mr Cohen who told me that all the Cohens were priests of the House of *Levi* so maybe I'm a *Levite*! and not as some would boast a descendant of the Roman Historian *Livius*!!

All the best to you & Violet from Phyllis &  
your old  
J C Powys

Powys's great-grandmother was Maria Dorothea Livius (1788-1864).

In his *Autobiography*, 1934, p. 301, Powys recalls: “It was during the Boer War . . . that I obtained the exciting job of giving a set of English lectures, under the official aegis of the Free City of Hamburg”.

My dear old friend Hal & my dear lady Violet of whom I so often think as you were when we sat together in our upper chamber at Cae Coed Corwen, I do thank you both and so does Phyllis for the wonderful way you keep in touch with us through thick & thin.

Thank you for letting me keep the letter from Cassell. Yes I have written to him enthusiastically.

Yes I am so glad that our Queen & her Prince enjoyed themselves so much & that all went so well; for, as you say, in these delicate situations, you never can tell!

O I do love to think of Violet enjoying a “telly” as they call it over here. Her name reminds me of my brother Theodore's wife when she was young & O so pretty! Now as his widow she has a mania for *animal pets*! These are what take the place of a “telly” with her! She has I don't know *how* many cats and kittens and dogs and puppies!

Think of your sister being so devoted to old Carlyle & writing a play about Cheney Row where he lived in Chelsea.

Yes I can well believe you are feeling a bit overwhelmed by all these books & things coming into your place.

I am amazed that Lloyd Wright is older—3 years older—than I am.

You and Violet certainly have been through the Mill & the Mill-Pond this year. O I do trust next year will be a luckier one for you both.

You did right well, old friend, to get a “telly”! For myself I'm too much of an old “fuddy-dud” book-worm to want a “telly”. But Phyllis, tell Violet, has now got a big Music Box called a *Hi-Fi*. If only I weren't so totally un-musical—a funny thing for a man whose father was prouder of his Welsh ancestry than of anything else!—I would appreciate more the wonderful *RECORDS* she gets for it. One set of these contains songs I *can* appreciate. I expect it's needless to tell you that they are the songs of the Negro *Paul Robeson* whom for some reason—I'd give a lot to know for what reason!—your Government refuses to allow to travel outside the U.S.A. But unmusical as I am I *can* and *do* do justice to his *songs*! “There's a man going round taking names” always thrills me when Phyllis turns it on.

My dear old Hal it's lovely of you to think of sending us this Box of Medical Necessities to battle with the colds and pains that Old Man

Winter brings with him. Listen to me, old friend, I am and have been for 20 odd years on a *special diet* of milk raw eggs strong tea and dry stale bread. It's only so I can avoid the trouble from which I suffered since I was 14 at school—I mean what Carlyle had, *Dyspepsia*. I've been in hospital 4 times on both sides of our Atlantic for *Duodenal ulcers* but they have absolutely nothing to do with dyspepsia and never cause anything approaching the pain that dyspepsia brings. But since we've come to Blaenau, & we shall have been here *3 years in May, all Dyspepsia has ceased*. So, my dear friend, cut that kindly *Box in half*. For I do *not touch ever anything* different from my routine diet. But if you will cut that *precious Box in half* it may provide many wondrous palliatives and remedies for Phyllis who coughs more often than I like to hear & gets terribly weary; but of course my life is so much easier than hers.

I only walk for about 25 minutes every morn before breakfast now and I am *feeling my age* in regard to many things, *mental* not physical! I am entering my *Second Childhood*. But I am wonderfully happy as children are!

Well I must stop. Love to both from us both,  
your old J. C. P..

The letter from Mr Cassell which Hal Trovillion had sent to Powys referred to the essay "A Visit With JCP" in *Faces and Places Remembered*.

Violet Powys (1887-1966) was the wife of T. F. Powys.

The architect Frank Lloyd Wright was born in 1867 and died in 1959.

The singer and actor Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was denied a passport in 1950 when he refused to sign an affidavit disclaiming membership of the Communist Party. This decision was reversed by the Supreme Court in 1958.

[No date. 22 September 1959]

My dear Hal & Violet,

We do thank you indeed Phyllis & I (she still an American Citizen) for these interesting papers about Mr K's visit. I gather he got on extra well at *San Francisco* just as I always did.

When I think of my life in America in all those years before I met Phyllis it is always of San Francisco I think and of Chicago with vivid remembrances. Though we were very happy together in "Greenwich Village" New York but of course I was much younger then! We still hear

from *E. E. Cummings* who was our neighbour in Greenwich Village in Patchin Place.

\* \* \*

yrs always as long as there is an always  
J. C. Powys

The Soviet leader Khrushchev visited the United States in 1959.

The poet e.e. cummings (1894-1962) had lived next door to John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter in Patchin Place.

16 February 1960

My dear Hal & Violet Trovillion,

Your letter to my American Phyllis was such a very nice one that I thought the best thing I could do would be to try and answer it myself as well as I could, so here I go!

Phyllis and I are so happy together, and for a long time we have had our Government's special permission to live & work and write together while she keeps her American Citizenship.

We are so fond of our present Publisher the Boss of Macdonalds Ltd 16 Maddox Street Mayfair *London W.1.* that I shall not attempt to let any other Publisher have any book of mine. The next one to be published by Macdonalds is entitled "*All or Nothing*" and our Boss says it will be published shortly. Then I've got four or five others that he may prefer to publish singly year by year or to bind two pairs of them in the same covers. I leave all that to him: but to interest you and Violet I'll tell you the titles of a few more. You see from my childhood when my favourite of all books was Grimm's Fairy Tales I have had an obsession or mania for inventing wild exciting impossible stories, the sort of stories that nowadays are called *Space-Travel-Fiction*.

I have inherited money enough to live up [on] as Phyllis and I live quite happily & comfortably in this little house. We lived twenty years in Corwen and by next May 2nd we shall have lived *five years* here in Blaenau. Both these little towns are in Merionethshire. We left Corwen because so many cars came by night past our house flashing light into the room where we slept. Here we are a bit more out of the way. At the moment however roofs roads gardens hedges ditches are covered with deep snow, thicker

snow than we've had since we came here five years ago.

I hope that the titles of some of my so far unpublished books may have a little interest for your friend Mildred Seydell. Tell her that I've got a couple of friends called Mr and Mrs Sullivan of *Dahlonaga Georgia* with whom I have corresponded for a long long time. They are both School-Teachers and are not far from Athens, Georgia. Well! Here are some of the titles of my books that are awaiting publication by Macdonalds & Co. Ltd—Maddox Street—London—for I would not wish any other Publisher to bring them out. "*Four Wraiths*". These are really *ghosts*; but I did not wish to copy Ibsen so I call them *Wraiths*! Then a book called "*You and me*". Then a Book called "*Two and Two*" which deals with the inherent nature of quarrels between different types of minds and different systems of philosophy. And now I am *half way through* a book called *Cataclysm* which is of absorbing and thrilling interest to me for its about two lads and [a] girl flying far far far far into Empty Space and discovering different worlds, absolutely different from this world of ours, with inhabitants whose bodies, arms, legs, heads etcetcetcetc are different from ours.

You see what I enjoy is *inventing*. I have done this since as the eldest of eleven brothers and sisters, five brothers and five sisters, myself the eldest making the eleventh, I used [to] invent games for us all to play. The first book I ever read to myself was *Alice Through The Looking Glass* by Lewis Carrol [sic].

I have a bad memory for the last 20 years but a very good memory for my boyhood when at school at Sherborne a Large Public School in Dorset I learnt Latin and Greek. The Latin Poet Horace is still my favourite of all Poets and I can now recite his Odes with intense delight just as well as I can recite Shakespeare or Milton.

Our family is distantly related to two famous Poets, John Donne of St. Pauls and the Poet Cowper who wrote John Gilpin. I was 87 years old last Oct. 8th the very day of our Election by which our present Prime Minister came into power.

I have an old lady cousin whom I used to know when a boy as Cousin Katy Donne who is descended from Donne's great-grandfather. She celebrated her 97th birthday last April 29th. She

lives in Norwich Norfolk where all my Mother's relatives come from and though ten years older than I am she writes or rather *dictates* for she is *blind* the most witty and amusing letters I get from anybody.

Well, my dear Hal & Violet I must stop—no more margins!

yours ever & always  
John Cowper Powys

*All or Nothing* (Macdonald, 1960), *Four Wraiths* published as *Real Wraiths* and *Two and Two* (Village Press, 1974), *You and Me* (Village Press, 1975). "*Cataclysm*" remains unpublished.

*Alice Through The Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll was published by Macmillan in December 1871, less than a year before Powys was born. In *Letters To Louis Wilkinson* (Macdonald, 1958) he writes: "I read it on Sunday in my Father's study when everyone was in Church . . . and I think the crazy daring of that book and the peculiar way of treating beasts birds dolls pawns (and the inanimate as well) has influenced me profoundly".

13 October 1961

I want to thank you very much for sending me that Ten Dollar American Bill.

We are both of us, your loyal old John Cowper Powys and his *lady friend* Miss Phyllis Playter feeling very happy tonight a happiness which is largely due I am pretty sure to the close connection between Thatchcot and 1 Waterloo.

At this moment Phyllis is gallantly steering *our Hoover* this way and that way across the surface of our floor, a floor now quite covered by a lovely dark blue carpet. Every time the Hoover swings round from one corner to another of Phyllis Playter's Parlour I grow more vividly aware as I lie on my back on the sofa of the fortunate good luck which every man has who has had the fortune to possess a spirited wife or a wise and daring lady-friend. Thus I grow happier and happier every time our Hoover swings Trovillion's Thatchcot nearer to our Water-Fall's woollen Mill.

Yours ever,  
John Cowper Powys.

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# Wolfgang Kehr

## John Cowper Powys in Conversation: Corwen, 1954\*

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The “Victorian” J. C. Powys had discovered his pre-Celtic home twenty years earlier. Whatever didn’t fit into the picture—historically, ethnically, socially—was set straight imaginatively. He was absolutely determined to achieve his happiness by cultivating this new, Welsh version of his old “private mythology” in his own particular way.

He lived together with Phyllis Playter in a small cottage in Corwen (Merioneth), idyllically situated in the Edeyrnion valley on the River Dee in the northern hill country of Wales, and was still praising, after twenty years, “that peculiar psychic aura of the place”, which the author of *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Owen Glendower* had sought throughout his entire life.

He had invited the 23 year old student to be his guest in Corwen for three days. Stimulated by the circle of friends surrounding Ernst Kreuder, I had read his books closely, and I was curious to see what impression he would make in conversation. In his letters he avoided any argumentative commitment by means of extravagant praise of the other person. He was proud of what he called his Welsh character, “a harmless, patient, unfathomable, evasive soul”. Evasiveness was a key word for him. He referred to his mental strategies of survival sometimes as “obstinately Cymric”, sometimes as Taoist, and drew bold historical and ethnic parallels between the original pre-Celtic, in his opinion Iberian, natives of Wales, and the complaisant, peaceful, but imperturbable inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom. Welsh aboriginal—that was what he was himself.

\*First published in *Akzente* 28 (1981), 129-132 and translated here by Ella Barsky with kind permission of the author and Carl Hauser Verlag, München.

“There is something Proteus-like about them. You catch hold of them, of their opinions, their ideas, their prejudices, their feelings and under your very grasp they yield, they melt away . . .”

He himself, he said, had personally never been very brave. “One tends to die so young when one is especially courageous.” He spoke about Aleister Crowley, who was in his day considered to be a clairvoyant and magician. All of his friends had advised the young Powys to steer clear of him. “When G. P. Gooch saw how I greeted Crowley on the street, he warned me, ‘he can kill you if he wants, he can kill anybody without lifting a finger’. Actually I never believed any of that,” said Powys, “but a few days later I invited him to go to a London pub with me—as a precautionary measure—and although I was short on cash I bought him the best bottle of wine in the place. Without any ill-will at all I watched the magician empty the bottle slowly and with relish. Fear has dominated my life and I have always tried to overcome it with ritualized gestures of appeasement.”

I arrived in Corwen at the end of August 1954. A golden, evening mist hung over the Edeyrnion valley. The sun stood red and motionless in the gilded twilight. As I approached the small house I could see him from the street through a low window. He was alone in the room, lying on a bed, a gaunt, old, toothless man with a sunken jaw, his hair like tow, dominating the aquiline nose, the cheekbones, the deep-set grey eyes beneath powerful brows, his face faded by time. Nothing, however, about the 82 year old man gave the impression of decrepitude. On the contrary, everything about him suggested excitement, tension, intensity. A pile of papers lay on a board

resting against his raised knees, and he was writing diagonally across the large sheets of paper in a hand which grew smaller as he progressed to the bottom right of the page. Readers of his letters were palimpsest readers.

At first the conversation was inhibited by shyness. Then we spoke about his books. He said he had often written his volumes of essays only because the sponsors of his lecture tours in the U.S. had wanted a printed text. "All of my lectures" he said, "have originated in the inspiration of the moment. I've never written down very much in advance. For example, *The Religion of a Sceptic* was written hurriedly after one of those lecture tours; one shouldn't take all that too seriously. Actually I'm not a man of letters at all, but rather a 'talker', an 'orator'. I don't construct my novels; I begin somewhere without knowing where it's going to go. Every moment of writing is new. In earlier years, before I began writing stories, usually about idiots and usually unfinished, I made up stories parlando, imagining an audience for them. Actually nothing has changed; I still do it this way. In the United States I virtually vampirized my listeners with words. When I got the impression they were all exhausted I went away, conscious of being the only one happy. All that I'm after is expression. Writing is not an effort for me, but rather something quite natural. It's compulsive, and gives me infinite pleasure. Scott influenced me, not Flaubert. But I did nothing to prevent the publishers from deleting five complete chapters from *Wolf Solent* or from not printing large portions of the manuscript of the *Glastonbury Romance*. There is something that my editors have never understood: there must be dullness in a novel, a scenery where nothing happens and not the reader but the characters in the novel feel this dullness."

I had expected the self-assured, whining manner of a writer who feels himself underestimated. Instead, Powys gave the impression in conversation of being modest, child-like, naive. When something delighted him,

he clapped his hands excitedly. He talked a lot, but he could also listen attentively. It bothered me that he never contradicted. He was astounded to hear that there were writers in Germany—Hermann Hesse, H. H. Jahn, Ernst Kreuder, Horst Lange—who praised *Wolf Solent*, and he accepted this information as an unexpected gift. He said he had never been able to understand how the aged Thomas Hardy could have esteemed him personally and appreciated some of his books. "This is all very encouraging. I must work harder, write more, more novels and fewer letters, for I haven't, in any case, much time left."

The next day he sent me to the old abbey ruins of Berwyn-Llangollen. A small bridge was suspended over the wild, brown waters of the Dee. On the path over the rolling hills into the valley I saw for the first time broad slopes with tall wild ferns, and was reminded of "Yellow Bracken" in *Wolf Solent*.

In the evening we talked a long time about occultism, astrology, and the act of consciousness in the philosophy of Ludwig Klages. I must have pressed the matter; presumably I wanted to convince him. When the rhetorical insistence of his young guest became too much for him, he suddenly cried out, "Oh, you have converted me, absolutely converted me to Klages, to his philosophy of the 'actus purus'; he is so right, he is so right." Was he serious or was he only extricating himself again with the help of his "mental trick of agreement"? Had anything changed at all since the days when he used to agree with his fellow student Gooch whenever he was unable to prove him wrong? "I admired, I listened; I asked intelligent questions, . . . but mentally I went my own way," he confessed in his autobiography.

The next evening I found him wrapped in a heavy coat. He got cold easily. Because of his ulcers he had lived for decades almost exclusively on milk and bread. We spoke about "The Art of Happiness", the ability to transport oneself into a condition of inner happiness through imagination and the spiritualization of sense perception and feel-

ing: "One shouldn't always want to cure neuroses," he said. "One can cultivate them and so live a happier life without giving pain to others. This ability is dying out, and some day most people won't know any more what it is. The therapists are on the march, and a lot of people will only be able to bear this artificial world with the help of opiates."

Before we parted he read to Phyllis Playter and me from the manuscript of his unpublished novel *The Brazen Head*, from the section where Friar Roger Bacon is thinking about the homunculus until the end of the conversation with the lay brother Tuck.

Now he had his audience. This was no old man sitting here; fascination and enthusiasm emanated from him. He was suggestive of, and brought all three of us into, an ecstatic mood, a natural understanding. Shortly thereafter came the all-too-early leave-taking. He was strict with himself and with others, concluding each day at the same hour, never allowing any exceptions. He knew how much time and strength he still had left. I was to come again and stay longer. For years I continued to receive letters, but I never saw him again.

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# Rolf Italiaander

## An Award to John Cowper Powys, Blaenau Ffestiniog, 1957\*



J. C. Powys receiving the Plaque of the Free Academy of Arts in Hamburg from Rolf Italiaander, 1957.

[...] After the decision of the plenary assembly of the Hamburg Academy to award the Academy Medal for 1957 to John Cowper Powys, it fell to me as Permanent Secretary to invite Mr Powys to Hamburg to receive the award. Unfortunately, Mr Powys was unable to accept the invitation as he was already 86 years old and suffering from the infirmities of age. So it was planned that President Jahnn and I should travel together to Wales to present the award personally.

\*First published in Rolf Italiaander, *Akzente eines Lebens*, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1980, and translated here by Elmar Schenkel with kind permission of the author.

But H. H. Jahnn was unable to travel because of sickness, so I had to journey on my own to Wales to present the Medal. [...]

When I visited him, Powys had been living for four years in the little, grey, one-up one-down terrace-house that was so typical for Blaenau Ffestiniog. The room downstairs was occupied by Miss Phyllis Playter, a dedicated American with the weather-beaten face of an old American Indian squaw and Powys's devoted companion for more than forty years. He even joked about her appearance, maintaining that perhaps she was of American Indian origin, seeing that she knew so much about the separate

American Indian tribes and their history. A narrow staircase led upstairs to the room which Powys occupied, and it was tiny indeed. Bookcases lined the walls and in front of the window was a couch on which he spent his days reading and writing. His only exercise was a quarter of an hour's walk each day before breakfast. Because of gastric trouble he had to observe a strict diet consisting of four raw eggs and several glasses of milk a day. What a comedown for a man who used to regard whisky as the panacea for all ills!

I was permitted to accompany him on his morning constitutional. He had a vigorous stride for a man of his years, would often stop to chat with neighbours or, with particular pleasure, to children; he would pick up the odd piece of string that might come in useful later, and would gently straighten the flattened flower-stalks in his path and tenderly stroke the animals that he encountered. His usual walk was to a large boulder from which there was a magnificent view of the hauntingly beautiful surrounding

countryside. He called this boulder his "tapping-stone", for he would always tap it four times, murmuring unintelligible incantations while doing so. It was very quickly obvious that he had transferred his own mythology and mysticism to everyday life too. Life's tragedies, comedies and absurdities were all simultaneously present.

When I visited him for the first time I had to sit down facing him in full sunlight, as he was blind in one eye and could see only very little with the other. My face was subjected to very close scrutiny, while he expounded on the physiognomical merits of eyebrows and the corners of the mouth.

Even though he had to spend so much of his time reclining on his couch, he was still very lively. If something that you had said or did met with his approval, he would shout and clap his hands enthusiastically. He was a fascinating story-teller, but also a good listener. He was interested in the whole gamut of human aspirations and knowledge. And he was also very fond of extremes. He happily recalled that he preferred audiences





of workers, Jews, monks and nuns in his lecturing-days, because they had always been so interested in what he had had to say. He felt that the middle-classes had no intellectual potential and very little sense, so that they did not interest him in the slightest. He was very scathing of contemporary aristocrats with the exception of Lord Bertrand Russell, who also happened to live in North Wales. But he did admit that his admiration for Russell might have had something to do with his magnificent physiognomy. He was very interested in religious problems, but was a pantheist and polytheist, not a monotheist. As he believed in many gods, he returned again and again to the study of primitive religions. Though he often attacked the established churches, he was a fervent admirer of the late Pope Pius XII. He recalled a film that he had seen on Pope Pius XII, and particularly remembered a scene when the Pope was being carried in his chair in a ceremonial procession. He had spotted a sick child amongst the bystanders on his route and had asked his bearers to set him down so that he could lay his hands in blessing on the boy's head. Powys felt that he knew exactly what was passing through the Pope's mind at this point and that he was probably trying to point out to the Almighty that it was sheer

coincidence that he had been singled out to become Pope for he was as ordinary a mortal as everybody else. He was probably invoking God's blessing upon the child not as Pope, but as a mortal sinner, telling God that it would well behove Him to show more compassion for the mortal sinners He had created.

With great enthusiasm I described my drive through the mountains and how impressed I had been by the numbers of sheep dotted about on the mountain-slopes. Powys informed me that I had been travelling through Johann Sebastian Bach country. I was slightly puzzled and told him that to my knowledge Bach had never been in Wales. Powys told me not to be so sure about that—after all, Bach's pastorales were full of sheep and he was therefore convinced he must have been in Wales.

He also explained that he had never been ashamed of showing emotion either as a child or an adult—in fact, he was sure that human emotions were the mainspring of life and creativity. He was pleased that the Duke of Edinburgh was trying to introduce more spontaneity to the life and etiquette of the court. Powys had used his influence at the University of Oxford for honorary doctorates to be awarded to André Gide and Jean Cocteau. He explained that Cocteau was a particular favourite of his and he was sure that he later had established a new tradition in Oxford by parodying and putting up so good-humouredly with all the ceremonial humbug of the award.

He never learnt German, but frequently quoted two sayings of Goethe in the original German, the first being "Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis" and the second "Im Ganzen, Guten, Schönen resolut zu leben". He exclaimed that this was really what life was about and he would repeat the words "the whole" and "resolutely" again and again like magic incantations. Conversation turned naturally to the "Angry Young Men" of the new generation of English writers. He was glad of their presence but wished that they were even angrier. He found many of their outbursts too mild and

superficial. This criticism is understandable when we remember some of the courageous stands taken by Powys in the long course of his career as writer and lecturer. However, he greatly enjoyed being called "the father of the Angry Young Men". During a BBC television interview jointly with him on the occasion of the award, I said that I thought that the British National Parks were a wonderful institution, but that I thought that it would be far more important, both in Britain and elsewhere, to set up national reservations for the creative artists in the world, to save this heritage from extinction. Powys embraced me tenderly at this point and, shouting to the bystanders like a

politician on the election-platform, he exhorted them to take note of what I had said. Artists were an endangered species but were absolutely essential to society and themselves in dire need of protection.

I often compared him to Socrates as I sat facing him and felt as though I had been transported back to the days of the Academy in Athens. But perhaps he had an even greater resemblance to the Old Testament figure of Abraham.

Many people in Britain sat up and took notice of Powys for the first time when he was given this first award of his life, and a foreign award at that.

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# A. J. Brothers

## John Cowper Powys on Aristophanes's *Acharnians*: an Introduction

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Since the accompanying piece on Aristophanes's *Acharnians* is obviously incomplete, and even the completed portion might well have been subject to revision before the whole was finished, it might be helpful, particularly for the reader not well acquainted with Aristophanic comedy, to have a few comments by way of introduction and background.

