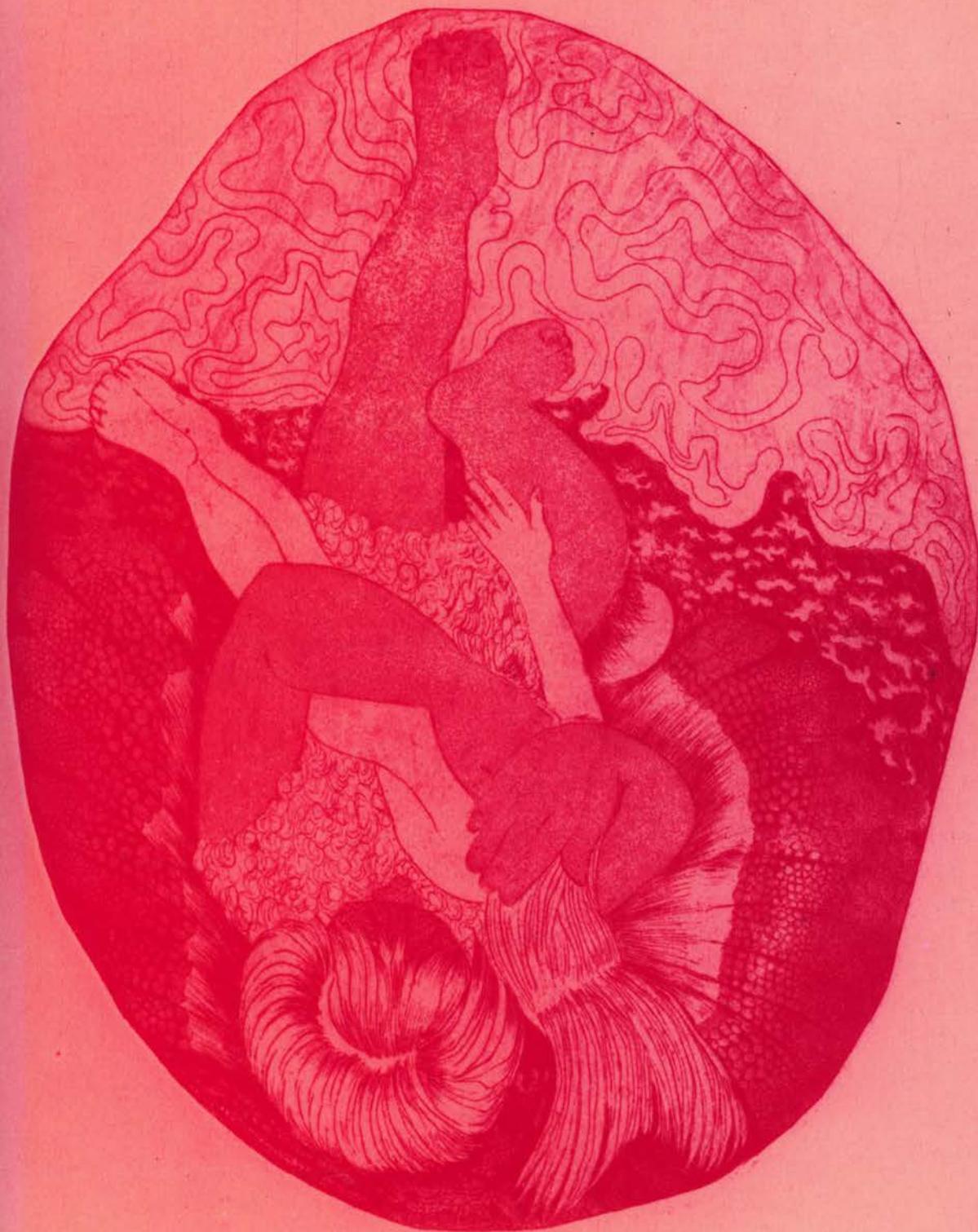


The Powys Review

NUMBER TWENTY-ONE



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Contents

Tony Brown "On the Screen of Eternity": Some Aspects of R. S. Thomas's Prose	5	Reviews	
Charles Lock "To Ravage and Redeem": <i>Maiden Castle</i> and the Violation of Form	16	Mary Casey <i>The Kingfisher's Wing</i> GLEN CAVALIERO	60
Peter Christensen Wessex 1272: History in John Cowper Powys's <i>The Brazen Head</i>	28	Vilhelm Ekelund <i>The Second Light</i> CEDRIC HENTSCHEL	61
H. W. Fawkner John Cowper Powys and Ontotheology	35	Noel Kennedy Thomas <i>Henry Vaughan: Poet of Revelation</i> GARETH ROBERTS	63
Ben Jones John Cowper Powys in Mexico	49	Joan H. Harding <i>From Fox Howe to Fairy Hill. Matthew Arnold's Celtic Connections</i> BARBARA DENNIS	64
Patricia Vaughan Dawson Etchings and Sculptures Suggested by Scenes from J. C. Powys's <i>Porius</i>	50	John Halperin <i>Gissing: A Life in Books</i> ANDREW HASSAM	66
Reviews	60	Caitlin Thomas with George Tremlett <i>Caitlin: Life with Dylan Thomas</i> JAMES A. DAVIES	67
Notes on Contributors	79	Meic Stephens, ed. <i>The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales</i> PETER DAVISON	69
		Roland Mathias <i>Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History</i> JOHN HARRIS	70
		Richard Poole <i>Richard Hughes: Novelist</i> PAUL BENNETT MORGAN	72
		Randall Stevenson <i>The British Novel Since the Thirties: An Introduction</i> WILLIAM BAKER	74
		Jeremy Hooker <i>The Presence of the Post</i> JOHN WILLIAMS	76

Tony Brown

“On the Screen of Eternity”: Some Aspects of R. S. Thomas’s Prose

Writing in his autobiography, *Neb*, of his arrival in 1967 at Aberdaron, R. S. Thomas says that he had come to “the end of his own personal pilgrimage”.¹ Geographically, he had come almost full circle: from Holyhead, where he spent his childhood; then (after university at Bangor and theological college in Cardiff) to posts as curate in the 1930s at Chirk and Maelor Saesneg on the English border; and later westwards, to livings at Manafon in Montgomeryshire, Eglwysfach near Aberystwyth and finally Aberdaron, with Holyhead visible on a clear day across the sea to the north. But more importantly R. S. Thomas’s pilgrimage, his search for “the real Wales of my imagination”,² begun as he gazed westwards towards Wales from his exile at Maelor, has been a spiritual and imaginative journey, one that has taken him across the boundary between two cultures.