Greek comedy is usually divided into three periods, old, middle and new. Although during this century papyrus discoveries have yielded two plays by the new comedy writer Menander, and substantial portions of several more, Aristophanes (c. 450 - c. 385 B.C.) remains the only writer of the old comedy period of whose plays any have survived entire. We hear of some forty comedies which he is known to have written, but only eleven of them have come down to us. Of these eleven, two belong more strictly to middle comedy, and the first nine are therefore the only remaining examples of the most brilliant phase of Greek comedy's life.

*Acharnians* is the first of these in order of date. It was produced in 425 B.C. at the Lenaea, one of the two principal Athenian festivals in honour of Dionysus at which dramatic competitions were held, and it won first prize. Aristophanes had had his first play produced in 427, and his second in 426—though both of these are now lost. *Acharnians* comes next, and so is the work of a young man who had embarked comparatively recently upon a career as a comic playwright.

The Peloponnesian War, in which Athens and her empire was ranged against Sparta and her allies, principally Boeotia and Corinth, had at this time been going on for almost six years. On the Athenian side, the

chief sufferers had been the inhabitants of the countryside of Attica, since their lands were regularly ravaged by Spartan invasions. They were therefore forced to abandon their homes and seek refuge inside the city of Athens or within the Long Walls which connected the city to its harbour, the Piraeus; there they lived in cramped, unpleasant and unhealthy conditions. Not least among these refugees would have been the Acharnians, the inhabitants of Acharnae, one of the largest settlements of Attica outside Athens itself, situated a few miles north of the city, where one of the principal occupations seems to have been charcoal-burning.

Many people, like the chorus of Acharnians (at any rate as they are represented early on in the play), must have been eager to continue the war until Sparta was defeated, if only from motives of revenge. But others, like Dicaeopolis, were obviously by this time advocating a search for peace and an end to a war which they thought neither side could win, in order to be able to return to their farms and begin rebuilding their shattered livelihoods. In this spirit Dicaeopolis sets out to conclude his private peace with the enemy. It is a measure of the great amount of freedom allowed to the writers of old comedy that Aristophanes was able to depict such activities in this play and to have them enacted in the theatre before a great crowd of his fellow-citizens.

J. C. Powys's essay requires a few brief comments on some assorted points. Firstly, the change of scene on which the writer comments (p. 64) is paralleled in other plays; for example, *Birds* opens in the rugged countryside of Attica, but most of the action takes place in the birds' city in the sky, while in *Frogs* the scene changes from this world to

Hades, whither Dionysus journeys to bring back to Athens one of the dead tragedians. Secondly, it should be noted that most modern editions do not agree with Powys (p. 68) in ascribing part of Dicaeopolis's speech in lines 247ff. of the Greek text to his wife. Thirdly, the mention (p. 61) of the Graces finding a sanctuary in Aristophanes's soul is a reference to a well-known epigram about the poet which is ascribed to the philosopher Plato. And finally, the 'Ecclesia' and the 'Assembly' to which Powys refers in the piece are, of course, one and the same.

Unfortunately, Powys's manuscript breaks off abruptly when his discussion has

reached a point only a little over one quarter of the way through the play. *Acharnians* is 1234 lines long, and the last passage translated, a paragraph before the break, ends at line 357. The translation, which appears to be the writer's own, is neither a true translation nor a paraphrase; at some times it is nearer the former, while at others it seems more like the latter, but the essential spirit of the Greek is there. I have taken the opportunity to correct a few minor errors and inconsistencies—most of which would in all probability have been put right by the writer's own revision—but otherwise the manuscript has been left substantially as it was written.

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# John Cowper Powys

## The *Acharnians* (c. 1948-1950)\*

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The hero of this play, a sagacious and humorous small-holder from a district near Athens called Acharnae, prides himself on being, as his name, Dicaeopolis, suggests, an honest citizen. On his own particular farm which had been before the war a prosperous one, he cultivated vines and olives while the bulk of his neighbours, many of whom are old veterans of Marathon, earn a good living as charcoal-burners supplying Athens with fuel. So badly has Acharnae suffered from the war with Sparta—which has been going on now for five years—that Dicaeopolis, along with many other farmers, has been driven to leave his vines and his olives and take refuge in a patched-up hovel within the protection of the city-walls. This comedy, the first complete one of the author's eleven to come down to us intact, possesses many of the most startling and seductive qualities of the genius of Aristophanes. It opens with the humorous countryman Dicaeopolis seated in absolute solitude in a completely empty Ecclesia. The Mother of all Parliaments is situated on the sacred hill known as the Pnyx, close to the Acropolis; and here for hours has this whimsical individualist and home-sick exile from the ravaged vineyards and the

charcoal-burning woods been waiting in growing indignation for the proceedings to commence.

The proper time for the appearance of the Prytanes, the magisterial authorities, who preside over the Assembly, has long passed; but private business and private gossip in the streets of the town and the market booths of the Agora and around the gates to the lanes of warehouses leading down to the Piraeus are evidently far more attractive to rulers of a sea-empire city than a discussion concerning the possibility of bringing to an end this suicidal and crazy war between one half of Hellas and the other.

Aristophanes is always unequalled in the rapidity with which he plunges into the subject of one of his new comedies and he is a wonder too in the magnetic intensity with which he flings himself into the most wayward feelings of his chosen antagonist. On this occasion we have barely realized where we are when we find ourselves identified with the irritable integrity and humorous indignation of Dicaeopolis, whose confidences as soon as he begins to utter them have more of the fantastic intensity of a character in Dickens than of the stately super-human eloquence of Greek tragedy. But we soon realize that the eccentric Dicaeopolis has something about him that is different from the appealing oddity of a Dickensian character, and something about him too that is beyond the natural grudge fermenting in the gall of a born agriculturist against city-bred politicians. Behind his grunts and groans and ribald grumblings we begin to catch in this cantankerous small-holder's indignant soliloquy, the universal voice of the ordinary undistinguished individual in all human communities protesting humorously and shamelessly against the

\*PR Editor's Note. The incomplete manuscript copy of "The *Acharnians*", of 75 pages, from which this, the first printed version is derived, is in the possession of Mr E. E. Bissell to whom we are grateful for permission to publish it. A translation of the manuscript into French by Michel Gresset appeared in *Cahiers du Sud*, LXI, 386, Jan.-Mars, 1966. J. C. Powys refers to his writing of a book on Aristophanes in *Letters to Nicholas Ross* (ed. A. Uphill, Bertram Rota, 1971), 15 January 1948 and 17 July 1949. In the 1948 letter he refers to two previous years of "careful" preparatory reading for the book. In a letter to Hal Trovillion (*not* published in this *Review*) of 11 June 1950, he again tells that he is "working" on the Aristophanes.

bigoted stupidity and pompous humbug with which human affairs are conducted by those whose business it is to conduct them; in fact here in the opening soliloquy of the *Acharnians* we get a sort of prelude to the whole vast cosmogonic Opera Bouffe of this titanic rhapsodist upon world-madness. Aristophanes, like Rabelais and Shakespeare, has no real imitators. None have caught his tone. None have reproduced his special brand of humour. Perhaps among the more imaginative critics it is Heine who comes nearest to hitting him off. Heine uses a rather terrifying German expression in connection with him that has been translated "the idea of world-destruction". But this phrase ought to be qualified a little; for the mood into which responsive and sympathetic readers are thrown by these eleven comedies is anything but entirely negative. Heine's "idea of world-destruction" is only one aspect of the atomic fission produced in the human psyche by the reading of Aristophanes. His genius, like Goethe's, answers to the dynamic polarity of the deepest of nature's essential contradictions. There are hints of a multitudinous exhalation of rhythmic world-architecture rising afresh from this abyss of world-destruction. "Thou hast shattered it all—the beautiful world! Build it again—fairer than before!" The Graces, "hunting for a sanctuary that could never be shaken," found it in this great comedian's soul. He certainly causes the choir-stall pavement under the shuffling sandals of generations of religious performances to heave and crack; and the humorously querulous tone he assumes when he unmasks one treachery after another against the essential honesty and friendliness and kindness of that ordinary human nature which governments and moralists and prophets and patriots refuse to leave alone has, I fancy, an effect that is often more disturbing to our besotted dictators and preposterous governments than any earthquake shocks of Olympus-rocking ribaldry. Does it not seem as if it were more in the tone of their most popular characters' soliloquies, the soliloquies, I mean, of Hamlet,

Falstaff, Gargantua and Don Quixote rather than in their more dramatic outcries, that the peculiar Rabelaisian Cervantean Shakespearean reaction to life, a reaction whose quite special and definite character can be shown to be common to these three great ones, all men of the Classical Renaissance to whom quite properly we still apply—and some of us struggle hard to be worthy of it even today!—that good historic word *Humanist*, that makes both the totalitarian police-state of this world and the totalitarian police-state of the next world hop and skip though we twentieth century humanists can do little against them being as we are, naturally disorganized and naturally timid, while the police-state of earth and the police-state of heaven are as brave as they are remorseless and as wooden-headed as they are iron-handed?

But to return to our honest cod, Dicaeopolis, fussing and fidgeting in the empty Ecclesia. Here indeed is the sort of soliloquizing which in Rabelais and Cervantes and Shakespeare has that peculiar and special appeal to the unsquared, uncaught, uncommitted, unbranded, unbaptized, unredeemed cosmic-comic souls of ordinary people who enjoy their life and long to enjoy their life undisturbed by either compulsory fixation or compulsory evolution. Now of all literary effects, whether in prose or in poetry, whether in narrative or in drama, the special and peculiar effect of the soliloquizing in complete detachment from every preconception of race, class, and family and from every moral taboo, by a shameless but not a wicked person, is the fullest of amusing and penetrating significance. *Not* a wicked person, mind you. *That* is the point; and *there* is the rub. For that the heart of man left to itself is *not* "desperately wicked" as such essentially Christian souls as Dostoevsky and St. Paul assume it to be, is as much an axiom of Aristophanes as it is of Rousseau. And just as our Pantagruelian, Falstaffian, Shandean, soliloquizer is not necessarily wicked, so he is not necessarily brave, or stoical, or heroic, or even exceptionally wise. He is, and *must* be, as representing a constantly recurrent type, a

fairly good “mixer”, a person moderately free from neurotic obsessions, but he is not in the least less valuable as “the perfect soliloquizer” for being not particularly patriotic but with a strong preference for Greeks whether friends or enemies, over barbarous orientals and wholly free from any particular erotic obsession. In fact the more completely does our soliloquizer represent the average human frailties of normal people the better adapted for our purpose he is; but at the same time, be it understood, he must possess *some* amusing and indestructible touch of originality or he may turn out little better than a nice but hopelessly wearisome drag-witted, long-winded egotist. Aristophanes doesn’t fail to supply his well-meaning shameless individualist from the country with exactly the right qualities for a born soliloquizer, especially a soliloquizer on the Sacred Hill and among the empty benches of the Ecclesia. And so Dicaeopolis making all the most emphatic gestures of utter boredom, gestures that could be clearly seen from the remotest row of his enormous audience in the vast Athenian open-air theatre at the Lenaean Festival of Dionysus in the sixth year of the war with Sparta, talks to himself as follows: “O how many things I’ve got to torment me! And when I try to think of any nice things, how many do you suppose can I call up? Mighty few, O terribly, terribly few. Just exactly four! But as to the maddening worries that leave me no peace. How can I, dear Gods in heaven, sum up their number? More are they than the piled-up sands of all the shores of all the world! Well, now let’s see; what are the precious things that really have thrilled me? God! But I can tell you one of them, right off the reel! Was I glad, or wasn’t I, tell me *that*, my good friends, when I saw Cleon cough up those five talents!

That *was* something to see; and didn’t I advise the Knight, for that little job? Worthy of Hellas *that* was! But for getting it in the neck—you should see me in the Theatre, all agog and gaping for Æschylus when the announcer bawls, ‘Theognis and his Chorus!’ what about *that* for a knockout to my old heart? And I tell you, never, no!

not since I could wash myself, have my eyes been so bothered by the dust as they are today, when, though the time has come for the opening of the morning-assembly, here is the Pnyx totally empty save for my devoted self while our precious citizens chattering and chaffering in the market-place are dodging about now here, now there, to escape the vermillion rope. Not a sign of the Prytanes yet! Ye gods! and when they do appear you’ll be amazed at the scrimmage! Positively fighting for the first seats they’ll be bolting for them tooth and claw! As for peace in the world, and in this poor wounded Hellas, do you think they give these things a thought? *Not they!* Not one tiny little fragment of a thought! O City! O City! And here am I faithful at my post, as usual, always the first to take my seat in the Ecclesia, here I’ve got nothing to do, but grumble and yawn and stretch and break wind and try to think things out and make a few notes and pluck at my hair and get my ideas into some kind of order, but always come back to staring into the distance where lie the fields and the vineyards, always come back to longing for peace, to hating this town-life, to pining for my own home-stead which never at anytime shrieked at me, ‘Buy coal! Buy vinegar! Buy oil!’ or so much as knew the word ‘Buy’ but of itself brought me everything and Mister ‘Buy’ could go to hell. But now, I tell you I’ve come briefed and primed for this occasion; bursting to bawl, to barge in, to interrupt the speakers and generally to raise hell, when anybody utters a word that hasn’t to do with making peace. But look! Here are our Prytanes! And in good hour they come; for it’s noon already. And didn’t I say so? Each man of them scrimmaging for the best seat!”

Dicaeopolis is now interrupted in *his* soliloquy by the entrance not only of the Prytanes, these presiding officers of the Assembly, but of the Herald, and of an eccentric private citizen descended from the immortal gods.

HERALD: Forward! Forward! Forward!  
Forward to the consecrated ground!  
AMPHITHEUS: Has anybody spoken yet?  
HERALD: Who wishes to speak?

AMPHITHEUS: I.

HERALD: Who are you?

AMPHITHEUS: Amphitheus.

HERALD: Not a man?

AMPHITHEUS: O no! I am an undying immortal. For my ancestor, Amphitheus was the son of Ceres and Triptolemus. He begat Celeus who married my grandmother Phaenarete from whom was born Lucinus who begat me, an immortal; yes me to whom the gods have entrusted the duty of making peace with the Lacedaemonians. Yet listen to this, men of Athens, immortal though I am I have no journey-money. Not a penny! The Prytanes won't grant me a penny!

HERALD: Police!

AMPHITHEUS: Triptolemus and Celeus! Can you look on and permit this?

DICAEOPOLIS: What's this, Prytanes? You're insulting our assembly in turning this man out, who was only wanting to make peace and hang up our shields.

At this point in the performance the City-Police or "Toxotai" violently eject Amphitheus.

HERALD, *addressing the indignant Dicaeopolis*: Sit down you, and keep quiet!

DICAEOPOLIS: By Apollo I won't be quiet till a motion for peace is made!

At this point there enter the City's Ambassadors from the great King, the King of Persia.

HERALD: The Ambassadors from the King!  
DICAEOPOLIS: What King? I'm sick of ambassadors and their peacock airs and humbug.

HERALD: Silence!

DICAEOPOLIS: But good God! How these idiots are tricked out! What *have* they got on?

AMBASSADORS: You sent us to the great King on a salary of two drachmae a day when Euthymenes was archon.

DICAEOPOLIS: O those drachmae, those precious drachmae! Don't we know all about these sacred drachmae!

AMBASSADORS: And weren't we tired to death with pitching tent after tent in the plain of the Cayster and half-killed by the luxuriousness of our closed carriages?

DICAEOPOLIS: How do you suppose I got on, then, lying on rubbish heaps on the battlements?

AMBASSADORS: And such was our entertainment that we drank—against our will you

must understand—from glass cups and goblets of gold sweet undiluted wine.

DICAEOPOLIS: O City of Cranaus! Will you never see how these ambassadors make sport of you?

At this point we have to imagine on this astonishing Dionysiac stage one of the dramatic pauses that proclaim the entrance of an entirely new and extremely startling figure. The person who enters now is indeed an object that might amaze the most hardened theatre-goer. The ambassadors introduce him with pride and the Herald announces him as Pseudartabas, "the King's Eye".

DICAEOPOLIS: I'd give something to see a crow peck *yours* out, you curst ambassador!

HERALD: The King's Eye!

DICAEOPOLIS: Lord Hercules! Shall I tell you what you're like? You're like a painted ship rounding the Cape with an eye-hole for a rower's oar!

AMBASSADOR: Come now, Pseudartabas, let's hear what the King sent you to announce to the people of Athens?

KING'S EYE: "Artanab Xerxes pissona Satra."

AMBASSADOR: You understand what he says?

DICAEOPOLIS: By Apollo! not a blessed word!

AMBASSADOR: He says the King will send you gold. Say that about the gold, King's Eye, a little louder and clearer.

KING'S EYE: No gold for you, you gaping sods of Ionians!

DICAEOPOLIS: Well, we're done for. No luck for us. *That's* clear enough anyway!

AMBASSADOR: What did he say?

DICAEOPOLIS: You're asking what he said? He said the Ionians are gaping sods to expect gold from the barbarians.

At this point, Dicaeopolis takes upon himself the business of examining "the King's Eye" and compels this painted image to admit that the ambassadors are tricksters and liars; and indeed Dicaeopolis has already begun to feel a suspicion that beneath the eunuchs' robes of two of the attendants upon Pseudartabas are the shaven bodies of two familiar Attic pimps, Cleisthenes and Straton, who have been reduced to robbing the State in this new

fashion. This suspicion is confirmed when the Herald re-entering announces that he has been ordered by the Senate to invite "the King's Eye" and his eunuch-attendants to a banquet in the Prytaneum. And so indignant does this whole business of political graft make our honest farmer that he decides to do a dreadful and terrible deed. "deinon ergon kai mega", nothing less in fact than to despatch the demigod Amphith-eus to Sparta to make a separate peace for himself and his family! Now the quick way in which this astounding move is carried through is our first introduction to one of the most noticeable and important of all the dramatic devices adopted by Aristophanes. In fact this method of his is much more than a device. On it depends the whole vital energy of his comedies. It is the way in which he produces his *illusion of reality*; and it implies a considerable if not a complete disregard for those sacred "unities" a reverence for which—though it was never explained to me in precise detail what they were or why they were so indispensable—most students of my generation will recall as playing an almost theological part in what we were taught about classic drama. What I am now praising in Aristophanes is indeed a method inherent in the very soul of his genius; for it combines incredibly rapid external movements and outward happenings with a still more rapid mental accompaniment. The more anyone examines this method and the closer attention he gives to its implications, the more convinced he will become that this method is not only the greatest theatrical innovation or invention ever made but one that reduces the importance of all theatrical devices to the minimum. It is, as a matter of fact, an invention that lends itself with a natural perfection of ease to our modern methods of broadcasting. It is a method that makes all other stage-presentations seem preposterously theatrical. For the truth is that, though this amazing Aristophanic method whirls you about most literally from pillar to post, it manages by the way it uses the consciousness of its "hero" or "heroine" to keep up a humorous running

commentary not only upon the immediate and particular situation which is often as fantastic as anything in the German stories collected by the Brothers Grimm, but upon Hellenic life in general, and in a yet wider connection upon the whole comical-tragical-pitiful predicament of the whole race of man upon this sun-begotten, moon-besotted earth. But the real secret of this Aristophanic method, compared with which all other "theatre stuff" save a few scenes in Job and Æschylus and Shakespeare appears rhetorical and pretentious, lies in his reduction to what is negligible and unessential of all stage-sets, stage-direction, stage-machinery, stage-effects. The effect of Aristophanic world-drama, and world-drama it still remains as we can see from the startling relevance of its commentaries on life to what is going on in the world today, depends entirely upon imagination and upon imagination conjured up in words. It is essentially an art of hearing rather than of seeing. What we *see* in this Aristophanic Cloud-Cuckoo Town of Human Comedy are the "topless towers" that rise "like an exhalation" out of the crucible of what we *hear*; in fact out of the magic cauldron of rhythmic words. In the genius of Aristophanes more than anywhere else in the whole of art, everything depends on the imagination. Where you are, and why you're there, and how long you'll be there, and how you'll escape from there, and what sort of "some-place-else" it'll be you'll escape to when you do escape, all these aspects of solid reality around us are made subject to a mysterious wand of *transformation*. The outward depends utterly upon the inward; and the pleasure and pain, the beauty and horror, of what our reason, our senses, our emotions report to us are subject to the magic power of the imagination. It is the imagination charged with the magnetism of the will to give life and to destroy life that takes the occasion by the throat, time by the hair, outward reality by the horns, and after destroying life with one breath, re-creates it with another. Now the *Acharnians* offers us several perfect examples of this imaginative method, a method that may be said to make

all external scenes shift and change without any rumbling of stage-machinery according to what I might call *the Imaginative Will*. There are people who would call this self-delusion. There are others who would call it "impassioned acceptance" or "love of fate", or "immersion in the destructive element". But it is none of these things. It is something quite different. And it is only by saturating ourselves in the *words* of Aristophanes that we can hope to discover his secret, since it is by words that his magnetic power reaches us, and we can see by the structure of his comedies what in life he regarded as essential and what in life he regarded as unessential. Presently, for instance, we shall find Aristophanes pretending that a basket of charcoal is as dear to his cantankerous forest dwellers as if it were some tribal baby. And then a little later—without any novelistic descriptions to make the thing more credible—we suddenly find our honest, impulsive, simple-minded, satirical, indignant friend knocking at the gate of the town-house of Euripides. Now this whole incident lends itself in a most beautiful way to my contention that all the eleven comedies are nothing less than one long subjective *Interior Soliloquy*, which, though using as masks and mediums all manner of separate heroes and heroines, philosophizes both upon life in Hellas and upon life in the world in general. It is in fact this perpetual soliloquizing combined with the sequence of wild and crazy events which make up its subject-matter that compels us to face the startling truth that what the method of Aristophanes really resembles is the modern novel; and by "modern" I do not mean Dostoevsky or Balzac; I mean any casually selected group from the most neurotic-exciting, fantastical-comical, sardonic-circumstantial, recklessly-chaotic, story-tellers, male or female of the present day.

By the expression "soliloquizing" I do not mean that the chief character in each of the comedies keeps up a running commentary on all that's happening on the stage. Nor do I mean that the chief character entirely

represents the author. *That* role is explicitly allowed for in the excellent custom of the "parabasis", a self-praising oration, spoken in a particularly lively and beguiling rhythm wherein the author attacks his rivals, propounds his political ideas and utters a defiant defence of his aesthetic method.

What I might call the "divine" or if you prefer, "demonic" soliloquizing in Aristophanes is by no means confined to the utterances of the chief character whether male or female. It is a sort of recurrent *philosophical aside* into which any of his persons may at any moment naturally fall, and the opposite of whose philosophic detachment is the animal instinct, the party bigotry, the savage violence, and poetical rhapsodizing of the over-emotional mob of creatures who constitute the chorus. Whenever this tone of pure philosophical detachment enters, we are permitted the privilege of eavesdropping as if through some crack in the adamantine curtain of destiny to an irresponsible cosmogonic Immortal who is commenting, not in a sardonic but in an outrageously humorous way, upon some burlesque performance in heaven of the history of our tragic-comic race. For in fact we feel in each of this amazing person's comedies, as if we were surreptitiously and sacrilegiously overhearing some actual demonic soliloquy of the creative Demi-urge himself "while the orchestra breathes fitfully the music of the spheres".