It has not been an easy journey. The major obstacle on R. S. Thomas’s pilgrimage, of course, was the fact that his had been an English-speaking upbringing. As he emphasized in an essay in 1958, “without the key of the Welsh language one and all must needs pass by the door that opens on the real Wales”; without the language, he says, one remains “a *dyn dieithr*, a stranger”.³ It is perhaps easy today, when opportunities for learning Welsh are so numerous, to underestimate Thomas’s determined struggle, through the early years of the War, to master the language. One has to admire the sheer stubbornness which kept him travelling every week from Maelor all the way to Llangollen to have his Welsh lesson (*Neb*, p. 40). Remarkably, by 1945 Thomas was sufficiently fluent to publish his first pieces of prose in Welsh, some short essays on the birds of the Welsh countryside, published in

the Church in Wales weekly, *Y Llan*.⁴ Other essays followed over the next seven years in the same journal and in *Y Fflam*, the latter under the editorship of Euros Bowen.

Perhaps more significant than these early essays were some of the letters, in Welsh, which R. S. Thomas wrote to *Y Llan* in the immediate post-war years, letters which indicate another area of difficulty on his journey: his consciousness that the Church in which he served was failing to provide moral and spiritual leadership to Wales as a nation at an important point in her history. His nationalism and his pacifism come together in his criticism of the Church in Wales’s continued acquiescence in the face of contemporary militarism, an acquiescence which he sees as typifying the Church in Wales’s servile attitude towards England and its traditions:

... One can expect to have leadership and inspiration from the Church, of course, but after all the un-Welsh attitude of the Church in Wales is only a reflection of the extensive anglicisation which has infiltrated the whole nation. And although the trouble in Dolgellau is very unpleasant,⁵ we ought to welcome this opportunity for the Church to give a positive lead in matters of importance like these.

Nobody can deny that our nation is caught in two minds at a fateful time in her history. Despite the two ugly wars which have gone by, there is continuous talk of another war, and considerable preparation in that direction. In the face of all this there are some preaching pacifism, some others demanding Welsh regiments, while the majority of our young people will be quietly joining the British army. Is the Church in Wales giving any consistent guidance in these circumstances? It isn’t. It is accepting things as they are, as it did before and during the last war. How did it behave on that occasion? How many of its

leaders, how many of its priests stood for peace and justice? Didn't they follow England servilely, praying for victory and singing the English national anthem on every occasion, while more than one of its priests joined the "Home Guard".