But to return to the open-air parliament of Athens whence the impoverished, though divinely-descended Amphitheus, having been given his fare by our farmer-friend Dicaeopolis, is now travelling faster than if he were in a jet-plane to Sparta, and back, to obtain some samples of private treaties for that heroic pacifist.

HERALD: Room for Theorus who has returned from Sitalces, King of Thrace!

THEORUS: Behold me!

DICAEOPOLIS: So you've brought us another rascal, have you?

THEORUS: We shouldn't have remained so long in Thrace at this critical time if—

DICAEOPOLIS: God, no! you sure wouldn't if you hadn't been getting a critical salary!

THEORUS: If Zeus hadn't been as frosty and icy *there* as Theognis, our chilly tragedian, *here*. I spent the time drinking with King Sitalces. Indeed he was so enamoured of our people that he would scribble on his walls: 'Lovely, lovely Athenians' . . . and now he has sent you the most warlike tribe in Thrace.

DICAEOPOLIS: You've only to look at him to know that!

HERALD: Advance you Thracians, for whom our city is indebted to Theorus.

*Enter a gang of catamites looking suspiciously like Athenian pimps.*

DICAEOPOLIS: What the devil are these?

THEORUS: A band of the noble Thracian tribe called Odamanti.

DICAEOPOLIS: What Odamanti? What do you mean? Aren't these fellows eunuchs from our own brothels?

THEORUS: For a couple of drachmas they'd ravage the whole of Boeotia.

Here the pretended Odamanti attack Dicaeopolis and rob him of the garlic he was intending to enjoy during the session.

DICAEOPOLIS: Help Prytanes! Help Officer! Am I to be treated like this in my own country and by a set of sham Barbarians? I forbid any further discussion in this Assembly of these mountebank Thracians and their pay! I announce an omen from above! This very second I felt a drop of rain!

HERALD: The Thracians must now retire. The day after tomorrow they can return. But for today the Prytanes dismiss the Assembly.

DICAEOPOLIS: Curse my luck! Just what would happen to me to lose that exquisite garlic! But here's Amphitheus back from Sparta! Welcome, Amphitheus!

AMPHITHEUS: 'Welcome' *nothing!* Anyway not till I've got my breath! Heaven save us all! The Acharnians are after me.

DICAEOPOLIS: What on earth's the matter?

AMPHITHEUS: I was coming back from Sparta with the private peace you wanted when a pack of old Acharnians got on my track, lusty old boys, hearts of oak, tough as hell. Marathon fighters, stomachs of maple-pith. And you *should* have heard their howls. 'Traitor! Do you dare bring a peace when our vines have been ruined?' And they began picking up stones and filing their cloaks with

stones and I had to run for it. And after me, hell-for-leather, they rushed yelling like mad.

DICAEOPOLIS: Let them yell. But have you got my private peace?

AMPHITHEUS: I should say I have.

It is at this point, while the farmer is scrutinizing his panting messenger very closely, it becomes evident that the Protean imagination of the author is using three separate wine-skins to represent the above-mentioned three treaties and that it is one of these which the half-god emissary is now offering to our hero.

AMPHITHEUS: Here are three samples. Take this one and taste it.

DICAEOPOLIS: Horrible!

AMPHITHEUS: You don't like that one?

DICAEOPOLIS: I should say not! Why, it reeks of tar and naval dock-yards!

AMPHITHEUS: Well, try this other one then, and see what you make of it!

DICAEOPOLIS: No! This tastes mighty sourly of tedious negotiations between our municipalities and of intolerable delays among our allies.

AMPHITHEUS: Here's the third then. Thirty years of peace by land and sea.

DICAEOPOLIS: Dionysia! Here's the one! Why, it smells of ambrosia and nectar! It doesn't say 'Join up at once with rations for three days!' Its purple-stained mouth says 'Go wherever you like!' This is my treaty and here's what I'll take! Gods! Won't I drink deep of it! Gods won't I pour it out before your blest altars bidding this bunch of mad Acharnians clear off! And now for my native acres and the glorious worship of Dionysus!

AMPHITHEUS: As for me, I'll put a few more miles between my immortal state and your Marathon Acharnians!

At this point in the play the whole scene must be imagined as completely changed. We are now transported into the heart of the vineyards and plantations of Acharnia.

We are in some ruined vineyard just outside the homestead of our friend Dicaeopolis, where [are gathered] the whole *Chorus* of veteran Acharnians who have returned during the long years since the defeat of the Persians to their normal labour as expert and industrious charcoal burners. It is important to remember, in order to appreciate all that follows, that the smallest

quantity of this precious commodity has become of inestimable value to these old veterans of Marathon, who are now running wildly and desperately round their village trying to find Dicaeopolis, of whose arrival they have heard and whom they intend to stone to death for his treachery to Athens in making this abominable private peace with their remorseless enemy. Dicaeopolis now suddenly emerges from his dwelling accompanied by his farm-boy who is bearing the great symbolic Phallic pole and also by his wife and daughter who are carrying the sacred basket and the other utensils necessary for the Dionysiac rites. It is at such points in our author's plays as the one at which we have now arrived: ticklish points, delicate points, critical points, crucial points, pivotal points, points on which the whole of the dramatic humour depends, that the art of translation becomes so terribly important. Let us try my dear reader, to imagine ourselves directing a broadcast of "the *Acharnians*". How would we reproduce the effect of this furious crowd of patriotic old charcoal-burners whose hands and garments are weighed down by sharp-pointed, sharp-edged stones with which they propose to stone to death this treacherous neighbour of theirs as they encounter the complacent and well-satisfied Dicaeopolis gravely attired and attended by his excited family marching in solemn procession to celebrate the Dionysiac ritual? An immensely old religious tradition evoking that awe-inspiring feeling of some *tremendum mysterium*, suggesting a sense that Deity is really and truly present with us, "numen inest", brings it about that this little private religious service, with a Phallic pole symbolizing the creative pressure of the sap of Spring actually on its way to make fecund the whole earth, has its religious effect even upon these furious charcoal-burners. What will presently happen will be the dividing of this indignant crowd of charcoal-burners into two parties, one much more conservative, conventional, moralistic and timid than the other; and it is of course Dicaeopolis's complete familiarity with his native village that makes him able to

beguile this chorus of old patriots into "moderates" and "extremists". Meanwhile we modern *British* spectators [are present] at this encounter between the most sacred of all imaginable celebrations of our worship of life, and the furious band of ex-army and ex-navy veterans of the Athenian sea-empire bent on lynching, as we would put it today, an individual who has made peace with the enemy. The chorus of war-veterans now charcoal-burners have been cursing the infirmities of age which have made it hard for them to gather stones and to hunt the man down and now, while they've got both the stones and the man, they are forced to delay their attack till this religious service has at least passed its most solemn point. Well! It is just here that the art of the translator is so important. Dicaeopolis comes on the scene at the head of his little procession uttering the ritual proclamation which the poet Horace interprets as "favete linguis" but which our own children would probably interpret negatively rather than positively as [one] who should say "Hush Child! Remember you're in church!" The Greek word Aristophanes actually makes Dicaeopolis repeat in his liturgical pronouncement is the word "euphemeite" which being interpreted would, I take it, be "Speak well!" And what I fancy this expression really implies is to wish to win as much luck and acquire as much merit as our propitiary offering to the gods would naturally bring to us if not side-tracked by any unpropitious word, inauspicious or ill-omened we ourselves or anyone in our vicinity either accidentally or in mischievous ribaldry might let fall. The effect upon the Acharnian chorus of furious old charcoal-burners wild with patriotic frenzy, of their encounter with this little procession is instantaneous. They recognize at once the traitor they have come to stone to death; but the sacred "Euphemeite! euphemeite!" quells them completely for the moment and their leader whispers, "Silence every one of you! Don't you hear the *euphemia*? But it's the fellow we're after right enough. Here! Let's get out of the way till this is over! The man's clearly come out to sacrifice."

DICAEOPOLIS: Euphemeite! Euphemeite!  
On with the basket—just a little way, that's  
enough! Lift the Phallus straight now.  
Xanthias, and keep it well upright! Now,  
daughter of mine, you can put the basket on  
the ground, so that we can begin offering our  
holy oblation.

DAUGHTER: You must hand me the ladle  
first of all, Mother, and then you and Father  
shall see me pour the condiments on the cake.

While the girl is thus occupied, Dicaeopolis, in the highest good spirits and clearly feeling a deep glow of authentic gratitude to the mysterious divinity of the juices of autumn and the sap of spring, presents us with a most enlightening indication of what any emotional worship of the gods actually meant in Attica and the Isles of Greece two thousand four hundred years ago. He begins with a prayer that has the recognizable ring of all the old primordial harvest-festivals; and it is interesting to hear him call Dionysus "Lord-Master" or "Heavenly Despot".

DICAEOPOLIS: O how beautiful it is, Dionysus Despot, and with what sweet delight I *feel* it that now free from this curst war and all its burdens I can at last, I and all that pertain unto me, offer thee glory and worship and honour and grace and the blest season's gifts and I beseech thee that my peace of Thirty Years be prosperous!

Here ends our hero's religious invocation. But an interesting textual point arises just here; for some of the good modern texts—Berk's for instance published in Germany by Teubner in 1895—dismiss Dicaeopolis's wife altogether from this scene, save as a silent onlooker appealed to by both father and daughter, and attribute to Dicaeopolis himself her gross words to the girl. But the words, while bawdy enough in themselves, possess what might be described as feminine rather than masculine bawdiness, and in any case they seem in some curious way to be inappropriate to Dicaeopolis, about whose whimsical though not particularly subtle mental process we have already come to know a good deal. But here they are for the reader to judge.

WIFE: Come, daughter! You're pretty enough to make carrying that basket a prettier thing still! So put on your best crab-apple-

juice—the woman's perfect expression 'thumbrophagon' is well translated by Hickie in the old Bohn Library as 'verjuice'—for lucky indeed will be the man who gets you for his own and hugs you so hard at dawn that he makes you break wind like a weasel! On with you child! But for heaven's sake, take care if you get into the crowd that nobody pinches your trinkets!

At this point Dicaeopolis dismisses both wife and daughter, bidding them watch what remained of his Dionysiac celebration from the window of their home. With his women away, our honest farmer lets his heart flow out in shameless worship of the great copulating instinct that replenishes the earth! His orgiastic litany soon resolves itself into one of those rushing torrents of melodious short lines that in their passionate abandonment make you think of Shelley or Swinburne. But the mob of old charcoal-burners are now upon him with stones.

CHORUS: There he is! There he is! There he is! Throw! Throw! Throw! Throw! At the sod, all of you! What the devil are you waiting for?

DICAEOPOLIS: Dear Hercules! What's this? Careful! What are you doing? You've cracked my ritual-pot already!

CHORUS: We'll crack your ugly mug, you filthy rogue!

DICAEOPOLIS: But what have I done, most venerable elders?

CHORUS: What have you done, do you say? How can you ask, shameful, filthy one, betraying your country and making a private peace for yourself alone!

DICAEOPOLIS: But listen why I made this peace! Listen to the reasons!

CHORUS: Listen? We'll finish you off first and *then* we'll listen! These stones will be our listening!

DICAEOPOLIS: I won't submit to it! Not till I've been heard. Have you *no* patience, my good, excellent, well-meaning neighbours?

CHORUS: Not a grain! We won't hear a word from you. We hate you worse than Cleon, whom tomorrow we'll cut into shoe-leather for the Knights. Hear your long tiresome tricky speeches? *You*, who've made peace with the Lacedaemonians. We'll show you!

DICAEOPOLIS: For heaven's sake, my

dear, good neighbours, leave the Lacedaemonians out of it, and let me tell you about this peace of mine and what a fine treaty it is!

CHORUS: How can you talk of anything fine when you've made peace with people who respect neither altar nor loyalty nor oath?

DICAEOPOLIS: O listen to me, crazy ones! I tell you I know for an absolute certainty that these confounded Lacedaemonians whom naturally we've no love for at this moment aren't guilty of *all* the evils we're suffering from!

CHORUS: Not of all? O you supreme villain! And you actually have the gall to say this to our face!

DICAEOPOLIS: No! *Not* of all! I say again not, not, not of all! And what is more I'll go further and tell you now, yes! I who am speaking now will tell you, that these our enemies have been injured *by us* in some cases!

CHORUS: This word of yours is terrible. It makes a person's heart turn over! Do we actually hear you say you'll speak in favour of our enemies?

DICAEOPOLIS: Yes, and if what I tell you isn't just and right and fair and you people don't see it, you can, [sic] for I'll utter it with my head on the block!

CHORUS: Tell me, fellow-tribesmen, are we going to waste these good stones or are we going to pound this villain into a bloody pulp?

DICAEOPOLIS: O my friends, my friends! Is this same hell's coal going to blaze up again in your crazy hearts? Hear me, hear me, Acharnians!

CHORUS: We won't hear you.

DICAEOPOLIS: But it'll cause me extreme suffering to be finished off with these stones.

CHORUS: We'll be damned if we'll hear a word.

DICAEOPOLIS: I'm not so sure about that.

CHORUS: Well, see here! You'll be dead before you can.

DICAEOPOLIS: *Now* what say you? Yes! I'll do it; I'll kill these darlings of your hearts! I've got hostages of yours here that I'll slaughter before your eyes!

CHORUS: Say, neighbours! What's he threatening to do to us now? Has he got a child of anyone here in that basket? What's making him talk so big?

DICAEOPOLIS: Throw your stones as fast

as you like! Here's what I shall kill; and quickly shall I see who cares for coals.

CHORUS: O we're lost; this basket of preciousness is the very blood of our very blood! Don't think of such a frightful thing! Please! Please!

But at this point it becomes irresistible to play the part of one of those old nameless scholiasts whose observations seem to float like book-worm flies with flashing wings round these immortal texts and to point out how, after the two thousand and some hundreds of years that separate us from our author, certain technical aspects of our most up-to-date life lend themselves with beautiful appropriateness to some of his subtlest effects. I am referring of course to the Radio. All the translations that I've yet seen of the the *Acharnians* are at pains to explain what exactly happens now *on stage*. But what happens in reality happens not so much on the stage as in the imagination; indeed it might almost seem that, at this first inspired seizure of the little coal-basket which one of the Chorus must have been carrying home to his own hearth, Dicaeopolis didn't fully realize all he could make of his combustible hostage. It was the leader of the Chorus himself who so to say humanizes the characteristically Aristophanic idea of making a hostage of this inanimate and symbolic object, the dear little charcoal basket, by suggesting that there *might* be concealed in the basket the living human child of one of those present, *paidion ton paronton endon*. But this "child in the basket" is only an after-thought and not at all of the essence of the situation; for presently our author makes his unusually imaginative farmer talk of "the abundant coal-dust" squirted upon him by this cuttlefish of a basket. The truth is that the secret of Aristophanes, the "art" in him that "adds to Nature" and yet "is an art that Nature makes", lies more in his handling of the *inanimate* than in anything else. Here he has something in common with Grimm's fairy stories as well as with the Welsh Mabinogion. It is a quality at once child-like and outrageous but has other elements in it also that penetrate so deeply into life that we

might presume to call them “comic-cosmic” “mesons” of psychic nuclear force. Just as with the *Iliad* and with *Don Quixote* and with Rabelais and with Shakespeare the real genius of this great humanist and humorist is best caught so to say, “on the wing”, that is when in absolute loneliness an ordinary person who is neither a scholar nor an antiquary nor even in the academic sense a philosopher, reads these plays to himself. He should puzzle over each Greek sentence with the aid of the most starkly literal and least literary “crib” or school-boy “key” of which he can get hold. For the enchantment is first and last in the human imagination of the author appealing to a kindred human imagination in the reader! With all due respect to our great actors and great stage-directors and great illustrators, the truth remains that the subtlest and most poignant and most humorous effects evoked by the scenes between Don Quixote and Sancho and by the scenes between Friar John and Panurge and Pantagruel, just as much as the grandest poetical effects of Hamlet and Lear and Macbeth, can really and truly only be appreciated by solitary readers, far removed from any theatre! These supreme effects can only be caught so to say “on the wing”, and the same applies even to Dickens himself, as every solitary imaginative youth or maid knows too well, who has a Father who is “fond of reading to his family”!

Of course, the two things are quite different and strictly speaking, I am well aware by no means *rule each other out*. Many an Athenian youth—for women, so we’re always being assured by our scholars, bringing to literature a touch of masculine as well as of academic unction, “weren’t allowed in the Dionysiac Theatre”—must have had the keenest mental and aesthetic thrills of his whole life as, listening to one or other of these rare performances, he caught some individual touch or situation or imaginative flight that seemed in some special predetermined way to appeal directly and particularly to him. Because Shakespeare as well as the ancient Greeks depended for the expression of his art on the receptivity of a particular audience and because the magnetic

and atmospheric intoxication of a particular audience intensified all individual emotion to what might sometimes have been an ecstasy of feeling, *that doesn’t mean* that Charles Lamb, himself an impassioned play-goer, was merely talking like an eccentric recluse when he confessed that he enjoyed the supreme effects of these plays more completely when he was reading them to himself than when he was watching his adored actors play them. But though we solitary, unscholarly, unacademic readers may get a more exquisite thrill from these eleven comedies than any single citizen did in those crowds of fanciful, critical, political, electrical Athenians when in their laughter and applause his genius rocked and convulsed them as the South Wind of the Aegean Sea, it still remains that we ordinary people of this mid-twentieth century feel simply staggered at the astounding receptivity and sensitivity of this vast audience of the privileged citizens of no mean city some two thousand four hundred years ago. For no great poet could go on writing comedy after comedy throughout one of the most hapless and ruinous wars without the encouragement of the cleverest and subtlest populace there has ever existed. But to return to our play where we left Dicaeopolis standing in ferocious isolation over the basket of charcoal which he has forcibly seized and is now savagely threatening as if it were a living creature. The Acharnian charcoal-burners are naturally profoundly disturbed by this threat to a thing which though inanimate symbolizes their labour, their life, their livelihood, their sacred tradition, their hope of the future. But half of them, in spite of sharing their companions’ distress and apprehension, are still old Marathon-men and are prepared to go on with the stoning of this Sparta-loving traitor even at the risk of his carrying out his appalling threat.

DICAEOPOLIS: He dies, I tell you. You can cry your hearts out. Nothing can make me listen.

CHORUS: Do you mean to say you’ll really kill this comrade of mine?

DICAEOPOLIS: Sure I will! You didn’t listen to me just now.

CHORUS: All right. We're beaten. Say what you want to say about loving the Spartans! We yield. We can't betray this little basket.

DICAEOPOLIS: Throw down your stones then!

CHORUS: They're on the ground. Don't you see how we've shaken our clothes? But don't you try fooling us now. You can see for yourself what a shaking we've given our every rag in the swirl of our dance.

DICAEOPOLIS: What a near shave! And so you were going to start a grand hullabaloo, weren't you? And your sweet coals from the slopes of Parnes were within an inch of their death, weren't they? Thanks to the shameful behaviour of yourselves, their darling compatriots, while your coal-basket-comrade like a cuttle fish in its panic squirted a peck of coal-dust over me. Isn't it terrible that the minds of men should be bitter-sour that they can do nothing but throw stones and hurl abuse and hate compromise like the devil? I'm ready to say my say on behalf of the Lacedaemonians with my head on a chopping-block. And yet I love my life.

While our farmer-friend is being trusted by the indignant old charcoal-burners to fetch his boasted chopping-block, I would

like to enlarge a little upon the man's character and personality as with the subtler and more sophisticated humorous characters in Shakespeare such as the melancholy Jacques in *As You Like It* and the lively Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. This can only be done by taking certain of the famous symbolic lines put into their mouths as the text of what I want to say. Isn't, for instance, the peculiar tone of voice and I might go further and say the peculiar atmosphere of habitual temperament such as we have already detected in our hero during his opening soliloquy in the empty Ecclesia growing still more definite and unmistakable? The tone of humorous petulant playful hopelessness with which the man who finds himself lamenting all this violence and abuse and regretting that the heart of man cannot balance th[e]\*

\*PR Editor's Note

The manuscript breaks off thus in mid-sentence and mid-word. After this, Powys wrote something which he scribbled over. Mr Bissell reads it as follows: "N.B. *read* cries this discourse of the scholiast John!"

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# Laurence Coupe

## The Comic Vision of T. F. Powys

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T. F. Powys has suffered not only from neglect but, where attention has been given, from a twofold misapprehension. He was taken up briefly by *Scrutiny* in the thirties; thereafter a consensus somehow emerged that his art was "folk" and "tragic". There having been little challenge to the application of these terms, he is still taken by those who feel no real obligation to read him as a gloomy modern equivalent of Bunyan.

I wish to argue that in terms of both structure and vision Powys is a profoundly comic writer. I do not mean simply that his work contains humorous observations and incidents but that he consciously uses the traditional pattern of comedy, based ultimately on pagan fertility myth and ritual, for his own serious purpose.

Q. D. Leavis did some unwitting damage early on: linking Powys with George Sturt, she spoke simply of the rich idiom of "the old culture of the English country-side" as opposed to the "inflexible and brutal" jargon of modern suburban life: spoke of that and of little else.<sup>1</sup> But only a decade ago Raymond Williams felt able to dismiss even such work as *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* under the category of "regional novel".<sup>2</sup>

An early booklet-length study of the fiction tells us that we "must take account of Powys's preoccupation with Death".<sup>3</sup> Thirty years later, with little evidence of any general interest in between, the first full-length account of his fiction appears, but only to conclude that "he was ultimately a tragic writer".<sup>4</sup>

The one critical comment on T. F. Powys which comes close to apprehending his true spirit is brief and parenthetical, made by William Empson in his account of the development of the pastoral form: "his object in writing about country people is to get a

simple enough material for his purpose, which one might sum up as a play with Christian imagery backed only by a Buddhist union of God and death".<sup>5</sup> Here we are at least beyond folk wisdom; and it would be a strange Buddhist who saw anything as tragic other than man's attempt to resist the fact of mortality.

\* \* \*

We all know where the title *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* comes from: *Emma* by Jane Austen. Let us remind ourselves, though, of the specific context. It is chapter 15, where Emma is forced to sit in a two-seater carriage with the odious Mr. Elton as they bid farewell to their evening's host, Mr. Weston. Emma's interest in the clergyman has hitherto amounted only to plotting his marriage to her young protégée Harriet Weaver; otherwise she finds him simply tiresome, and now she is rightly apprehensive: "She believed he had been drinking too much of Mr. Weston's good wine, and felt sure that he would want to be talking nonsense." Far worse than this occurs though: Mr. Elton seizes Emma by the hand and begins making violent protestations of love to herself.

*Emma* of course belongs to the narrative genre which we call comedy: not because of its author's sense of humour but because of its structure. From the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence and from Shakespeare we know that structure to be based on a move from ignorance to knowledge, frustration to fulfilment, isolation to identity. Emma, once she has understood the error of her presumption, may marry Mr. Knightley. The episode to which we have referred offers one illustration of that crucial period of sexual confusion which precedes the triumph of harmony.

T. F. Powys, who knew the cultural anthropology of Frazer well, would have understood that comedy ultimately—Jane Austen's included—derives from fertility myth and ritual. It is essentially about the tension between winter and spring, death and life. Just as in tragedy the fertility god disappears and in a sense dies, so in comedy he revives and reappears to be restored to the fertility goddess. Whether we know that god as Dionysus, Adonis or Tammuz, we say the original power is that of Eros. On the psychoanalytical level also the structure of comedy is clearly erotic: the drive towards the release of tension. Hence nothing—even the author, unless he wishes to make a display of being ironic—is allowed to prevent the sexual realization at the end, no matter how deep and intractable the period of confusion at the centre of the play or novel. Unlike normal life, art may present us with the triumph of the pleasure over the reality principle.

But Freud in his later work came to see the two principles as complementary rather than antagonistic. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he suggested that *all* behaviour is an attempt to release tension: a release that may seem complete in sexual terms but which is only final in death. In that sense Thanatos comprehends Eros.

All this may seem a long way from fiction which has seemed to most critics a folksy by-product of English literature. Let us consider *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* in more detail.

Mr. Weston, the benevolent old wine merchant, is God; his assistant Michael is the archangel of the same name. They come in their Ford car to the village of Folly Down with a list of potential customers. In order to sell their product they stop all the clocks at seven in the evening: time gives way to eternity. There are two wines; or rather the wine is of two strengths; the lighter one is that of love, the darker that of death. As Mr. Weston himself says, his wine is "as strong as death and as sweet as love". Love and death, Eros and Thanatos, are described by Powys elsewhere as "the two great realities".

So the central symbol of the book is wine. But an attendant one is that of the spreading oak tree and its mossy bed beneath. Here various virgins, procured by the evil Mrs. Vosper, are seduced by the sons of Squire Mumby, Martin and John. One such was Ada Kiddle, who subsequently drowned herself: she drank the dark wine of Thanatos. The blame for all such sin is attributed by the village to the sexton, Mr. Grunter: he is Adam, still attempting to act as if he were in Eden, seeing no shame in his reputation (which he rather enjoys).

Customers for the light wine include Luke Bird and Jenny Bunce, who are given to each other in marriage and so testify to the power of Eros. "To be happy with another, in all the excitement and the glamour of the spring, is the proper thing to do. Luke longed in his heart to commit, to rejoice in the commital of, the most wanton excesses of love." But there are others who yearn to succumb to Thanatos, notably the vicar Mr. Grobe, who lost his faith after the death of his wife. His daughter Tamar, who is obsessed by the possibility of an angelic lover, is finally carried off into the skies by Michael himself: in her fulfilment Eros and Thanatos are shown to be one.

An important part of Mr. Weston's task is to bring the Mumby sons to repentance. Having revealed his true identity to Grunter, he leads John and Martin to the graveyard, where they expect to find his good wine but where the sexton has unearthed Ada Kiddle:

'My good wine, gentlemen,' said Mr. Weston.

Though the worms had destroyed Ada's beauty, her shape was still there, and Mr. Grunter regarded her compassionately. He saw Ada as if she were a picture, which is the way that all wise countrymen regard the world or anything in it that seems a little curious or out of the common . . .

'You are a liar and a cheat,' Martin shouted at the wine merchant. 'You promised us wine, and you show us the rotted corpse of a whore. Is this your wine?'

Mr. Weston said nothing.<sup>6</sup>

Powys may perhaps be dismissed as having a morbid, even a sadistic streak (consider his

story "The Baked Mole"). But to do so is to miss his real thematic interest: not a passing attention to sexual life as a sort of spice by which to relish all the more the fear of death but a realization of the final identity of the two great realities.

At the close of the novel, Mr. Weston himself is ready to drink the strong wine of death: he orders Michael to set fire to the car:

Michael did as he was told. In a moment a fierce tongue of flame leaped up from the car; a pillar of smoke rose above the flame and ascended into the heavens. The fire died down, smouldered, and went out.

Mr. Weston was gone.<sup>7</sup>

The Biblical associations are hard to ignore. Yet throughout the novel their persistence has not overridden the profane, rural idiom which pleased Mrs. Leavis; and of course its strength has to be acknowledged, without making the mistake of justifying the novel solely on such terms. What is more pertinent is to demonstrate the way in which the "folk" idiom is informed by the spiritual dimension; or conversely the way in which that dimension is substantiated by that idiom. Consider the moment at which Grunter (Adam) recognizes Mr. Weston (God):

'I have work for you to do, John Grunter,' he said.

'And who be thee to command folk?' asked the clerk.

Mr. Weston uncovered his head and looked at him. Until that moment he had kept on his hat.

'Who be thee?' asked Mr. Grunter in a lower tone . . .

'I know thee now,' said Mr. Grunter.

'Then tell no man,' said Mr. Weston.

Mr. Grunter looked happy; he even grinned.

'I did fancy at first,' he said, in a familiar tone, 'that thee was the devil, and so I did walk down church aisle behind 'ee to see if thee's tail did show.'<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Weston's disappearance at the end of the novel is clearly not a touch of homely whimsy: God enters into the death which he

has created; or, following Empson, God and death are shown to be identical. We may be reminded of an earlier tale by Powys, "The Only Penitent", in which Tinker Jar (God) asks Mr. Hayhoe (Adam) for forgiveness for creating all the evils of the world and in particular for allowing his own only son to be crucified. Mr. Hayhoe is only able to grant it because his effort to counter Jar's confession with a reminder of the good things in the world—love included—fails in the face of Jar's reminder of the fact of individual annihilation. That is why Mr. Hayhoe has finally to forgive Jar: he invented death. It is God we must thank for death.

*Mr. Weston's Good Wine* is then not a tragedy in any acceptable sense. True it concentrates to a large extent on the aftermath of the death of Ada Kiddle—though that death has taken place before the story begins. True Mr. Grobe and his daughter accept the darker wine—but there is no sense of protest or loss. Where death is presented as not the terrible contradiction of life and love but their realization, "tragedy" is not an appropriate term. This book is in fact a comedy in the sense that it follows the structure of pagan fertility myth, involving the ever-recurrent springtime victory of life over death; Powys simply accepts that the corresponding autumnal victory of death over life is not a fate to be feared but a comic resolution more desirable even than that of love. Given this emphasis it is not surprising that he makes constant allusion to another book, profoundly comic in structure, which long before that of T. F. Powys resolves in its own way the dichotomy between love and death: I mean the Christian Bible.

In traditional Christian theology there is an inextricable link between sexual love and the fact of death. Put simply, angels do not breed; they are immortal and immaterial. Only fallen man, with the animals, must reproduce his kind and so attempt an immortality of generation. According to St. Augustine Adam and Eve enjoyed a sexless joy in Eden, but after the fall they entered into a world of individual death and birth, death

and birth . . . and so a world of sex. Thus T. F. Powys presents us with the image of the mossy oak tree bed on which both wines are drunk. The possibility of such identity—sex and death as one—gives his language its paradoxical force. This brings him close not so much to Bunyan as to Shakespeare (Lear's "I will die like a smug bridegroom") and Donne ("A bracelet of bright hair about the bone").

Again in *Unclay* John Death is sent by God to gather up Joseph Bridle and Susie Dawe, but loses his parchment of names and so spends the whole summer resting from his usual labour of "scything" and finds delight in love. As he explains to the parson's wife:

'When a deathly numbness overcomes a body, when the flesh corrupts, and the colour of the face is changed in the grave, then I have done for a man more than love can do, for I have changed a foolish and unnatural craving into everlasting content.

'In all the love feats, I take my proper part. When a new life begins to form in the womb, my seeds are there, as well as Love's. We are bound together in the same knot. I could be happy lying with you now, and one day you will be glad to lie with me.'<sup>9</sup>

It is to miss the point, as does H. Coombes, to protest that there is too little distinction drawn in this novel between the erotic and the morbid intrigues of the protagonist.

In the later Freud also we find identity where others—the earlier Freud included—have seen conflict. Eros and Thanatos have a common end; or rather the final fulfilment of Eros is in Thanatos. Hence Powys's fiction, which owes as much to Freud as to Augustine, amounts to an interrogation of the comic structure and in doing so offers us a new comic vision. In the major novels—*Mr. Weston* and *Unclay*—as in *Fables* and the more realistic stories such as "Lie Thee Down, Oddity!", the final victory is not over death but over fear of death. Death is truly a consummation devoutly to be wished; meanwhile there are less devout wishes and consummations.

Hence T. F. Powys is no disciple of Nietzsche: he sees the eternal recurrence of individual birth, experience and death as

acceptable only because the recurrence is not eternal for the individual. He is closer to Swift: nothing strikes him as worse than the fate of the Struldbruggs. Life is only possible given death; death is the very form of life. The difference from Swift is that for Powys a positive emerges: we begin to live only when we know we will die.

But to return to the Christian perspective: Coombes's book contains page after page of conjecture as to whether T. F. Powys was an orthodox believer. Such efforts seem to me largely futile: what matters more is to see how he adapts the language of orthodox belief to his own ends.

The good wine that Mr. Weston brings to Folly Down must surely remind us of that drunk at the last supper by Jesus. The early Christians, conscious of that event, understood that their communion, their affirmation of community in the person of the risen Christ, must involve the sharing of wine. The term for such an occasion was 'Agape' or 'love feast', from the Greek word for spiritual love. Scriptural commentators often suggest that Agape is something opposed to Eros, but strictly speaking it comprehends it. It also comprehends Thanatos, since what makes the love feast possible is the conviction that death, the last enemy, is no longer a threat given the resurrection of Christ.

What T. F. Powys does is to work within the language of orthodox Christian belief but without subscribing to its premisses. It is not so much that he agrees with Nietzsche that God is dead but that he agrees with Schopenhauer (and so with the Buddhism of Empson's aside) that God is death.

When Luke Bird and Jenny Bunce drink the lighter wine, and find fulfilment in Eros, they enjoy a foretaste of the darker wine of Thanatos, of the final mature acknowledgement of the fact that we are born to die. The comedy of T. F. Powys is Freudian in its impulse, Christian in its imagery, but ultimately neither of these in its import.

With most writers it is difficult or impossible to deduce a vision from a structure. The author of *King Lear* is not necessarily a

cosmic pessimist; after all he is also the author of *The Tempest*. But Powys is the exception who proves the rule. We wince when we come across gift books containing the 'wit and wisdom' of Shakespeare, Johnson and others. T. F. Powys, though, is one of the few writers who does seem to insist that we consider the beauty of his art to be its truth. Thus we can we imagine a gift book, admittedly not one that everybody would find congenial, in which we find the following from *Unclay*:

When the sun of Love rises, and a man walks in glory, he may be sure that a shadow approaches him—Death.

Love creates and separates; Death destroys and heals.<sup>10</sup>

With the publication last year of R. P. Graves's *The Brothers Powys* we may hope that a revival of interest in the brother Theodore is due. This article is written in the hope that that revival will necessitate a serious re-valuation, not another invitation to savour the rustic gloom of a literary eccentric. For T. F. Powys's art, like Mr. Weston's wine, is truly "as strong as death and as sweet as love".

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1932; repr. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973; repr. Paladin, St. Alban's, 1975, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup>William Hunter, *The Novels and Stories of T. F. Powys*, Gordon Frazer, London, 1930; repr. Trigon Press, Beckenham, 1977, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>H. Coombes, *T. F. Powys*, Barrie and Rockliff, London, 1960, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup>William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Chatto and Windus, 1935; repr. 1979, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>T. F. Powys, *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1927; repr. 1975, p. 292.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>9</sup>T. F. Powys, *Unclay*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1931, p. 325.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

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# Two Obituary Tributes to Derrick Stephens

(Hon. Secretary, Powys Society, 1970-83)

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It is sad to know that we shall no longer see Derrick Stephens at our Powys Society gatherings. We shall miss his thoughtfulness and care, which did so much for us all to assure our comfort and enjoyment.

Apart from our personal loss we remember his fine work as Secretary in popularising the Society, spreading its influence and bringing together and co-ordinating all those who are devoted to the cause.

We remember him with gratitude and may expect, if it be possible, that he will still be near, to assist us in our plans and prospects.

Our deep sympathies are offered to Christine and the family.

G. R. Wilson Knight  
*(President of the Powys Society)*

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### Derrick Stephens: a friend's tribute

The work of furthering a writer's literary reputation is not only carried on by critics. Over twelve years of close co-operation with Derrick Stephens I could watch his unfailing concern for the well-being of the Powys Society and its activities, a concern, moreover, that never toppled into possessiveness or self-aggrandisement. For he really cared about, and for, the various members of the Society; he enjoyed corresponding with them; and he took enormous trouble over the arrangements for our various meetings together. His humour, so puckish, shrewd, but never cruel, was a sustaining force; and his self-effacement affected only his public role. His presence was felt in all he did. He will be greatly missed, but he will not, I think, be entirely absent. How often on the telephone have I heard his voice say "Hullo there!" as preamble to news either heartening, frustrating or simply funny. Whichever it was, he thought about and acted upon it. And his wife Christine would share in all this, as in the hospitality offered to many visiting Powysians. It is sad to think that Derrick's tribute to Gilbert Turner should so soon have to be followed by tributes to himself; but as Gilbert Turner introduced Derrick Stephens to the works of the Powys brothers, so in his turn Derrick helped to make knowledge of the Powyses' writings available to others. And he helped to further their spirit too.

Glen Cavaliero

## Cedric Hentschel

### *The Brothers Powys:* Richard Perceval Graves

Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, £14.95.

In Victorian England large families were commonplace, from the trend-setting royal household to the thriving nurseries of the middle classes and the teeming warrens of the slums. Dynastic urgencies, a devout belief in the need to people the earth, a Forsytean concern with the tenure of property, an awareness of infant mortality, together with sheer improvidence—all played their part. There was thus nothing unusual in the philoprogenitive ardour of the Rev. Charles Francis Powys. It was a singular bonus, however, that his wife bore him almost a round dozen of exceptionally gifted children. In consequence these six sons and five daughters, of whom ten were to survive the perils of youth, face the biographer with an undertaking of daunting magnitude, more so than ever now that much new material has become available. The task remains formidable even if, as has been customary, the sisters are treated as supernumeraries, while attention is concentrated on only three of the brothers. Yet it is also true that anyone disposed to make a fresh attempt has the advantage of learning much from the efforts of his predecessors, whose unequal (but rarely dull or ineffectual) labours help to give perspective and provide a rich source of quotations.

The pioneer of the threefold study was Richard Heron Ward, whose *The Powys Brothers* (1935), with its pleasing portraits by Gertrude Powys, is now difficult to come by and possibly underrated. What has since become period charm is here interfused with the excitement of first discovery.<sup>1</sup> Only a year later came *Welsh Ambassadors*, that “Scandalous Chronicle” as John called it, which well deserved its belated second edition (1971), augmented by Kenneth Hopkins’s introduction.<sup>2</sup> In *Welsh Ambassadors*—and again in his *Seven Friends* (1953)—Louis Wilkinson, drawing on his personal knowledge of the parental home in Somerset, presented a series of sharply observed

sketches, studded with anecdotes and sometimes verging on caricature, which have coloured many readers’ initial impressions of the Powys family.

Littleton’s several contributions—his slender pamphlet based on a lecture delivered in 1945 and the many scattered references in his two works of autobiography—are chiefly noteworthy as reflections of their author’s kindly disposition and conventional beliefs. They totally lack that “malice” recognized as one component in the complex Powysian spectrum. Another valiant attempt at compression was made by R. C. Churchill in his British Council pamphlet *The Powys Brothers* (1962). His select bibliography, including works by the “lesser” siblings, was valuable in its day; but Churchill’s account helped to nourish the unseemly dogma, propounded by Louis Wilkinson and F. R. Leavis and still held in some quarters, that Theodore alone could lay claim to authentic literary stature. John, on the other hand, was disparaged as “this most Celtic—even at times most ‘wild and woolly Western’—of the Powys brothers”.<sup>3</sup> Churchill acknowledged the difficulty of “placing” writers who belonged “to no current school or contemporary trend” and offered some shrewd reasons for their failure to achieve popularity.<sup>4</sup>

In his *The Powys Brothers, A Biographical Appreciation* (1967), Kenneth Hopkins presented a personal commentary which illuminates both the lives and the works. He owed these insights to his acquaintance with all three brothers and with many members of the “Circle”, including Louis Wilkinson. As a creative writer Hopkins was also well fitted to analyse the process of literary gestation and, as a seasoned critic, he could draw on a wide range of allusions to bear out his own assessments. His book is “modestly offered as a guide or introduction”, but while following the normal chronological pattern, it also lays stress, as the subtitle suggests, on interpreting the brothers’ works.<sup>5</sup> The chronological treatment inevitably challenges comparison with the new biography by Richard Perceval Graves which is the main object of our scrutiny; but the point should not be unduly laboured. It is clear that the cradle-to-grave annals of identical groups, as presented by

different authors, must largely march together and reveal abundant parallels. If there are nevertheless important distinctions, these stem from the emphasis Hopkins lays on "appreciation" and from his special credibility as an eye-witness.

Mr Graves's substantial study—it runs to 370 pages—is encased in a pleasingly appropriate jacket. Andrew Young's photograph transports us at a glance to the very heart of Powysland. Here is Montacute Church, where the begetters of that marvellous generation lie buried. The distant tree-clad hill breathes the summer magic so felicitously caught in Llewelyn's prose. The thistles in the foreground, symbols of tenacity but also of evanescence, strike a more ambivalent note. They suggest the beauty that lies in the humble and seemingly insignificant: a theme dear to all the Powys tribe. They likewise recall the words which Alyse Gregory wrote in her journal: "The fantasies of our brain are but thistledown in the wind". The light is crepuscular, the mood tinged with melancholy. In short, the *mise en scène* could hardly be more evocative.

On turning a few pages we soon sense that we are being led into more sober territory; for it is impossible not to be impressed, from the outset, by an air of orderliness and brisk efficiency. Mr Graves seeks answers to basic questions. When? Where? In whose company? Never swerving from the strict sequence of events, he shows us what all the Powyses were up to in any given fragment of time. Despite the limitation suggested by the title, we are brought into close contact with the entire family: there are twenty-six separate entries under "Powys" in the index! Indeed, it is not the least merit of this book that it examines these intricate relationships in depth and treats the influence of the Powys sisters more fully than hitherto. Without this inclusive pattern, convincing portraits of John Cowper, Theodore and Llewelyn could scarcely emerge.

To achieve this panoramic view of his subject, Mr Graves has had recourse to both published and unpublished sources on both sides of the Atlantic. A cautionary introduction to the notes gives an inkling of the size of his task:

In the course of preparing for this biography, I have read and noted an enormous number of books, and thousands of manuscript documents. However, it would take ten years to read everything which has ever been written about the Powys brothers, and inevitably there will be occasions—I hope not

many—when I have unwittingly given an unpublished source precedence over a published one; and there may also be occasions when I have arrived independently at a conclusion which has at some stage been put forward by someone else.<sup>6</sup>

Powys enthusiasts, especially those who have not played the part of wandering scholars in the New World, will scrutinize with interest—and perhaps with envy—the list of unpublished sources held at Colgate, Syracuse, Texas and Yale. Unpublished documents in the possession of Malcolm Elwin's widow were also made available. The detailed acknowledgements (pp. xi-xv) cover an impressive range of published material both old and new. It is clear from a number of references in this lengthy catalogue that Mr Graves is considerably indebted to *The Powys Review* and Belinda Humfrey (he repeatedly cites *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*), as well as to Jeffrey Kwintner and his enterprising Village Press editions. The acknowledgements mention further important unpublished sources, e.g. certain of the Alyse Gregory papers entrusted to Rosemary Manning. After this meticulous sifting of libraries and research centres, it comes almost as a surprise to reflect that, even now, the tally remains incomplete—that further revelations await us in more than one collection of as yet unpublished letters, e.g. the correspondences with Frances Gregg and Dorothy Richardson, while unrestricted access to the diaries of John Cowper Powys should also yield valuable fresh insights.

To marshal and give cohesion to the accumulated data is in itself no mean feat. Mr Graves stretches the family history to cover almost two centuries (1797-1963), beginning his account with the creation of the first Lord Lilford, great-uncle of the Rev. Charles Francis Powys, near the close of the eighteenth century. Unadorned dates form the eighteen chapter headings. The segments of time thus proffered to the reader vary from Chapter I, which takes us at a bound to 1885, to the middle chapters which, for the most part, progress in two-year phases. Eight chapters are devoted to the important decades 1910-1930. If the final chapter (1940-1963) advances more swiftly, it is because by 1940 Llewelyn had died and Theodore grown inactive. Whether, nevertheless, John Cowper would have merited more elaborate treatment during his last years is a question requiring further scrutiny and on which opinions may well be divided. In the preceding main body of the work,

we note the deft dovetailing of the three principal lives, in intimate association with a host of subsidiary figures. This orchestration is rendered more difficult by the need to jump to and fro between the West Country, Switzerland and the United States. We cannot however complain that the trail is inadequately sign-posted, though the inclusion of a family tree would have been helpful. Adopting a somewhat old-fashioned but useful device, the author places a neat summary of what is in store at the beginning of each chapter. These summaries, viewed in tandem with the index, will greatly assist the student bent on checking specific points.

Infancy and early youth are regions beset with problems for the biographer. Too often he finds himself wrestling with scraps of family gossip and unreliable recollections, or faced by uncomfortable lacunae. With the Powys brothers matters sometimes veer to the opposite extreme. Instead of a dearth of material there is a superabundance. The gift of self-revelation, alternating with dissimulation, so conspicuous in several members of the family, indeed poses a peculiar difficulty. On the one hand the chronicler is bound to pay close heed to these multiple self-portraits, while on the other he may find himself, as it were, repeatedly upstaged in terms of sensibility, panache, and sheer literary presentation. To exemplify, Mr Graves recounts that the odd sado-masochistic episode where John, aged three, is at first reprimanded by his father for removing tadpoles from a pond to puddles in the drive, but is afterwards rewarded with an axe carved from laurel wood.<sup>7</sup> This is the kind of bizarre incident which, when paraphrased and divorced from the potent spell of John's *Autobiography*, inevitably loses something of its original suggestiveness. More distant ancestral voices, too, allow room for speculation, and it is interesting that Mr Graves places rather more weight on the Cowper strain than does Kenneth Hopkins, who largely discounts it.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to Littleton, John and others, many impressions of Sherborne, some bleak some enchanting, survive in the family folklore. "Had I any happy hours at Sherborne School?" John was later to ask.<sup>9</sup> There was, however, the solace afforded by books as gateways to erotic experience and the comforts of the study he shared with Littleton. These included "their uncle Littleton's East Indian low chair", lent them by their father.<sup>10</sup> The full significance of this chair

deserves to be recorded, for while it is well known that their uncle's early death in Afghanistan in 1879 brought unexpected wealth to his brother, it is seldom mentioned that Littleton Albert had himself been educated at Sherborne, which he had left in 1857.<sup>11</sup> Thus when the Rev. Charles Francis Powys sent his sons there, he needed little prompting by the Phelps family, who also had close ties with Sherborne.

In disposing of John's undergraduate years at Corpus Christi in less than ten pages, Mr Graves has the warrant of certain indications in the *Autobiography*, which refers to Cambridge in a markedly dismissive manner: "I did not read a single volume of the least importance to me all the while I was there."<sup>12</sup> Equally John gained little from lectures (one by the historian Seeley was an exception) or from corporate activities. But there were the roads out of Cambridge to be explored ("and it seems as if all my most heavenly roads have been out of, rather than into somewhere") and friendships to be fostered.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more might be made of the relationship with G. P. Gooch, here simply described as "later a famous historian".<sup>14</sup> Gooch was a great admirer of Goethe—he was to become President of the English Goethe Society—and it is certain that he enlisted John as another disciple.<sup>15</sup>

During the quinquennium 1894-1899, John was teaching and writing verse, Theodore farming and Llewelyn still at school. It is a period of which our relatively slender knowledge has now been enlarged. Not many Powysians will, for instance, have heard of the unpublished play written by John at Southwick in 1894.<sup>16</sup> Mr Graves also tries to bring into sharper focus the enigmatic Margaret Alice Lyon, who too often "seems a shadowy figure in the background of John's life".<sup>17</sup> Some may however find the parallels drawn between Margaret and the Gerda Torp of *Wolf Solent*, first mooted by Malcolm Elwin, not wholly convincing.

The first decade of the new century was crucial in several ways. John embarked on his career as a roving lecturer in the United States. Theodore married, settled in Dorset, and wrote *An Interpretation of Genesis*, which, though privately printed, "was the first important work by any member of his family".<sup>18</sup> Llewelyn, after his Cambridge fiasco, wrestled unhappily with the schoolmaster's lot and began his long fight against tuberculosis. The adult siblings, though often separated, had become a tightly knit

group, and Mr Graves draws a pleasant picture of their involvement with one another:

When he remained at Montacute during the vacations, Llewelyn was thrown mainly upon the company of his sisters: for after Littleton's marriage in the summer of 1904, Will was his only brother who was regularly at home. Gertrude, aged twenty-seven, had already given up thoughts of marriage, and settled down to looking after her elderly parents; but Llewelyn enjoyed playing tennis with Marian, who was determined on an independent career, and was busy learning typing and shorthand. Llewelyn also went out riding with Katie, to whom he read poetry, and the two of them went on walks with their youngest sister, Lucy, who was still only fourteen. From time to time there were visits from other members of the family, and John in particular liked coming over from Burpham for short holidays.<sup>19</sup>

Whether normal family affection may occasionally have split over into more amorous moods is not here deeply probed, but Mr Graves mentions the surprise of Peter Powys Grey at "the strength of the sexual element in the relationship between some of his aunts and uncles".<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, in America, John had become infatuated with Mabel Hattersley. This unpleasant interlude seems out of keeping with the subtle eroticism of the "Southwick" and "Court House" chapters in the *Autobiography*.

As we advance into more productive phases of the brothers' lives and as their books begin to take shape, the story gathers pace, momentum and variety. The tensions arising from individual creativity may however sour as well as cement family relationships:

Louis Wilkinson's description of the family as 'The Powys', Littleton's determination in his memoirs always to see them in the best possible light, and John's decision in his *Autobiography* to be frank about some areas of his life, but highly reticent about others, have led to the view that the Powys family was far more united than it really was. At this time there was certainly a good deal of spiteful comment within the family, directed at various targets; and John himself was criticised with better cause than most.<sup>21</sup>

This bickering is perhaps also reflected in the complicated genesis of *Confessions of Two Brothers*—originally conceived as *Confessions by the Six Brothers Powys*. Theodore's contri-

bution, with its amusing self-portrait, the "crank" Mr Thomas, was separately published as *The Soliloquy of a Hermit*.<sup>22</sup>

The latter half of World War I (1916-1918) brought a foretaste of the prodigality to come; 1916 was, indeed, John's first *annus mirabilis*. In that year he succeeded in having five books published, including *Suspended Judgements*. Mr Graves gives us neat résumés of such varied fare as *Wolfsbane* and *Rodmoor*, with its "unmistakable portrait of John's mother" as Mrs Renshaw.<sup>23</sup> *The Buffoon* also falls in this period and contains some of Louis Wilkinson's shrewdest thrusts at John's tampering with social reality:

You heighten the character—abilities and vices—of everyone you meet, because that makes it more interesting and sensational for you. So you're always moving among remarkable men: the plan works magnificently into the hands of your egoism.<sup>24</sup>

Frances Gregg, by then Frances Wilkinson, had collaborated with her husband in writing *The Buffoon*. This lends an added piquancy to her later stay with John at Sausalito in the summer of 1919. Thanks to the recollections of Oliver Wilkinson this little-known Californian interlude has now gained substance and colour. John was then working on *The Complex Vision*, and Mr Graves thinks the book "must have owed a good deal to the influence of Frances". Having noted its animistic and visionary qualities, he concludes that the philosophic effect was weakened "by an attempt to make everything subservient to John's dream of a communistic state".<sup>25</sup> Burdened with two households, John was short of funds and started churning out short stories, "but none of the twenty which he wrote were ever published".<sup>26</sup> A tantalizing revelation!

During these middle years poverty, affecting most members of the family, becomes a recurrent theme. John was particularly exposed, as he strove to maintain his wife at Burpham "in a style of living far superior to his own".<sup>27</sup> Yet at one time he was also sending weekly one-pound cheques to Theodore to relieve basic needs: coal, children's shoes, even sugar. The Wilkinsons, too, were not exempt from financial pressures, though Louis cannily remained in London while his wife and children were dispatched to France to live cheaply in a cottage. While the death of the Rev. Charles Francis Powys, in August 1923, brought welcome legacies to his children, John,

in part the victim of his own generosity, was periodically close to indigence even in old age.

A gallery of remarkable women now enter the story and in varying degrees prompt, inspire, cherish, subtly influence the men. Sylvia Townsend Warner begins her correspondence with Theodore. John meets Phyllis Playter, while Llewelyn marries Alyse Gregory. There are repercussions within the family at large. Both Llewelyn and Marian grow jealous of Phyllis. Mr Graves needs all his powers of co-ordination to keep this swollen cast in play, especially when, a few years later, Llewelyn finds himself torn between the conflicting claims of his wife, Gamel Woolsey and Betty Marsh. Not the least interesting aspect of the lingering *ménage à trois* (which Betty Marsh at times threatens to turn into a quartet) is the compassion shown by the feminist Alyse to Gamel, her youthful yet forlorn rival. It is a comment worth pondering that, because of her innate tropism towards "a strange world of dreams and myths", Gamel may, at least in this regard, have had more in common with John than with Alyse or Llewelyn.<sup>28</sup> A difficult but dignified role in the marital imbroglio is that assigned to Gerald Brennan, himself the survivor of that other triangular relationship involving Carrington and Lytton Strachey. As Gamel's husband he was called upon to show unusual forbearance both before and after Llewelyn's death.

While these erotic entanglements are exposed in explicit detail, the veil which still surrounds some aspects of Theodore's domestic life is only slightly lifted. His adopted daughter Theodora ("Susan") has, we are told, written "a remarkably dramatic but at present unpublishable account of her parentage and very early life"; but we are also given to understand that Count Potocki "makes further similar allegations in his book *Dogs' Eggs*". Since Potocki's allegations remain accessible, it would seem a natural step either to confirm or refute them.<sup>29</sup>

1930 was another year of outstanding achievement, but by then Theodore, who had only recently become "a minor celebrity", had stopped writing. Mr Graves identifies his finest work as "the remarkable trinity of *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, *Unclay* and the good-humoured *Kindness in a Corner*", whereas *Mark Only* was "deservedly parodied" by Stella Gibbons.<sup>30</sup> In 1930 the diverse talents of almost the entire Powys family were displayed. Theodore contributed *The White Paternoster* as well as *Kindness in a Corner*. John's plea *In Defence of Sensual-*

*ity* caused something of a stir. Llewelyn's offerings were *The Pathetic Fallacy* and *Apples Be Ripe*. Katie launched her novel *The Blackthorn Winter* and "a selection of her passionate but unpolished poems", while Bertie produced his historical, architectural and social survey of *The English Parish Church*. Kenneth Hopkins, too, has recorded the fruits of that bountiful year. Casting his net even wider, he lists eighteen items of interest for "the collector of books by the Powys brothers and their circle" and includes works by "Laurence" Powys, Ann Reid and Louis Marlow.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile John, not yet sixty, had published *Wolf Solent* and was preparing the first draft of *A Glastonbury Romance* at Phudd Bottom.

Mr Graves ventures succinct and for the most part positive judgements on John's major novels. *A Glastonbury Romance*, that financial disaster almost utterly spurned by the New York critics, offers "a description of sexual relationships which far surpasses D. H. Lawrence in its maturity and understanding". (If this challenging statement is true, one would welcome a fuller interpretation of the role played by the Powys brothers in the erotic revolution.) *Weymouth Sands*, acknowledged as "the most haunting and poetical" of John's works of fiction, is analysed in depth; and due weight is given to the autobiographical traits to be found in Magnus Muir and Sylvanus Cobbold. The verdict on the *Autobiography* proper is a mixed one. We are shown how, despite the general exclusion of females, John was "prepared to bend his own rules a little" by including Frances Gregg "at the time when she was the sylph of his dreams". Increasing reticence about his personal life is evident in the concluding chapters, so that "what had begun so brilliantly becomes increasingly rhetorical, verbose and unrevealing". While many will concur with this criticism, some enthusiasts may not wholly agree with the view that "the sinister tone of *Maiden Castle* comes as an unpleasant shock after the magical healing of the Grail in *A Glastonbury Romance* and the nostalgic enchantment of *Weymouth Sands*".<sup>32</sup> There are other sporadic comments of this kind, for Mr Graves would appear to be broadly out of sympathy with those occult, irrational and fantastic elements which became increasingly prominent in John's later writings.

A less urgent scepticism—and one that is differently motivated—informs the verdict on Llewelyn. *Love and Death*, published as its author's life was ebbing at Clavadel, was Llew-

elyn's final idealization of his affair with Gamel Woolsey. Mr Graves suggests that "the novel lacks conviction" both because Llewelyn's passion had by then waned and because the dimension represented by Alyse was missing in the design. Others however, including Phyllis Playter and Alyse herself, see *Love and Death* as Llewelyn's masterpiece.<sup>33</sup> No one will quarrel with Mr Graves's assertion that Llewelyn was more gifted as an essayist than as a novelist; but is it right to judge *Love and Death* as a novel when its creator placed the work in the separate, if ambiguous, category of "an imaginary autobiography"?

The last phase, 1940-1963, is covered in barely more than twenty pages. One senses that, by then, Mr Graves was spurting to the finishing post—or else that he was running out of the space allotted by his publisher. He finds ever less to admire in the rambling pot-boilers and volatile fantasies which, in these final years, poured from John's pen; and though *Porius* clearly falls in a higher order of achievement, it too is held to be tainted with those mystical and mystifying features for which Mr Graves has little relish. Description is sometimes pared away to the irreducible minimum. Thus *Mortal Strife* becomes "a philosophical justification of the war against Germany". Does not so wide-ranging an enquiry, found worthy of a translation into Japanese, warrant a more probing discussion? Similarly, *In Spite Of* is laconically dismissed as "a volume of practical philosophy". *The Art of Growing Old* is seen as "a modern *De Senectute*", a definition excised from John's own introduction. If it be allowed that the management of old age is a matter of increasing importance in our society, does not this perceptive survey deserve less summary treatment? Much of the later fiction also gets short shrift, and one comment on *The Brazen Head* would seem to imply active dislike.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps I am misconstruing Mr Graves's reactions, but his opinions do at times resemble those of the worthy Littleton, who shunned what he thought was unwholesome in literature.

Given the elaborate texture of the reference material and the wealth of quotations, this magisterial volume is agreeably free from misprints, though no work of such a compass could contrive to be immaculate.<sup>35</sup> Minor errors are rare. Where identical or nearly identical books were published in Britain and America under different titles it is as well to maintain this distinction.<sup>36</sup> Some titles—or editions—have

not been included; but one would scarcely expect full bibliographical treatment. According to their individual tastes, different readers are likely to pick on different "omissions". Seeing that the fame of the Powys brothers, both at home and abroad, was so painfully won, it would seem right to draw attention to the occasional European success, e.g. the "early" German translation of *Wolf Solent* (1930), or the inclusion of *Captain Patch*, in 1935, in the Modern Continental Library published by the Albatross Verlag of Hamburg. And the posthumous collection of Theodore's stories, *Rosie Plum* (1966), surely deserves mention, if only for the strange fate of the manuscript?<sup>37</sup>

The illustrations form one of the attractive features of this book. Thirty photographs convey vivid impressions of what another publisher might have labelled "The Powys Brothers and Their World". (Perhaps it is not wholly fortuitous that Mr Graves has himself made a contribution to that sprightly and informative series.) We come across many old favourites: John wearing his bardic cape and cap and clutching his fearsome staff; Theodore, tight-lipped and with hypnotic gaze—or, in earlier life, sporting his "Nietzschean" moustache; the curly-haired Llewelyn, both with and without his beard. Some portraits are less well known: a youthful Phyllis Playter in Breton national costume; Alyse Gregory on her wedding day; and a fine study of Gertrude Powys, taken in 1926 at Chydyok. Headmaster Littleton, alas, is difficult to disentangle from the ranks of his minuscule charges at the Sherborne Prep. Some important peripheral figures—not merely the Wilkinsons—round off the extended "Circle": Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Isadora Duncan, Theodore Dreiser, David Garnett, and a splendid snapshot of a plus-foured, wing-collared Thomas Hardy leaning against his bicycle.

The index, like all indexes, is somewhat wayward. A number of persons mentioned elsewhere in the book, e.g. Belinda Humfrey, Jeffrey Kwintner and Grant Richards, have been overlooked. Names one would expect to be there, such as Strindberg and Iorwerth Peate, are absent. The student interested in differences of approach will find it rewarding to compare the list in detail with the index in Hopkins.<sup>38</sup>

In "A note on further reading" at the end of the book—there is no bibliography as such, though the sections headed "Acknowledgements" and "Abbreviations" contain much

bibliographical information—Mr Graves hands out bouquets to fellow toilers in the vineyard in a manner which may cause occasional disquiet to the recipients. Glen Cavaliero is said to have written a “first-class” study, while G. Wilson Knight, despite making some “extravagant claims for John Cowper Powys”, is allowed to have “a brilliant mind”. I am myself awarded the booby prize for a “particularly ingenious” comment on *After My Fashion*.<sup>39</sup>

Any reader dissatisfied with the general level of aesthetic appraisal may well be disarmed by the author’s own explicit qualification of his task: “the present work is a biographical study rather than a work of literary criticism”. This assertion needs to be weighed in conjunction with the claim in the blurb that the book, while also revising Malcolm Elwin’s biography of Llewelyn, “provides what are likely to be the definitive portraits of John and Theodore, for whom no full-scale biographies exist”. The potential purchaser of this expensive volume will thus ponder whether it represents the traditional approach to the Powys brothers in its ultimate, unsurpassable form. Certainly we must be grateful for a much enriched family history; no previous author has so deftly interlinked the lives of these complementary visionaries. If their warts as well as their virtues are now more readily discernible, that is perhaps no bad thing. The Powys brothers have sufficient stature to survive de-idealization, just as Dr. Johnson remains a giant after Boswell has done his worst. If, even now, there are a few gaps in the story, these, one understands, are to be filled in future revisions. It is therefore difficult to believe that any other scholar, whether British or American, will attempt to rival Mr Graves by writing a biography of comparable scope. This does not however mean that the earlier chronicles we owe to Wilkinson and Hopkins will not continue in demand, if only for the verve of their presentation.

An unresolved issue, which persists despite Mr Graves’s modest disclaimer, concerns the propriety of recording the lives of authors while dispensing with detailed critiques of the books they wrote. After reading *The Brothers Powys* one may well feel that a great deal has been substantiated and clarified: events and their sequence; some elements of the characters of the people involved; their many trials and tribulations and their sporadic triumphs; and the taut summaries of those shelves-full of assorted works will certainly be helpful to the floundering

student. Nor, as we have seen, will the reader be left in doubt as to where Mr Graves’s own preferences lie. But it is still arguable that certain larger dimensions are granted only token recognition in his lucid evaluations.

The question is awkward but basic, for it raises the ultimate problem of the relationship between the biographer and his subject; and between the subject and the *Zeitgeist*. Virtual self-effacement may do for the mere annalist; but in the ideal biographer there is likely to be a less unequal partnership between the author and his chosen companion. Such a symbiosis may well be a precondition for creating a definitive work. With luck, empathy will transform a curriculum vitae into a celebration of life—into a work of art in its own right. The biographer must also decide whether to accord primacy to “the life” or “the work”, assuming that such a distinction is valid and does not vary from case to case. “Only from the work the biography acquires significance.”<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps we are setting our sights too high. The modern biographer is usually content to offer plain exposition and seldom lays claim to literary merit. A more practical suggestion—to return to *The Brothers Powys*—would be to consider the utility of adding a final chapter (the present ending, with its doleful necrology, being somewhat dispiriting), in which there would be room for deeper probing into those social, intellectual, religious and philosophical themes which used to be collectively known as *Geistesgeschichte*. The main purpose would be to release the Powys brothers from their constricting images as cult figures and place them firmly on the larger stage of that Western culture from which they emerged. Too often they have been derided as freaks and eccentrics. This view, widely held in the Thirties, has recently reappeared in several reviews of Mr Graves’s book. To encapsulate the brothers in a narrow, private universe is to deny that, despite some loose arguments to the contrary, they were nevertheless very much of their time and place in a fermenting society. They bridge the 19th and 20th centuries, and their cultural allegiances stretch from Ancient Greece to modern America. The acute yet fluctuating changes in social and sexual behaviour which have occurred since the end of World War II have not been helpful to their cause and may give rise to ironic reflections. The *avant-garde* reputation of the Powys brothers rests in large measure on the anti-Victorian stance they once shared with Louis Wilkinson. Now that the

excesses of the permissive society are being increasingly questioned, some traditional Victorian values are regaining ground. Where the Powys brothers were once thought to be daringly radical, they are now held to be either too timid or else out of touch with the new conservatism.

There would be no lack of themes for that mooted last chapter: the Golden Age; the Homeric Vision; the Feminine Principle; Animism; the Arthurian Legend and the Grail; Religion and Scepticism; Psychoanalysis and Morality; Sado-masochism; the Erotic Revolution; the Art of Forgetting; Rabelaisian Humour; Hedonism; Existentialism; Cymric Virtues. The proliferating dimensions interlock; but is a synthesis possible—or, in a “multiverse”, even desirable? And what of the fame and after-fame of the Powys brothers, which Mr Graves has now helped to consolidate? Why was their reputation so ambivalent in their lifetime? Why have their books won acclaim so fitfully since their death? Does the history of their publications directly reflect the British attitude towards “intellectuals”—an attitude which, according to George Steiner, is epitomized in the phrase “come off it!”? This is the kind of area where speculation, however subjective or seemingly intangible, may nevertheless reveal important truths. One might argue, for instance, that if J.C.P. had so little success in commercial terms, it was perhaps because in temperament he was more akin to German than to the general run of British novelists; so much so that, had his novels been shorter and his unwieldy personal idiom less difficult to translate, he might well

have achieved in Germany the breakthrough which eluded him in England—where, significantly, the German novel proper is scarcely known outside a narrow academic circle.<sup>41</sup>

If we accept the melancholy thesis that, even today, despite the gallant efforts of Jeffrey Kwintner and an increasing band of scholars, the Powys brothers are still struggling for their due recognition and esteem, then it perhaps follows that it is also too early—a mere two decades after the death of John Cowper Powys—to proceed beyond a circumstantial chronicle of their lives to an ultimate evaluation of their message. Perhaps there is even a new and subtle barrier to such ultimate recognition in the swelling tide of academic glosses and gossipy marginalia which threaten to engulf the very works they are supposed to interpret. When the centenary of Goethe’s death was celebrated in 1932, H. W. Nevinson expressed regret that “German critics and biographers should have erected over their poet’s body and soul a tumulus of particles so insignificant”.<sup>42</sup> In that same year Nevinson and others sought with some success to penetrate the “tumulus” and find the “soul”. The time-scale is thought-provoking. Possibly we shall have to wait till the year 2063 to gain comparable insight into the legacy of the Powys brothers. In the meantime we can be thankful that Mr Graves has amplified our knowledge of their chequered careers and provided a plain man’s guide to their books. This impressive biography may not satisfy some of the more esoteric worshippers at the shrine; but it will offer substantial enlightenment to the many.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The book was published by The Bodley Head at a time when the firm had a number of major works by J. C. P. in print, including *Jobber Skald*, *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Autobiography*, as well as several books by Llewelyn. R. H. Ward was a practised craftsman with a gift for arresting first sentences: “But the really great philosopher, and perhaps the greatest of all,” said Theodore Powys in his curiously low and monotonous voice, “the really great philosopher is Freud”. *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>John’s comment on *Welsh Ambassadors* is quoted from an inscribed copy in my possession.

<sup>3</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup>“In the Marxist hey-day of the thirties, their concern with ultimate problems seemed bourgeois; and when ultimate problems—or ultimate answers—

became the rage in the forties, the heretical Powyses were swept aside in the flood of an orthodox Christian revival.” *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup>Graves, p. 332.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 2: “The poet Cowper had no children, and the blood relationship with him comes through his second cousin, the Rev. John Johnson, a man who was Cowper’s exact opposite in temperament”.

<sup>9</sup>*Autobiography*, 1967 edition, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup>Graves, p. 24; and cf. *Autobiography*, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup>See *The Sherborne Register, 1823-1900*, 2nd ed., 1900, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 201.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>14</sup>Graves, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup>"He (Gooch) might have belonged to that weird Pedagogic Society in *Wilhelm Meister*, whose activities involved the mystical training of ardent but wayward spirits like my own." *Autobiography*, p. 180. Graves mentions another Cambridge friend, Constantine Koeller, who appears in *Autobiography* as "Koelle". Powys's spelling is often suspect; but it is not clear which version is correct.

<sup>17</sup>We learn that "box 5" of the J. C. P. collection at Syracuse "contains five notebooks of a play dating from 1894". The main theme of this play is the trite parable of the redeeming virtue of a prostitute. Graves, pp. 38-9 and p. 334.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 81. Oliver Wilkinson lends support to this view (see Note 4 to Chapter Six).

<sup>22</sup>For a full discussion of the *Confessions*, see the review article by Charles Lock in *The Powys Review*, 12.

<sup>23</sup>Graves, p. 119.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted by Graves, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 166. Divergent opinions have been expressed. Charles Lock (cf. Note 22 above) contends that Malcolm Elwin was perpetuating a "disgraceful slander" in suggesting that Margaret was to blame for her husband's financial predicament.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>29</sup>Potocki's mastery of innuendo certainly invites comment: "The Powyses went to absolutely extraordinary lengths in keeping from Theodora all knowledge of her origin. The entire County knew who she was, including even tradesmen; and jokes were cracked in the whole world, in literary circles, and conundrums propounded, such as: 'What relation is Potocki to Francis Powys?'" *Dogs' Eggs*, p. 14. Graves refers (p. 350) to a 1972 edition of this curious work, published by The Shack Press. There was an earlier edition (1968), printed by the Mélissa Press.

<sup>30</sup>Graves, pp. 223-4.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 225-6; cf. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 147.

<sup>32</sup>The passages quoted in this paragraph will be found in Graves, p. 250, p. 255, pp. 264-5, pp. 273-4.

<sup>33</sup>"Is it too much to prophesy that this volume of my husband's with its timeless ballad-like quality, its innocent classic truths, its passionate spiritual serenity and its rich exuberant store of natural poetry will be read and enjoyed by men and women long after his bones have come to dust . . . ?" Thus Alyse Gregory, in her brief introduction to *Love and Death*.

<sup>34</sup>"The novel is full of strange scenes, some of them

nightmarish, and far more unpleasant than anything to which Frances Wilkinson had taken exception." Graves, p. 318.

<sup>35</sup>E.g. "cought" (p. 27); "*Earth's Memories*" (p. 251). The title is however correctly given in the index.

<sup>36</sup>On p. 285, the Simon and Schuster publication *The Enjoyment of Literature* is wrongly described as "*The Pleasures of Literature*". The distinction is important since the two versions are not identical. Cf. Langridge, *John Cowper Powys: A Record of Achievement*, 1966, p. 144.

<sup>37</sup>"Apart from the few that have appeared in magazines, they are the remains of a box of stored manuscripts that were used by rats . . . as nesting material". See the introduction to *Rosie Plum* by Francis Powys, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup>In the Graves index, place-names are cited as sub-entries under personal names, while in Hopkins they also occur as separate entries. This partly accounts for the relative amplitude of the Hopkins list. Thus Hopkins has 13 separate entries under 'O'; Graves has only 4. Hopkins also indulges in a wider range of literary allusions. Thus under 'C' he includes Coleridge (S. T. and Hartley), Conrad, A. E. Coppard, Coryate, Cowley and Culpeper, all of whom are absent in the Graves index. On the other hand Freud appears in Graves but not in Hopkins. There are further interesting disparities.

<sup>39</sup>Mr Graves (p. 360) reprimands me for describing *After My Fashion* as "an attempt at a war novel on the grand scale". He however ignores the connection mooted by J. C. P. between the carnage of World War I and the metaphysical idea of cosmic strife. This linking of the two planes pervades the novel and is readily detectable in my argument. See *The Powys Review*, 8, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup>Quoted from Geoffrey Grigson, "Recollections of Dylan Thomas", *The London Magazine*, Sept. 1957, p. 45. The reference seems to be to Hölderlin; but Grigson pertinently asks whether, in the case of Dylan Thomas "the work . . . contradicts the life".

<sup>41</sup>W. E. Yuill's definition of the typical German novel would apply equally well to the kind of fiction favoured by J. C. P. "For the German novelist technical competence rarely seems to have been the starting-point for literary enterprise. A philosophical thesis rather than the impulse to represent social behaviour for its own sake has tended to be his point of departure . . . The possibilities of oblique or symbolic representation have been more thoroughly explored than they have been by most English novelists." See "Tradition and nightmare—some reflections on the postwar novel in England and Germany" in *Affinities: Essays in German and English Literature*, ed. R. W. Last, 1971, p. 156.

<sup>42</sup>H. W. Nevinson, *Goethe: Man and Poet*, 1931, p. 10.

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## Reviews

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*Dorset Essays; Earth Memories,*  
LLEWELYN POWYS.

Redcliffe Press, 1983, £6.95 each volume.

“The supremely cultivated man”, wrote John Cowper Powys in *The War and Culture*, “is . . . the man who possesses the key to distinction of style”. Although it was written some two years before his first book was published the definition fits Llewelyn Powys well, for their “distinction of style” is the quality which will most immediately strike readers of both *Earth Memories* and *Dorset Essays*. John Cowper, however, goes on to say that such style “is a thing that springs up, like a flower or a tree, spontaneously out of the soil” but, as Philip Larkin reminds us in his introduction to *Earth Memories*, this was not the case for Llewelyn. Writing, for him, was hard work, something which had to be slowly and painstakingly crafted, and the voice which speaks to us with such natural grace and assurance in these essays is the result of art, not of spontaneous growth. Llewelyn Powys had been writing for some eighteen years by the time *Earth Memories* and *Dorset Essays* were published in 1934 and 1935 and now, towards the end of his life, his style had achieved its full beauty. Although many of the pieces in these two books are obviously what Larkin refers to as “literary journalism”, the very balance and poise, the controlled rhythmical sensuousness of the language seems, in spite of occasional archaisms, to achieve the timelessness of the greatest prose. Even the least of them, “An Old Weymouth Curiosity Shop” for example, which has an indefinable quality of the school essay about it and reaches its conclusions too easily, is written with the ease and grace of great craftsmanship, whilst at their best, as in “A Pond” from *Earth Memories*, which I believe is the finest and most enduring piece in either book, they achieve that rare and magical conjunction of content, form and expression usually found only in great poetry.

Although the pieces in *Earth Memories* tend to be rather longer than those in *Dorset Essays* and are less firmly rooted in a particular location, the technique in both books is largely similar. Powys invariably starts with some specific and concrete subject, “the great promontory

of Bats Head”, for example, or a local character, and the reader’s sympathy and interest are quickly engaged. Often this is done with a marvellously dramatic or intriguing opening line such as: “Lithe as a weasel, shy as a fox, slinking, slouching, with his jointed gib-cat limbs oiled by the hand of nature, a gipsy youth appeared from behind the Merlin thorn-tree”.

Having captivated the reader Powys begins to let his thoughts drift, though a more controlled “drifting” would be hard to imagine, to some larger, more abstract idea until, from the feather of a gull or the playing of fox cubs, he draws some secret clue to the art of living life to the full. Always, however, at the end of the essay we return to the world of solid and tangible reality, for, as he says in “A Pond”: “The truth resides in matter’s proud processions as they are revealed to our uncertain senses. In what can be seen, in what can be heard, in what can be touched, tasted and felt, there is no treason”. Whatever our philosophical speculations, he seems to say, it is only in appreciating “the miracle of our fugitive existence”, in living our real daily lives to the full that we may find that truth, purpose and happiness which some seek in the performances of priests and behind the mask of God. It seems to me that it is precisely because they are not primarily philosophical pieces (although “Natural Happiness” and “Natural Worship” both appear in *Earth Memories*), but are firmly based upon his own observations and are alive with a countryman’s genuine and unaffected love and understanding of the birds, plants and animals around him, that these essays are more likely than his more directly polemical books to convey Powys’s philosophy of life to his future readers.

The Redcliffe Press have taken the bold step in producing their edition of *Dorset Essays* of removing six of the original pieces and adding three or four which were originally published in *Somerset Essays*. No doubt this will outrage some Powys purists for it is certainly not the same book as the *Dorset Essays* of 1935. It seems to me, however, to have been the right decision, though I do feel that instead of simply referring to this as an “enlarged selection of essays” the publishers might have added an editorial note explaining exactly what they had done. Yet it seems the right decision because the people who

buy the book are as likely to be buying it because it is about Dorset as because it is by Llewelyn Powys. Therefore, if they are to be encouraged to take a chance on an author they may never have heard of, the interest of the subject matter ought to be stressed. Despite what booksellers would have us believe, there is nothing sacred about a first edition and I feel that those essays which have been added to this edition ought to have been there in the first place and were surely, even on topographical grounds, misplaced in *Somerset Essays*. It is, perhaps, a pity that others have had to make room for them, but even within the collections as we now have them there are inequalities. If Llewelyn Powys is to achieve the readership his genius so obviously deserves then it is right that we should take care to present the very best of his work to a public which has been indifferent when it has not been hostile.

In just the same way it seems right to have left out Gertrude Powys's woodcuts from *Earth Memories* for they do justice neither to Gertrude's talent nor to Llewelyn's essays. Unlike the lively and charming line drawings she was to produce for *A Baker's Dozen* they are heavy and have a "dated" quality unlikely to attract readers not already seduced by family associations. I have already mentioned the timeless quality of Llewelyn's prose, what Larkin calls its "extraordinary blend of modern English with Urquhart and Thomas Deloney", and it is surely this, combined with the interest of the subject matter, that will attract new readers. This is, after all, good writing, whether it was written fifty years ago or yesterday. The illustrations, however, are of their time and it seems right, therefore, that they should go, for these are books relevant to today, not museum pieces especially resurrected for the delight of the cognoscenti. Indeed it seems to me that the greatest strength of these two excellent editions is precisely what one might call, without any condescension or disrespect, their *ordinariness*. These are good, attractive and well produced books. They meet the reading public entirely on their merits as fine and fascinating literature and there is no hint here of any special pleading. These are no rare and exotic editions, exciting their coterie of admirers as much by their scarcity as by their content. It is not necessary to know, when buying one of these books, who Llewelyn Powys was, for the writing will speak for itself and will win its own, much deserved, admiration. No one who reads Thomas Hardy

would regard himself as being a specialist, an initiate into some obscure cult, and so it should be with the readers of Llewelyn Powys. Surely the greatest ambition of any admirer of John, Theodore or Llewelyn must be that they should be read as widely as any other important writers and that their books should form as much a part of the mental "world picture" of the average reader as do those of Lawrence or Hardy, T. S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas. These editions of Llewelyn's books, and the others which we are promised are to follow, seem to me to go a long way to making this possible. So long as they are not ignored by the booksellers it seems that in the year of his centenary Llewelyn Powys's place in literature may begin to be properly established. Many of his essays proved their popular appeal when they first appeared and there seems no reason why they should not do so again, particularly in editions so well designed to attract new readers. Philip Larkin's introduction to *Earth Memories* will also be an important factor specifically because he is not regarded as a Powys specialist but is someone whose name is known and whose reputation will inspire confidence and because he deals, as one must with any great writer, with Powys's weaknesses as well as his strengths.

There will be critics of these editions, no doubt, but I believe that the Redcliffe Press deserve nothing but praise for the enormous service they have done, not only to the reputation of Llewelyn Powys but also to the reading public in giving them the opportunity to enjoy these marvellous essays.

PAUL ROBERTS

*English Fiction, 1900-1950: A Guide to Information Sources*, 2 vols.

Volume II: *Individual Authors: Joyce to Woolf*, THOMAS JACKSON RICE.

Gale Research Company, 1983, \$42.00.

Professor Rice has set himself a formidable task in bringing together all available primary and secondary bibliographical material of importance for three categories of authors of English fiction during the first half of this century. Firstly, all generally acknowledged "major" novelists (Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence and Woolf) and the "major-minor" writers such as Wells

and Bennett. Secondly, all major men of letters for whom the writing of fiction was only part of their output (Aldington, Chesterton, etc.). Thirdly, "all so-called minor writers who have, nonetheless, attracted a significant amount of bibliographical, biographical, or critical commentary, and who have contributed significantly to the development of modern long and short fiction in Britain". In this last category are included J. C. and T. F. Powys—a classification (at least in the former case) which some readers of the *Powys Review* may wish to dispute.

It is not Rice's intention to provide full bibliographical details and indeed, in most cases, these authors have already been reasonably well served in this field, the exceptions being H. H. Munro and L. H. Myers for whose works this guide does provide immediately useful check-lists.

The scope of the work is admirably broad. Ten sections cover miscellaneous writings, collected and selected works, letters and concordances as well as bibliographies, biographies, critical studies and essay collections, general critical articles and studies of individual works. Unfortunately, of these ten sub-divisions eight are stated to be "selective". Some of the omissions brought about by this process seem arbitrary and difficult to understand: this is particularly noticeable in the T. F. Powys section.

It must be acknowledged that the scope of the periodical titles consulted (more than two hundred and fifty) is impressive, although with a distinct bias to United States publications. The brief descriptions of the contents of both primary and secondary entries would seem to be the largest part of the "new" material to be found here. In most cases these are adequate, and one should perhaps be thankful for the unimaginative style. Inevitably some are misleading (for instance the description of *Mark Only* as "Pathetic failures of a good but dull, rustic farmhand"), and one fears the possibility that these partly digested notions of the meaning of an author's work are likely to pass without comment from one generation of students to the next.

A close examination of the section devoted to John Cowper Powys shows a careful compilation without glaring omissions. There are, however, a number of secondary articles whose inclusion might have proved more valuable than the 1967 reprint of the *Autobiography* under the

heading "Collected and Selected Works"—particularly when the first edition is already included under "Miscellaneous Writings". Because there is no immediate indication that *The Buffoon* has any Powys interest (unlike the other books of Louis Wilkinson concerning the family), it would seem likely that any serious student of the subject would particularly wish to have his attention drawn to that title. It is only possible to wonder at its omission.

T. F. Powys is not as well served here as his brother; it is unfortunate that the first entry in the primary bibliography is *Black Byrony* (sic), and that a few pages further on there is a reference to Llewelyn as his older brother. The brief descriptions in this section are the least successful, and are in fact omitted altogether in many cases. Perhaps Professor Rice's obvious lack of sympathy for his subject has led to some carelessness in the examination of the available material. Of the non-fictional work only three titles are listed, when for any student of the fiction it must surely be of the greatest importance to know of the essay on John Bunyan in *Great Names*. The suspicion cannot but arise that its exclusion is due not to lack of significance, but to the fact that it is not already documented in the existing bibliography, and that the research undertaken by this author was rudimentary. As there are no other examples of Theodore Powys criticism, it might have been helpful if the five anonymous contributions to *The Dial* in 1926 could at least have been mentioned, even if not in any detail.

Ultimately, it is difficult to know exactly who the beneficiaries of Professor Rice's labours are to be. Certainly he has satisfied his publishers by not diverting significantly from the pattern and organization of the preceding volumes of the series—but for any researcher accustomed to the normal chronological layout of bibliographies its use is irritating in the extreme and its eventual value limited. It will doubtless satisfy the requirements of institutional book-purchasing departments, but offers only limited value to scholars, collectors or booksellers.

MARGARET EATON

*Thomas Hardy: A Biography*,  
MICHAEL MILLGATE.

Oxford University Press, 1982, £15.00.

"To-day has length, breadth, thickness, colour, smell, voice. As soon as it becomes *yesterday* it is a thin layer among many layers, without substance, colour, or articulate sound." This typical Hardy observation is quoted in Florence Emily Hardy's *Life of Thomas Hardy* (1965 edition, p. 285), a work (only nominally by Florence Emily, actually by Hardy himself) which seems to owe its existence largely to Hardy's wish to ensure that the thin layers of his own yesterdays should remain thin. It is Michael Millgate's great achievement, by contrast, to have restored much of the "length, breadth, thickness" of Hardy's vanished "to-days". By its very scope and pace, the richness of its detail and its ample, leisurely (though never digressive) examination of the same, this biography presents not just a narrative of Hardy's life but a reconstruction of it. The effect, and presumably intention, is, as was Hardy's in his handling of the characters in his novels, to enable us to appreciate his subject's experience and actions from the inside. Not indeed from *right* inside: like the pig in *Jude*, Hardy has one (at least one) drop of blood (heart's blood, no doubt) that he keeps back even from this observer. We learn a great deal here about how it must have felt to live Hardy's life. What the book cannot finally tell us (perhaps naturally enough) is how it felt actually to *be* Hardy.

The story in its outlines is familiar, both from Florence Hardy's and, more recently (1975-8), Robert Gittings's version. Gittings's version, which made good many of the reticences and omissions of its predecessor, was on its first appearance accepted by many as definitive. Yet, closely researched and illuminating as his work is, it is now superseded. "It is likely the exact name of the girl will never be determined", he rather rashly writes (*Young Thomas Hardy*, p. 92) of the unhappy love relationship Hardy was clearly involved in during his London years. Millgate names her: Eliza Nichols. He also tells us a great deal about her: of her engagement and of Hardy's later preference for her sister Jane; of the breaking off of the engagement, poignantly commemorated in the poem "Neutral Tones" and in the series of sonnets, "She to Him".

This is the major "revelation" of the new

biography. For the most part it owes its authoritativeness to the greater fulness of its knowledge, to its accumulation and skilful handling of a mass of telling detail. The remarkable progress from rural obscurity to the literary eminence of Hardy's final years is minutely charted. Unlike Gittings, Millgate does not have theories about his subject. But he does have themes, themes which he maintains concurrently and develops progressively throughout the work. Chief among these are Hardy's family loyalty; his devotion to the past and specifically the local (Dorset and Dorchester) past; and the extent to which his work is rooted in his personal experience, particularly that of childhood. The pursuance of these themes provides a means, of course, of integrating the life and the art. The picture of "the sickly, solitary boy", all eyes and ears, storing up memories that will later bear fruit in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and other novels is unforgettable. So is the disentangling of the strands both from Hardy's past and his present that have gone to the making of *Jude*: the qualities in *Jude* derived from Hardy's shoemaker uncle John Antell; the *Jude/Sue* relationship reflecting his early closeness to his sister Mary; and the more recent parallels in the frustrations of his pursuit of Florence Henniker and of his own unhappy marriage.

That unhappy marriage, not surprisingly, provides another recurrent theme. It is examined in detail in all its various stages. In this connection, Millgate permits himself his one bold piece of speculation, when he suggests, from a reading of the poem "The Place on the Map", that Emma may have "caught" Hardy by a trick similar to Arabella's. By the time the marriage took place, he believes, Hardy, now moving in literary circles and facing social opportunities undreamt of at the time of their engagement, was already questioning its wisdom. The difficulties of the relationship thereafter are carefully scrutinized. That there was increasingly no place for Emma in either of Hardy's two "worlds"—that of family and that of art—is made clear. Millgate makes us feel for her in her attempts at rapprochement with the formidable Jemima (Hardy's mother), for whom Emma was, first and last, "a thing of a 'ooman". But he also, while frequently affirming Emma's kindness and courage, demonstrates fully the pain and embarrassment she caused Hardy through her silliness, her absurd style of dress (some very unflattering photographs are included here), her literary preten-

sions and claims to have written his novels, her disloyalty in letters and conversation from the 1890s onwards, and, in her final years, her growing religious mania and signs of mental decline.

Emma's death was, Millgate assures us, totally unexpected both by Hardy and by Hardy's doctor. He accepts Hardy's own assertion "that while she had certainly been in indifferent health for some time he had no suspicion that anything was radically wrong". Gittings, in *The Older Hardy* (p. 153), reaches a different conclusion: "He had seen her suffer for months the utmost physical agony, had deliberately turned his eyes away, and pretended not to notice". Gittings's account in general softens the picture of Emma and puts the blame for the failure of the marriage chiefly on Hardy's susceptibility to other women. Although Millgate never openly challenges him, it seems likely that his careful survey of the evidence on this matter, as also on the questions of Hardy's alleged snobbery and meanness, is intended as a rebuttal of Gittings's arguments. Hardy has been given a retrial, and a more favourable verdict reached. The damage done to Hardy's reputation among the general reading public through the exploitation of Gittings's "findings" by the media and the Sunday supplements (where the Max Gate housemaids too have had their say) may never be undone, but at least the serious reader who gives his full attention to Millgate's narrative can feel that justice (and justice without the inverted commas of *Tess*) has been done.

"Criticism of Hardy's conduct during these years seems sometimes to ignore the fact that he was an artist", Millgate writes. Millgate himself does not ignore the fact. He has not a lot to say about the various works considered as achievements (as distinct from providing valuable information about their backgrounds and origins). Here Gittings is on the whole the more impressive. (Compare, for instance, their respective treatments of *The Dynasts*.) His apparent endorsement of the "general" view of *The Trumpet-Major* as "slight" is disappointing: the loving re-creation of an historical and domestic past in that novel is surely as close to the heart of Hardy's art as anything in the more grandly "philosophical" novels. But where he is wholly convincing is in his demonstration of Hardy's total dedication as an artist, seen equally in the tenacity and courage with which he pursued his objectives in the early stages of his career and in the long hours spent shut up in

his study in old age. Hardy's true well-beloved is his art: both his wives here faced a more serious rival than any of the flesh-and-blood women he admired. As Yeats (and Yeats's wife) knew, "perfection of the work" and "perfection of the life" cannot be achieved together. Describing AE (George Russell) as a saint, Mrs Yeats commented, "You are a better poet than he, but you are not a saint". Neither was Hardy. Yet despite the well publicized failures of sympathy he was capable, as Millgate shows, of many "little nameless, unremembered acts/of kindness and of love". If not as good a man as his own Giles Winterborne, he was one who had done good things. We are left at the end of this monumental work with the impression of a great writer who by the end of a long life had achieved generosity, wisdom, and something like nobility, in both his life and his work.

JOAN GRUNDY

*D. H. Lawrence: History, Ideology and Fiction*,  
GRAHAM HOLDERNESS.

Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, 1982,  
£18.50.

I must declare an interest: I appear in the acknowledgements to this book, I am an ex-colleague of Graham Holderness, and my own critical work on Lawrence is discussed twice in the text. I trust that this review can serve as part of a continuing debate; but, reader, you have been warned.

This is the most stimulating recent book on Lawrence that I know. It is a book that, as a fellow critic, I am envious of, because it is so clear and strong in its demonstrations, so persuasive in its arguments. It is sometimes narrow, and often selective, but it pursues its targets with admirable concentration.

Narrow? Selective? The first part of the book consists of two lengthy, packed chapters about Lawrence's background, and the way criticism (in particular that of F. R. Leavis) has handled it. The first chapter provides the most sustained, well-argued and dismissive dealing with Leavis's attitude to Lawrence and his society ever published, though later nails hammer persistently into the coffin: "man cannot live by 'life' alone". The second chapter goes steadily through details of mining industry, local com-

munity, Congregationalism, as Lawrence experienced them. The rest of the book consists of chapters on individual works, or groups of works. Apart from five pages on the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* versions, and the use of "The Fox" (written 1918-21) to support an argument about a change in Lawrence's writing which took place between 1913 and 1917, what Lawrence wrote after *Women in Love* is hardly considered. *Aaron's Rod*, for example, which could have provided a most interesting comparison with the presentation of working-class mining-community life in *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love*, is not even mentioned. The second part of the book, in fact, is a collection of interrelated essays rather than a book designed to match up to the impressive and comprehensive sounding title. Holderness is prepared to use whatever is most suitable to support his arguments, because it is the arguments which take pride of place: not a desire to write a comprehensive book about Lawrence.

The essence of the argument is that Lawrence—because of his particular background, family, upbringing and education—was exposed to conflicting ideas and ideologies from the start: but was also equipped, as a writer, to convey the way in which "man is inescapably a 'social' as well as a 'natural' being". This he did, especially, in the early version of "Odour of Chrysanthemums" and in *Sons and Lovers*: after 1913, however, "this awareness breaks down". And, for Holderness, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* are properly to be seen as examples of what happens to a writer who loses such "awareness". *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is used as the confirmation of such an argument; after Lawrence's "decisive return to England, to the Midlands, in 1926", he was able once more to write as he used to; but the "awareness" broke down again, and the final version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* comes down so one-sidedly on the part of the "natural" being that it constitutes a real "denial of history".

Put like that, the argument is at its weakest, and I must stress that one of the book's strengths is the power of the examples Holderness uses to win his argument. But I am not happy with the idea of "awareness" as Holderness employs it, nor with the way it comes and goes. I would rather argue that Lawrence—rather than losing or having to "break down" such awareness—pushed it away. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* turned out to be a novel he had always wanted to write, about sex; and for it to be that novel, other con-

cerns—such as the impossibility of Parkin/Mellors and Connie Chatterley crossing their social divides—had to be abandoned. To drive the two lovers into their community of two, the rest of society had (literally) to be blackened and brutalized. A book which, in Holderness's terms, began as a work of realism became a polemical book.

It also became a far more exciting, and far more significant book, too. It is important to say this because the cogency of the "argument" can lull us into accepting that the *First Lady Chatterley* is the "real" novel (in both senses), and that the third version is fatally flawed and partial. Lawrence's extraordinary courage, attack and single-mindedness in writing the first sexually explicit serious novel (something which he had been tinkering with all his writing life) is both miraculous and flawed, partial, imperfect. Criticism can certainly expose the weakness of the resulting book, and show the strengths of the early version: as it can the strengths of the 1911 "Odour of Chrysanthemums", and the flaws of the 1914 version. But as critics we must pursue the cultural significance of our literature as well as the matter of its coherence or one-sidedness; and one of the jobs criticism can do is demonstrate the process of that significance. It can suggest why a sexually explicit novel was something to be expected, in the late Twenties—as well as the price that had to be paid, in other ways, for the achievement. Again, to write *The Rainbow* in 1915 involved a rejection of those methods of realism Lawrence had developed so brilliantly in *Sons and Lovers*. So be it: the new art was incapable of developing the truths about society created by the earlier. It was, however, attempting to open up a whole metaphysical dimension of experience, and to show the part that played in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century experience. Though Holderness denies it, he sets less value on that than on the achievement of "realism".

His *Women in Love* chapter is the most striking, and also the most gnomic. It centres on an argument about a "significant and constitutive absence in the text". The *Sons and Lovers* chapter had proclaimed such an absence, too—the absence of bourgeois society and culture (though Paul's work for Liberty's, his theatre visit with Clara to see Sarah Bernhardt, his very sexual explorations, are all culturally bourgeois). But the gap in *Women in Love* is the First World War. It is a peculiar argument which proclaims that the "unspoken subject" of the novel

is the war—and that, all the same, the war *could not be* included in it. Gaps may speak; they may remain obstinately silent; and the chapter is in danger of slipping into a mish-mash of argument for its own sake. Consider its conclusion:

Attempting to be the conscience of capitalism, the novel proves to be its shadow. Attempting to preside over the funeral obsequies of capitalism (*Dies Irae*), the novel becomes an instrument in its regeneration and historical persistence. (p. 219)

Just before, we are told that “Birkin is Gerald’s shadow”. These statements belong to arguments which work through paradox, reversal and rhetoric, rather than through clarity; we understand them by accepting the general analysis, and *feeling* their rhetorical truth.

The book is not, in general, written like that, though just occasionally the running-dogs of class-criticism are loosed: *Sons and Lovers*, for instance, “never stands far enough outside its dramatised community to offer an explicit critique or condemnation of this ‘self-help’ ideology”. But why would a “condemnation” (an interesting clarification of “critique”!) be so appropriate? (A terrible hush: the room we have entered is contemptuous of such questions.)

I should add my contribution to errors located. Professor Boulton is not guilty (p. 50); the German on p. 201 contains two mistakes and one mistranslation; *Women in Love* was, as Lawrence says it was, “finished in Cornwall in 1917” (Holderness corrects to “(actually 1916)”). The quotation from the Kaiser appears in the October 1916 draft, incidentally, so speculation about proof-correction in 1919 or 1920 is unnecessary. The Eastwood Congregational Chapel was called “Butty’s Lump” precisely because the butties had paid for it: Holderness argues that “the promoters . . . were in a different class altogether” from the miners, but by his own demonstration, the “little butty” was the *only* kind of butty by the 1870s: and he was a miner. It is a pity that Lawrence’s letters to the Rev. Robert Reid (published in 1979) are not used in the section on Congregationalism.

This is an irritating, energetic, polemical, difficult book; but everyone interested in Lawrence should read it.

JOHN WORTHEN

*Wales*,  
EDWARD THOMAS.

Oxford University Press, 1983,  
£2.50 (paperback)

I am not one who cries out, at the first pinch, for a critical apparatus. It so happens that the last book I read, before Edward Thomas’s *Wales*, was Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* (from the same publishers, in their World’s Classics series), which was provided with a long and tendentious introduction and an almost laughable over-provision of textual notes. That fact alone would press me to leave Edward Thomas’s text or any other unadorned. But *Wales* first appeared in 1905—a longish time ago—and it is, besides, a very odd book. Let me attempt to demonstrate how odd.

When the book first appeared it was called *Beautiful Wales*. It was further described as “Painted by Robert Fowler R.I. and Described by Edward Thomas”. The publishers were A. & C. Black. Fowler’s 74 paintings, all of them reproduced in colour, were, with the exception of nine, exclusively of *North Wales*. Thomas’s text, though it supplies no geographical location except Llyn y Fan Fach, is exclusively of South and West. To the extent that Thomas acknowledges, in one of his wittily dismissive lists, that he has been to Llanelltyd and Bala, the present volume does better by rooting out Fowler in his entirety (as in the 1924 reprint) and providing as a cover picture a reproduction of James Dickson Innes’s “Bala Lake”. But that is only a nibble at the oddities.

*Beautiful Wales* provided a short preface in which Edward Thomas attempted to assist the uninformed reader by giving the sources of a *few* of his many quotations: he acknowledged Ernest Rhys, T. Sturge Moore and Gordon Bottomley, none of them writers whose work has a place in the average memory. This preface has been deleted from *Wales*. Many other quotations which defeat this reviewer can be added, and a curious cloud hangs over the whole issue of Thomas’s sources. In the preface referred to, for example, he confesses, “for the benefit of the solemn reviewer”, that he knows “nothing of the Welsh language”. Yet he offers a number of translations of traditional songs, poems by Watcyn Wyn and so on, which his throwaway manner suggests he had a hand in, probably by Thomassing up the literal renderings from the Welsh. But that is not all. One or two of the

Welsh tales with which, often with the barest of excuses, he ends some of his later sections, turn up in odd or variant versions. Notable amongst these is the theme of the Oldest Animals, in which he has the Eagle of Gwernabwy seeking to take to wife the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd but anxious first to establish how particularly old she was in order to obviate the possibility of her having further children. This he claims to have taken from the *Mabinogi* (obviously from the tale of Cilhwch and Olwen). But this version is not in the *Mabinogi*. Professor Kenneth Jackson in his Gregynog Lecture of 1961 outlined the three main themes involving the Oldest Animals, which appear internationally from India and the Far East to Ireland, but Edward Thomas's version is not one of these. Instead it is found independently in the manuscript collection of Dafydd Jones of Trefriw (1708-85) and was afterwards used by Iolo Morganwg, in whose work Thomas presumably found it, since he brings in Iolo in one of his few pieces of straightforward biography. I am no scholar in this field and I instance this example only because of the sense of unease Edward Thomas's sources induced in me—not, I hasten to add, because I had frequent cause to doubt his accuracy but because I began to have the feeling that he had read widely and unusually in places where I had never been. This may seem a minor matter to patter on about, though I doubt whether the datedness of sources is ever, in the last analysis, minor. The publishers would have done well to ask a scholar (and whom, in terms of Edward Thomas, but Dr. R. George Thomas?) to introduce the book.

For the whole attitude of the book is determined by the fact that it was written in 1905. There Edward Thomas stands abreast of A. G. Bradley, to whom he is briefly respectful, ahead of the supposedly humorous vilifications of Tyssilio Johnson, and a long way after Thomas Roscoe and the still earlier cohorts of topographical "tourists", whose "gentlemanliness" and "fatuity" he finds fascinating. How shall he describe Wales? Borrow is the only predecessor whom he venerates, but he is not to be copied. Thomas fears he knows less of Wales than do many others, but "few of them seem to know the things which I know, and fewer still in the same way". This is what leads him to keep away from the famous places (and also, obstinately, from the scenes of Fowler's paintings, which are often "famous" in just this sense): "if I visit them my

predecessors fetter my capacity and actually put in abeyance the powers of the places". One can sympathize, indeed agree, with this. But he goes on to argue that if preceding writers "were imperfect tellers of the truth [I] yet feel myself unwilling to say an unpleasant new thing of village or mountain because it will not be believed, and a pleasant one because it puts so many excellent people in the wrong". This is quite unworthy of a man who was trained as a historian: indeed, to modern eyes, it approaches the fatuity of some of his predecessors, if from a different direction. What emerges from this unconfident hawing is that he will avoid what he calls a gazetteer. But more: no place will have a name, and individuals, except sometimes as quoted writers, will be pseudonymous. It is no surprise, then, that Edward Thomas's scenes create the effect that Paul Wakefield's fine photographs (in *Wales: The First Place*) have had on many people: they might be anywhere in a temperate highland country with industrial margins, and they escape the fineness of their writing less frequently than they ought.

What is being fashioned is a personal approach to a country with which there is an emotional bond, and for a while it succeeds. The pity is that Edward Thomas was best acquainted with an area that public fame had quite passed by, and might have made so much more of it. His relatives and friends, with whom he frequently stayed, were inhabitants of the Hendy-Pontarddulais district of semi-industrial Carmarthenshire (not that any reader coming to Edward Thomas for the first time could possibly learn this from the book) and he mixed freely in a Nonconformist society quite undescribed previously, in Borrow least of all. He is capable of striking a different note—"The last happy chapel-goer had passed me long ago"—without having anything to say about the quality of life in a totally Welsh-speaking region where the mines and steelworks edged upon and into the maze of little farms. If this is a deficiency that a present-day reader notices and that Thomas's "literary" mind would refute, it can be argued that Borrow would have provided the social comment, prejudiced and uninformed as it might have been, had he ever passed that way. Thomas's "characters", when he produces them, have to front the void behind. To have desired a *new* approach and not to have seen that the material nearest to his knowledge would have provided it is something of an oddity. It

seems to arise from a lack of confidence, of the same kind that kept Dylan Thomas from persisting with "The Town that is Mad".

Another reader than I might well miss this sense of social and historical definition less and mourn not at all for the omitted names and places and the associations inseparable from them. But for me their absence means that the book must needs work hard to justify itself. And, for a while, to be sure, it does. The first chapter, with its *lists* of places visited, chapels, rivers and streams and places not visited and its spirited attack on Ossianic Kensington-based Celt-lovers who are "perplexed in the extreme by the Demetian with his taste in wall-papers quite untrained", is rarely less than entertaining. For a while one accepts anecdotes about places with blanks for names. Chapter II, in which the writer first makes a way into Wales through a picture of the Chapel Perilous which hung in his room in West London (and is not deterred, even at the time of writing, by the possibility that the Chapel may have been in Rhaged—on the River Doe above Ingleton) leads on to two specific scenes, the second of which—that of the island of apple-trees—he follows with the Aber Cuawg sequence from Llywarch Hen. "These little things", he continues, "are the opening cadences of a great music which I have heard and which is Wales. But I have forgotten the whole".

This is the face-saver, the premonition that the rest of the formula may not work. And it doesn't. For a while there is fire, like the fire of the farmhouse in which he decides to gather his "characters" (rather as, much more fancifully, I heard that great raconteur, the late Stanley Rees, produce a whole tribe of Welshmen from the Stork Club, New York) and the first of his portraits, most of all "Mr. Rowlands" the minister and the landlord of the "Cross Inn", have warmth, humour and a simple pathos. But with the Poacher he begins to make didactic and over-fine distinctions, and "Llewellyn the Bard", "Azariah John Pugh" (in whom one suspects may lurk some of Edward Thomas's own "highs" and "lows") and "Morgan Rhys" are all complex impossibles, characters written from the inside with a totality of interpretation that no mere acquaintance could approach. Over-written, too, as is much of what follows.

The remainder of what is really a short book is devoted to "Wales Month by Month", an account of walks taken through the seasons. It is here that the "personal" conveys to the reader

less and less. For we learn very little of the inner Wales beyond the kindness of farmers and their wives in lonely places, the curious behaviour of a poet on a railway platform and the sad decadence of harpers. Instead we have much fine writing about the countryside at dawn (Thomas believed in making an early start) and a good deal of tedious poeticizing espaliered by a spread of similes. One or two sections seem to me outright failures—February's crossing of the river in mist towards factory chimneys and August's unfortunate village compelled by the writer to a "universal speech" before his mood changes and it all becomes nothing. But of course there are splendid passages too. I shall as little forget the two clocks in the farm house who "ticked with effort and uneasiness" and nearly ruined themselves when they had to strike midnight as one of the many, better, shorter similes like this:

The east opened, and the close-packed,  
dwarfed hills were driven out of it like sheep,  
into the gradual light.

The "Bill Bailey" story, in which the Merfyn who develops it may conceivably have been Edward's own son, is one of the happier episodes, but for the most part the poet who is trying to break out from this book is much more verbose and cloying than the one Edward Eastaway finally proved to be.

What, in the end, can be said of the author's attitude to Wales? He is as scornful of outsiders who patronize it as of Celtophiles who romanticize it as the always defeated. He prefers the roaring man under the bridge, the happy ne'er do well, to the failed stockbroker's clerk who looks up his pedigree out of Wales. But he contradicts himself nevertheless. He writes of "the resolved and terrible despair" of the Welsh national anthem and approves most of all of the landlord of the "Cross Inn" because he remembers gloriously what he has lost. When he himself looks out of the farmhouse at night he can "see nothing but the past as a magnificent presence besieging the house". He favours Welsh traditional songs to the harp and is amongst those who "emptied" the Prince of Wales "of its Englishmen" in order to get the harper to stick to his native songs. "I do not easily believe in patriotism", he writes, ". . . unless I am in Wales" and he notes the (in Saxon terms) unusual "surprise and joy" with which Welshmen meet each other. There are several vague encouragements to fight, but the enemy is never named. Edward Thomas has the air of a

man whose reading has been in ancient history and legend and who does not trust himself with the present of Wales. It is this that dates the book most of all. In 1905, perhaps, there were few signs that Wales had one.

ROLAND MATHIAS

*The Letters of Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge,*

Edited by ANTHONY BERRIDGE.

Enitharmon Press, 1983, £8.50.

In this elegantly produced volume Anthony Berridge has edited, with scrupulous care and perceptive insight, the 77 letters written by Thomas to his bank-clerk/poet/clergyman friend from their first meeting in May 1901 until January 1917 when Thomas was about to leave for France and his subsequent death near Arras on 9 April 1917. In the introduction and epilogue Anthony Berridge—no relation of these letters' recipient—provides a clear, sympathetic short account of both men's lives; his notes to individual letters unobtrusively give the reader ample information to fill out the one-sided correspondence. (For Edward Thomas had destroyed most of the letters he had received, except those from his wife Helen, in a huge two-day bonfire in the autumn of 1916 before he left Steep for good.) In particular, this editor uncovers the true identity of another life-long friend, Thomas Charles ("Duncan") Williams, one of Edward's earliest post-Oxford acquaintances: a Welsh-speaking local government official with enduring Fabian convictions and a shared love of Welsh and English folk songs. In addition to such nuggets of fact and the many admirable photographs, there is a six-page memoir of "Edward" written by Canon Berridge in 1946 for Rowland L. Watson, the indefatigable secretary of the Edward Thomas Memorial Committee. This memoir is here published for the first time. (Together with the 120 others collected by R. L. Watson, it will form part of the Edward Thomas Collection now in the process of assemblage at University College Cardiff with the active support of the poet's surviving daughter, Myfanwy Thomas.) Anthony Berridge rounds off his well-informed book with a useful list of the prose works of Thomas referred to in the letters.

So far I have been able to trace, and read,

about 1700 letters from Edward Thomas while completing a biographical study of him and, eventually, I hope to publish a substantial selection from them. The Berridge letters belong to a significant group of letters that cover most of Thomas's active writing life. (Other similar life-long recipients are Harry Hooton, Ian MacAlister, E. S. P. Haynes, Gordon Bottomley, Edward Garnett and the poet's wife. In his last four years, too, Thomas wrote at length to Harold Monro, John Freeman, Eleanor Farjeon and Robert Frost, chiefly on literary matters, and their letters are further glossed by the one surviving two-way correspondence between Thomas and his literary agent, C. Frank Cazenove.) From a thumbnail sketch of Berridge which survives in a letter to Robert Frost, it is clear that, although Thomas and Berridge met but briefly each year in order to spend a few days walking or cycling over the "South Country", Thomas found it remarkably easy to resume their intimacy despite the paucity of communication in between. Jesse Berridge was a hard-working clergyman, a fine swimmer and fisherman (like Thomas), a keen archaeologist, but a wretched correspondent. Many of the later letters centre around an annual exchange of family news at Christmas time and, when Canon Berridge first allowed me to read them, he apologised because they were "largely matter-of-fact trivial exchanges about appointments, plans for meetings, exchange of presents for the children" and, consequently, gave no sense of the richness of insight that he believed he was happy to have gained from his many talks and walks with Thomas. His memoir states his view precisely: "But indeed he made all things lightly passed over or unnoticed to possess a value only perceived when he made us see with something of the vision he himself possessed. I hold it to be the spiritual value, and whether he would have acknowledged the word or no, there was something of the mystic in his poet's vision. His poems contain ample illustration of this feeling then awakened in me." Here Jesse Berridge is referring specifically to the two journeys with Thomas which became his last "wayfaring country" book, *In Pursuit of Spring*, which appeared at Easter 1914 and which convinced Frost that Thomas was a poet in prose clothing.

There had been much to bring the two men together when they first met when Edward was a penurious literary journalist trying to make ends meet in a poor surburban London house over a shop and Jesse was an aspiring poet working in a

German bank because an English bank had dismissed him when his early marriage was made known. Jesse's father had been a sea captain and Thomas was inordinately proud of his own family connection with the sea and eager to hear Jesse's sea-shanties. They met frequently at Duncan Williams's house where art, literature and politics were discussed volubly, with intervals for singing and literary improvisation. One has to guess a great deal about these evenings in Grays Inn Road, but certainly Harry Hooton, Walter De la Mare, Franklyn Dyall, Charles Dalmon, Epstein(?) and Arthur Ransome attended in the early years of the century and, a few years later, W. H. Davies became a welcome member of the informal gatherings. As always in such company Thomas was remembered as a good listener, an enthusiastic and gifted singer, and an intermittent provider of salacious or mordant comment. The little we know of this society suggests why Thomas found it necessary to leave his various country homes for forays into London in search of intellectual companionship; it certainly supports the obituary statements about Thomas made by De la Mare and Thomas Seccombe which imply that Edward Thomas had a deep concern for those socially and privately dispossessed—but without joining any coterie—and that his decision to enlist at the age of 37 in July 1915 was a complete surprise to his close friends who had always identified him with the unjingoistic "Liberal Intelligentsia". This aspect of Thomas's work, I believe, has been insufficiently explored except by Dr. Stan Smith. The letters to Berridge show that these were lifelong concerns that matched his wife's public involvement in the movement for Women's Suffrage. After Edward's death, Berridge, like Duncan Williams, Harry Hooton and Ian MacAlister remained stalwart friends of Helen and her three children. Letters often convey such close friendships inadequately.

When Thomas began his study of Richard Jefferies, he turned naturally to Jesse Berridge—now an ordained priest—for the loan of books on various aspects of religious experience and mysticism. And he did the same again, later, when writing on Maeterlinck and on "Ecstasy". In his memoir in 1946 Canon Berridge is very careful to avoid the charge that he was involved in special pleading about these interests of his long-dead friend:

He told me of his poems and sent me some in 1915. I may have said something about there being only one cure for his melancholia. He

wrote back to say he did not know what I meant. But I still feel that his interest in mysticism was something much more than an effort towards a literary understanding of Jefferies and Maeterlinck. He had the most exquisite expression of thought of any man I ever knew, but there was something in him ever inexpressible. And the merely romantic side of supernatural experience repelled him, particularly when it took literary expression.

There writes a would-be poet who had often, in his earlier days, submitted his verse for the severe honest scrutiny that Thomas somehow always felt impelled to give his friends' work.

As most poets do, Thomas kept inviolate—except possibly from Helen—the inner citadel behind which he guarded his faith in the power of words to enhance the vital experiences of his readers. These letters, buttressed by Jesse Berridge's memoir of "Edward", help us to understand this partially neglected aspect of Thomas's work and personality. This attractive, slim book will be welcomed by the growing number of readers of Edward Thomas's verse and prose, now happily more readily available in paperback editions.

But the final judgement rests with Canon Berridge: "I repeat that, as I knew him, laughter and joy made up far more of his life than one would ever guess from some of the sombre portraits of him, literary and photographic". It reads like a salutary warning to any would-be biographer.

R. GEORGE THOMAS

*Twentieth-Century English Literature*,  
HARRY BLAMIRE.

Macmillan, 1982, £12.00 (hardback); £3.95 (paperback).

When faced with a work of literary history, one is reminded of Roland Barthes's soothsayer who, gazing up at a sky full of stars, attempts to discern some pattern in the chaos. Not that twentieth-century English literature is in such an uncharted state as the heavens confronting Barthes's primeval seer, but to the explorations of the astronomer, the literary historian has still to add some of the astrologer's art of prescience.

Harry Blamires's study of twentieth-century English literature (one volume in Macmillan's

projected History of Literature series) gains much from its simplicity of approach. Basically chronological, Blamires's impressively comprehensive survey dissects the century into overlapping decades and presents a chapter on each. Thus, for example, the 1930s are dealt with in two successive chapters, firstly coupled with the 1920s in "The Post-War Scene" and then with the 1940s in "Today the Struggle". This does indeed provide a good deal of flexibility in presenting historical trends, and is complemented by the policy of dealing with writers depending upon "the date of their main impact on the public, or on the date of the historic event or literary development with which they are strongly associated", as Blamires writes in his introduction. In addition to the consequent seven chapters which take the survey up to the 1970s, there are two specialized chapters dealing with the First World War and the Modern Movement which are argued to be respectively the major historic and the major literary upheavals of the century.

The chapters themselves (apart from that dealing with individual Modernist writers) are organized according to two main schemes. The first is to deal separately as far as possible with the drama, the novels, and the poetry of each period and though this does inevitably produce some inconsistencies (the plays of David Storey are seen in terms of psychological validity whilst his novels are held to be demonstrative of social tension), together with the odd sleight of hand (Lawrence Durrell's poetry has only passing reference in discussion of his novels), this is due to an admirable flexibility and clarity of presentation. And the second organizational feature is to make special reference to regional trends in a broadly conceived English literature, grouping together Welsh, Scottish, and Irish writers, as well as writers from the North of England (the moral and social concerns of T. F. Powys are, for instance, seen as distinct from, yet in context with those of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Sean O'Casey, and Walter Greenwood).

Broadly speaking, one can expect a history of literature to attempt in some degree three main tasks: namely, to provide a historical and cultural context for the period under discussion, to offer some informed criticism of individual works and authors and to link together writers to present a portrait of distinctive literary scenes. The first of these is provided in the present study by a short introduction to each chapter, though

the brevity of the contextual outline precludes depth and acts mainly as a reminder to the reader of what he or she already knows. (Some eighteen black and white plates of varying interest are included.) Clearly Blamires's focus is elsewhere, though the failure to mention the impact of film or television alongside that of fine art and music is perhaps a serious omission. Certainly the absence of any reference to feminist writing since the 1960s (except to the "piquant note of wounded aggressiveness" found in the novels of Fay Weldon) is conspicuous.

Turning to the second task of literary history, that of offering a critical judgement on author or work, this is again handled with brevity. On the whole this makes for ease of reading, and certainly the study is no mere catalogue, but there is a tendency towards contentious oversimplification and Blamires is clearly more successful as a critic when he has scope for a more detailed judgement (as in the chapter on Modernism where sections can be devoted to individual writers such as James Joyce or T. S. Eliot). A more serious complaint is that even given restrictions of space, Blamires's approach, with its emphasis upon "imaginative intensity" and "emotional pressure", is sometimes too impressionistic and vague. (As an example, Thomas Hardy's poetry is said to provide a "corpus . . . where the drive of spontaneous thought and feeling meets the mould of shape and stress, and constriction is lost in vibrancy and tension".) The type of criticism employed favours "human reality" rather than political engagement and formal experimentation, and whilst one can see the basis for such an approach, it is not always helpful and is particularly unresponsive to trends in later twentieth-century literature. To take formal experimentation, we find the novels of Muriel Spark, with their "serious estimate of human significance", preferred to the "inventiveness" of those of Iris Murdoch, yet it is certainly arguable that whilst both writers find new resources in the novel form, Iris Murdoch has a more interesting and varied output. And to talk in primarily psychological terms of the novels of Samuel Beckett ("his therapeutic self-exploration") or of those of William Golding ("the poetic insight and moral sturdiness carry immense authority") is to ignore the questioning of precisely those evaluations that such novels are now widely held to have undertaken. The attack on traditional literary presuppositions

from the inside is one vital trend that Blamires, as literary soothsayer, does not adequately foresee.

Understandably, however, Blamires's study concentrates upon linking diverse writers to provide a comprehensive survey of successive literary periods and in this it is most successful. Not only are the so-called major writers discussed but there is also a consistent policy of giving a proportionate amount of space to lesser known writers, not all of whom are assumed to be inferior (the poets Charlotte Mew and Norman Cameron together with the novelist James Hanley are among those Blamires shows admiration for). Indeed the work as a whole provides an excellent reference volume of British writers of the twentieth century (with an absolute profusion of relevant dates), and if it does lack contextual detail and an awareness of changing trends in literary criticism brought about by literary shifts, these are relinquished in favour of a noteworthy clarity of outline and structure. With the aid of this study, the stargazer of the second-hand bookshelf will look again with renewed interest.

ANDREW HASSAM

*American Literature in Context IV 1900-1930*,  
ANN MASSA.

Methuen, 1982; £9.95 (hardback),  
£4.50 (paperback).

Introducing students to American literature is sometimes not as easy as one thinks it should be. Although they, like their teachers, inhabit a world of cisatlantic values and cultural expression, when faced with American writing they often fail to distinguish its authentic Americanness, but treat it as another option of Eng. Lit.. American English is not English English, one insists, but what makes it not so is American society.

Ann Massa's survey of fourteen authors of the first three decades of the century is considerably angled to show how such literature displays its truly American concerns. Her method is to use an extract from each writer so as to provide a springboard for a critical, expository essay which relates extract to author and to his/her times. She selects interestingly and she writes fair-mindedly. Prose and poetry are both repres-

ented. There is one playwright accounted for, Eugene O'Neill.

The method is a common one, well used in teaching. The book's general preface suggests "that whilst the chapters are not precisely intended as models for students to imitate, those who are learning to write about literature are encouraged to treat extracts of their own choosing in a comparable manner, relating the particular response to wider matters". Ms. Massa's responses are varied and various, but so are the extracts. By and large she avoids the close and intimate linguistic analytical commentary of a work such as *Mimesis*, but she widens the sense of debate on the aura surrounding each author. What is particularly impressive is that faced with such writers as James, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, for whom the bibliographies alone would be longer than this book, she narrows the focus to the manageable. She keeps clear of the grandiose ambition of a complete re-writing of everything, but she pushes and shifts in certain directions. The essay on Henry James, for instance, seemed at first sight slightly perverse. *The American Scene* (1907) is good for America, and good for James as an American, but was it included because the chronology demanded it? Is James noting the inhabitants of the immigrant-filled Bowery central to the novelist of *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Ambassadors*, so securely located in Europe? Ms. Massa cleverly uses James's travel-book to go directly to his central and abiding concerns. She does not attempt to telescope James in 1907 into the novelist of twenty or thirty years previous, but she presents those particular American cultural and social perceptions—the problems of mass immigration, the Europeanized Waspish response to cultural and ethnic pluralism, the vacuity which arose out of conspicuous consumption, as viewed by a very special perceiver. The extract reveals much about James, and much about the cultural implications of what Zangwill termed the "melting pot", and James more roughly, "the great stew".

Predictably, some of the essays are better than others and some writers extract better than others. Poetry as usual extracts better than prose. Nevertheless, Ms. Massa is good on both counts. The essay on James is well matched by the excellent essay on Wallace Stevens's *Sunday Morning Service*, which should aid any uninitiated bewildered reader of his defamiliarizing poetry. The essay on Pound, connected to *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, is less convincing and less

coherent, but these are Poundian problems which readers must do what they can with. The essay on *Gatsby* is rather brief, though perhaps this is justified by it being a novel which students are likely to know. The essay on Mencken is a little disappointing, and rather too tied to the extract. Another perspective could have used him to discuss the idea of the American man of letters in modern times.

I had only three reservations about this book. The first was the unexplained omission of William Carlos Williams. The second is the ambiguous status of T. S. Eliot, American indigene as well as English patriot. It might be argued that to understand Williams and Stevens better, as well as cast a retrospective glow on James (and Adams), some mention of Eliot as American is useful. The third is that the book's introduction could well have been expanded to include more of the social and cultural history of the period which the individual essays did not have space for. Perhaps the editorial policy forbade it, which is a pity.

This book is enjoyable in its own right and it will be very useful to students and first readers of American literature. It has no grand aims, but it achieves worthwhile objectives. It avoids the sloppy survey of isms begetting isms, and adjudicates between literary work and social bearings.

ALLEN SAMUELS

*Fiction and Repetition*,  
J. HILLIS MILLER.

Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1982, £12.50.

Recent works of literary criticism, particularly those from Miller and his colleagues at Yale, share the proposal that textual "unreadability" both prompts and invalidates conventional critical response. We have been forced to view books, and books about books, in a new and paradoxical light. De Man's "irony", Hartman's "Voice", Bloom's "Scene of Instruction" (complementing Derrida's "Scene of Writing") are each a figure representing an attempt to name the absence around which conventional interpretative practice has constructed elaborate and authoritative replies to the call for meaning. Miller's book contributes to the subversive effort by way of textual "repetition", the latest in this line of super-tropes.

The proposal is that fictional texts generate meaning by a sort of referential vacillation between two axes or versions of repetition. These axes represent on the one hand repetition in the Platonic sense of type in some way signifying archetype, of a "real" or "true" ground for various forms of similarity, and on the other repetition after the style of Nietzsche in which connections are suggested among ultimately discrete (and correspondingly diverse) textual elements. "Repetition" combines these two senses of repetition, echoing the text's inability to offer us a definitive and meaningful choice between the two. Repetition as a narrative mode perpetuates the error upon which "knowledge" of the text is based; in this it can be closely approximated to de Man's "irony". We mistake the desire for, or the effort to produce meaning for meaning(s) itself, and an inter- or intratextual phenomenon is erroneously held to be extratextual.

Miller chooses to analyse seven texts from the English Literary canon in this latest demonstration of unreadability. Each has had many readings, each reading staking an unironical claim to interpretive truth. But these readings are of greater significance collectively than their often fierce and exclusive individuality would suggest. Both under- and overdetermination in fiction allows elements of the text to be collected together within a reading which gains a corresponding sense of achievement or self-justification: the novel has been *treated*, its initial lack of meaning cured. In this, repetition allows a sort of familiarity to develop both with and within the text. Its chaos of minimal units of meaning (of whatever variety, from the phonemic to the conventionally historical) are woven into as many different pictures of the text as there are repetitive threads that the reading is able to pick up, interpretation shuttling interminably back and forth between the coherence of its own, and its coincidence with an external pattern. Repetition as a figure, then, performs precisely as does any other metaphor: its specular form creates meaning where there is none, producing insight out of indecision, turning desire into the desirable itself.

There can be no doubt that the authority of normative critical practice (with which readers in Britain particularly are familiar) is yet further devalued by this collection of essays. Literary criticism is fast becoming criticism criticism, and the interest of Miller's critique increases the further he moves away from the texts in hand

toward the implications—social, ideological and professional—of their lack of meaning. Further weakening of the foundations of our canon of literary meanings is hardly necessary; we are approaching (we may already be there) a position from which we no longer need evidence of what Hartman calls the “strangeness words have as words”. Like Hartman, Miller acknowledges the odd attraction that such strangeness has. Beatrix in *Henry Esmond* is the characterization of de Man’s trope upon which the complex textual negotiations between rhetoric and cognition are based: she is irony in person. She is also “the most attractive characterization in *Henry Esmond*. . . though it would be risky to have anything to do with such a person in real life”. Mixing the way life works with the way texts work is certainly risky, as we are gradually becoming aware. Irony in Miller’s analysis conspires with repetition by way of being its most deeply negative aspect, breaking line after line of significant cohesion only to further suggest the possibility of meaning: “She is ready at any moment to forget and to betray the last lover in order to be ready without memory and without past for the next”. In fact Miller’s observation further illustrates de Man’s claim in *Allegories of Reading* that such textual operations “generate history”; irony fragments and forgets in order for repetition to connect and imprint significances upon the changeable surface of the narrative. The attraction of both figure and character lies in its illusive grounding of repetition, the reinforcement of a sense of meaning appearing to be most strong at the point of meaning’s dissolution.

Of course the trope of repetition, as it is gradually fleshed out in these essays, is itself deceptively comfortable, even consoling, as a critical device. It is rather like the terminology of natural science in its attempt to transcend the coherence and the contingency of its supportive system and approach the status of pure signifier or proper name. Varying degrees of ambivalence, inconsistency and the plain unknown come together within or are harmonized by the name: meaning has been successfully appropriated and yet we remember that the “truth” must, by this very process, have been pushed yet further from our grasp. Repetition is therefore a productive device placed, along Derridean lines, under erasure. It names a habit rather than a matter of fact or a phenomenon—something that we have, for whatever reason, come to do and even to expect in readings of fiction. Therefore to name

repetition is to repeat the habit for which it provides a name: it falls squarely in line with every other such deconstructive double-bind. Miller is naturally quite aware of the ways in which the reader can, with varying degrees of elegance or demystified panache, repeatedly fall into the same tactical trap (witness his analysis of Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Falsehood”, *Boundary 2*, pp. 47-54); for this reason the most dogmatic or authoritative points within his critical discourse must be allowed their fair share of that irony which casts the collection as a whole in a deconstructive or revisionary light. A striking example of such ironic repetition, crossing the boundaries of individual essays and culminating in the final chapter (on Woolf’s *Between the Acts*), both suggests and subverts the possibility that his essays themselves provide an example of repetition of the first type, in which the repeated elements’ primary, unironic archetype would lie outside the present text.

The hero’s violation in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* takes place within the text only as a “blank space . . . it exists in the gaps between the paragraphs”. Such an omission is repeated in the novel, suggesting the absent cause of significant chains of events in the form of a figure—specifically metaphor. This, says Miller, is because of the paradoxical nature of the sign: when an event enters directly into the narrative, its presence marks it as signifying something other than itself, and so its “real”, “originary” or archetypal significance is lost.

For this reason Tess’s violation and the murder must not be described directly. They do not happen as present events because they occur as repetitions of a pattern of violence which exists only in its recurrences and has always already occurred, however far back one goes.

This idea reappears in *The Well-Beloved*, when the lives of the Avices illustrate the stultifying effects (in terms of the narrative) of their too direct involvement in the narrated sequence of events; they cannot stand back and view the picture created by the narrative of their own actions: “The Avices live and die apparently without understanding the fantastic drama of repetitive love in which they participate”.

There is a similar series of significant omissions in Miller’s text, and it is based upon the problem of gendered writing, or the development of what Hartman might include as an “answerable style” of writing between the

authoritarian (male) convention and its individualist, fragmentary (female) revision. The problematic culminates in the final essay on Virginia Woolf, and yet its serial development in the course of the book can be seen in the recurrent deployment of the anonymous male reader, the notion of a "good" reader, the brooding implication of an Eliotic tradition, and the figure of literature as a child's game in which joined dots or connected pieces turn blank space into a picture. Miller repeats such conventions—repeatedly—in his book, and yet he never quite coincides or agrees with the reading "he" to which he refers, or the "good" reader who can keep up without prompting, the writers who write with the past in their bones (Eliot's particularly organic form of repetition), or any spatialized notion of literary function. Such glaringly contentious issues, included (we might say "quoted") without explicit comment, seem to be concentrated within the closing essay. Here Miller silently sets shades of Bloom's influence-anxiety against Eliot's literary history, answers male totalization with the ironic repetitions of that tradition in female writing, points up the arbitrary choices upon which "good" readings are inevitably based, and highlights the insidious negotiations among positions of power over the text that have arisen from the convention of visualizing (and hence spatially "mapping") the strictly invisible effects of linguistic figures. All the contradictions characterizing his trope of repetition serve to dismantle the dominating figures (by implication male) of writer and reader; in this his comment on *Between the Acts* is particularly concise: "The reader's expectations are defrauded, and he sinks. In his fall he has, it may be, a glimpse of the abyss, the truth that there is no truth". The novel points up an aporia, but it is ultimately discursive rather than epistemological: should the "woman writer" asks Miller (and, by way of repetition, the interpreter) "then join in the search for truth" or "reveal its absence or weave a fictive veil over the place where it is not?"

Such master-figures as repetition indicate that the search for truth has necessarily been abandoned. The discursive stakes are so high that truth seems always doomed to sublimation by authoritarian convention. Yet the revelation of its absence similarly can be seen as a historical commonplace in which convention sees no threat. It seems that the fictive veil that rhetorical critiques (varieties of "critical fiction") are able to weave might represent a most important

way in which literary criticism, or "the problem of interpreting a repetitive sequence which already exists . . . of adding new elements to such a sequence" might usefully be carried on in the face of such interpretive indecision. The task of reading remains subject to a self-mystification that no amount of problematizing of the interpretive process will finally resolve. Yet a book such as this illustrates a way in which that mystification can be used as a point of departure for (rather than the unspoken centre of) an appropriate or "answerable" style of critical discourse for the present day.

RICHARD MACHIN

*Late in the Day*,  
CAROL JONES.

Duckworth, 1983, £7.95.

It has long been fashionable for writers who have any connection with or experience of Wales to write a "Welsh novel". Some do so having only spent a holiday in Wales or stayed here for a short time to research us, just as Hemingway fought in Spain, hunted in Africa and fished in the Caribbean to gather material. Carol Jones, however, has not chosen Wales out of curiosity or as a picturesque location.

It is true that *Late in the Day* was written for the "Novel of Wales" competition organized by the English-language Section of Yr Academi Gymreig and the Extra-Mural Department of University College Cardiff and published to coincide with the College's centenary. But even if it had not been written for that competition, which it won, I feel that Mrs Jones's first novel would have been about Welsh people. She is herself Welsh, albeit an exile, and very conscious of it—both of being Welsh and of being an exile. And as this is a novel about roots and belonging it was inevitable that the roots should be her own and that her first book should be an examination of Welshness, but relevant to national and regional communities the whole world round.

Her book gets off to an eager start. Clipped sentences chase one another through the pages at breakneck speed. Impressions flash and fade too quickly to catch. You can hear the typewriter. Happily, this strenuous tempo slows down quite soon and we can begin to get acquainted with the narrator and his family.

The narrator, John Evans, is an ageing Welshman now resident in a home for the elderly in Leeds. A former college lecturer with a Ph.D. in History, he works hard at preserving his memory and rationality in an environment unkind to such faculties. The blurb on the dust-jacket tells us that Dr Evans "has a sardonic view of his contemporaries". That is just as well; such a view helps him to endure with some dignity the shrinking of his territory to a bed and a wheel-chair and the degradation of increasing dependence upon others. It also adds to the reader's entertainment.

Life in the home is immediately recognizable and corresponds with my own experience of such necessary places—though not yet as an inmate. Evans, like his fellow-patients, is fed, toileted, bedded, unbedded, drugged, scolded, visited and invariably bored. A loquacious priest and his soothing Welsh wife pay him dutiful visits. Among the other regular visitors are his headmaster son, Meurig, more educated than cultured, and his efficient daughter-in-law, Iris. It is she who is mainly responsible for his being here. But, he says, "I can talk to Iris although she threw me out".

John Evans takes refuge from boredom and non-communication with the other residents in his memories. These are mainly of summer holidays in Penmaenmawr, where he and his English wife, Kitty, used to take their son Meurig and daughter Sian, the latter now busy in America. Penmaenmawr too, although we only have a tourist's view of it, is immediately recognizable. Mrs Jones must know it well. The narrator also recalls his student days, his intimidation by his savagely puritanical mother and his affection for his meek father. Hard times, but not quite "the bad old days" that his visiting priest would call them.

Dr Evans has one large interest besides his reminiscences. It is Sir William Vaughan, the seventeenth-century Welshman who pioneered part of Newfoundland, the subject of his Ph.D. thesis. Evans's persistent interest in Sir William having been established in the first part of the book, the second part, "The Newland", is mainly devoted to Sir William's exploits. This is the least satisfactory part of the novel. Of course, there are parallels between the pioneer and his historian: Welshmen both, *emigrés*, uprooted, but both believing in the mission and aptitude of the Welsh to carry their values into other lands. These parallels are emphasized by further glimpses of Evans's own life interspersed

with the story of Newfoundland. But that story reads too much like a straight history.

Readiness was all. Salves and potions were put up and he now versed Calvert in their application, finding as it happened that the women of his household—his wife and daughters—showed considerable knowledge in the field. But they too were unfamiliar with Newfoundland winters.

This documentary style rambles on, broken only by long quotations in period English, and interesting though it may be as history it is tedious in a novel. It reads like parts of a doctoral thesis—admittedly a necessary one, as too little is known about the historical Sir William. But even if it is presented as a thesis once written by the central character in a novel, a novel is not the place for it, presented as it is.

There are a few other first-novel faults. The writing in the early part of the book tends to intrude between the reader and what he is reading about.

. . . yellow light passed through them (windows) like the sand used in the foundry for casting from patterns. I've used that metaphor the wrong way round. Their materials were cool sand, molten iron.

There is the itch to include every detail in a description, as in the reminiscence of the three students' trip to London and the narrator's mountain walks from Penmaenmawr to Llanfairfechan. I accept that this walk is significant in the novel but the author fills it out, noting every piece of bric-a-brac on the way, every glimpse of the changing view, with the result that the experience is more diffuse than it need have been.

There are other flaws, but they are few. The perfect novel has never been written, certainly not the perfect first novel. And this first novel has its technical successes. Its focus throughout is correct and sharp. Not once are we drawn from the narrator's viewpoint; even while we follow the adventures of Sir William Vaughan we are always with the narrator. The dialogue is alive, always revealing character and moving the tale onwards. The technique of extended flashback is well used. The inevitable Welsh words and phrases sprinkled here and there are the right ones in their context, properly used, a part of the author's heritage, not fished from a phrasebook.

It is a relief to pass from "The Newland" to

the last section of the book, "Kingdom Come": the best part by far. The style is now easy and confident, reminiscences flow and visits become ominous, real feeling enters—but never sentimentality—and the old man becomes really old. The little grandchildren of yesterday are now awkward with adolescence; David becomes interested in his grandfather and more like him; Janet rarely comes. The headmaster Meurig has become more argumentative. As death approaches, family and medical staff crowd in; thoughtless words are uttered; there is a change of place. This sequence is very well done. The end of the novel is quite moving, and I shall not reveal it here. But Dr John Evans leaves us a

message, which just about sums up the point of the novel:

. . . to everyone who has grown up firmly rooted in the native country, and expects to die there, don't scorn the exiles. There are repositories of Welshmen's bones from pole to pole.

So there are corners of foreign fields which are forever Wales. I think a novel is entitled to make such a statement as long as it is made creatively, as it is, on the whole, in this creditable and promising first novel.

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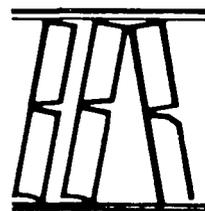


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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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LAURENCE COUPE, having completed an M.A. thesis "Edgell Rickwood and the *Calendar of Modern Letters 1925-27*" at the University of Manchester, is planning a full-length study of T. F. Powys. He is a regular reviewer for *British Book News*.

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JOAN GRUNDY, recently retired to her native Cumbria, was a university teacher, first at Edinburgh, and later at Liverpool and at Royal Holloway College, London. Her publications include *The Poems of Henry Constable* (Liverpool University Press, 1960); *The Spenserian Poets* (Edward Arnold, 1969) and *Hardy and the Sister Arts* (Macmillan, 1979). She is now working on Wordsworth.

ANDREW HASSAM has recently completed post-graduate work on critical theory and narratology at the University of East Anglia and University College, Cardiff.

CEDRIC HENTSCHEL lectured in the universities of London, Innsbruck, Breslau and Uppsala before joining the overseas service of the British Council. His writings in the field of Anglo-German studies include "John Cowper Powys and the Gretchen-Cult", *Studia Neophilologica*, 1941, *Alexander von Humboldt's Synthesis of Literature and Science* (Inter Nationes, 1969), *The Byronic Teuton* (Methuen, 1940; Norwood Editions, 1978) and an article in *Byron's Political and Cultural Influence in nineteenth-century Europe*, ed. P. G. Trueblood (Macmillan, 1981).

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WOLFGANG KEHR is the Director of the University Library, Freiburg. He wrote the first German thesis on J. C. Powys in 1957 (*John Cowper Powys—Leben, Weltanschauung, episches Werk*, Marburg).

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EIGRA LEWIS ROBERTS, full-time writer of novels, short stories and plays, was born in Blaenau Ffestiniog and visited John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter. She has made many contributions to magazines, radio, television and stage and has several times won the Pantyfedwen and National Eisteddfod medals for prose and drama. Her publications include *Digon i'r Diwrnod*, *Cyddynau*, *Plentyn yr Haul* and *Mis o Fehefin* which was serialised for S4C under the title *Minafon*. She translated one of her short stories for the *Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories*.

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R. GEORGE THOMAS retired as Professor of Medieval English at University College, Cardiff in 1980. He has published books, monographs and articles on

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