I was more or less silent at that time. It was a very difficult time. But now, despite the trouble and the threats, there's some kind of peace in the world, and everybody has a duty to consolidate this peace. Wales is, as was said above, caught in two minds, but she has, as a small nation, an inclination towards pacifism and friendship. If the Church were ready to do its duty as the Church of Christ, it ought to take advantage of the situation, and give every support to that inclination. But, alas, it prefers to leave things as they are. And things as they are smell of Englishness and Englishness is under suspicion now, because it has a bad reputation, not only in Wales, but in the world.

The purpose of this letter is not merely to denounce the English, although no small fault lies with them, because there are many of them in the Church in Wales, and they have a strong voice in church matters. And the majority of them are contemptuous of the Welsh nation. In this they are discourteous, if not un-Christian. Why is it necessary to have a bilingual church in an area which is wholly Welsh, just because there's a rich English person living there? If he wants to worship in the local church, let him learn its language. But it's necessary to remember that some of the fault is ours also. If we don't respect ourselves, if we don't have enough backbone to withstand the English tide, we can't expect anything else but scorn.⁶

The attitudes towards war and towards England are ones with which we are familiar in R. S. Thomas's work, but until *Neb*, written some years after his retirement, we hear little in Thomas's prose about his attitudes towards the Church and its role in Welsh life. But the misgivings expressed here clearly continued to exist.

To date, R. S. Thomas has published over thirty essays, reviews and lectures in Welsh—not counting letters to the press—as well as his autobiography. But, as he says in an essay entitled "If I knew the language . . ." ["Pe medrwn yr iaith . . .", 1980],⁷ for him

prose is ultimately secondary; it is in poetry that he responds most fully to life "in all its variety and its complexity"—and yet R. S. Thomas has published only one poem in Welsh, "Y Gwladwr" ["The Countryman"] in *Y Fflam* in 1950. ("The last two lines were praised by Gwenallt", he told an interviewer in 1973, "but one swallow doesn't make a summer".)⁸ Here is a third difficulty which Thomas has had to confront on his long pilgrimage. He explains in "If I knew the language . . ." and "The Creative Writer's Suicide" ["Hunanladdiad y Llenor", 1977] that he feels he lacks the intuitive sensitivity to the intricacies and nuances of the language which the native Welsh-speaker has and, therefore, he lacks the confidence to make the critical discriminations which are a fundamental part of the process of poetic composition. The distress, the sense of inner division, which this situation must have caused Thomas over the years—the feeling that he cannot give full expression to his most profound thoughts and feelings *in* the language which represents so much to him and in which he now lives his life—would seem to have grown more acute as his view of the rôle of the Anglo-Welsh poet, the Welsh poet who writes in English, has changed.

As a young man Thomas felt that there were "signs that the mantle of writers like T. Gwynn Jones and W. J. Gruffydd" was falling on those young writers, like himself, writing not in Welsh but in English ("Some Contemporary Scottish Writing", 1946) and that if they studied the work of the Welsh-language writers of the past these Anglo-Welsh poets might create in English a poetry which was distinctively Welsh, rooted in a tradition which was non-urban, non-industrial. As Ned Thomas has pointed out, however, even by 1952 Thomas had shifted his ground considerably⁹ and by 1977 ("The Creative Writer's Suicide") his anguish is clearly to be heard. In writing of the Welshman who has learned Welsh and who is then tempted to write in Welsh "in order to prove to himself and to the public that he is a true Welshman", Thomas is

clearly writing out of a personal dilemma: “He will never become as good a writer in that language as he could be in English”. R. S. Thomas is thus, poignantly, the victim of his own unrelenting idealism: for him the ultimate duty of the writer is to strive to create a masterpiece, to realize in words his vision of the truth.¹⁰ For a Welsh poet such a masterpiece will be in Welsh “a work so Welsh as to defy every attempt to translate it successfully into another language, especially English” (“If I knew the language . . .”), but such expertise Thomas feels to be beyond him and so, in his own eyes, he is unworthy of the title *Welsh* writer. “Who has suffered, if I have not suffered? For I bear in my body the marks of this conflict” (The Creative Writer’s Suicide”).

When one looks at R. S. Thomas’s earliest prose in Welsh, the essays in *Y Llan* and *Y Fflam*, it is clear that he himself had been doing what he was urging other young Anglo-Welsh poets to do, namely studying poetry in Welsh. One is struck by his knowledge, even in the early 1940s, of the work of, for example, Ellis Wynne, Gwili, and Williams-Parry, as well as his knowledge of the Bible in Welsh. One notices, too, that the central themes of Thomas’s writing are already being sounded: his deep love of the Welsh countryside, a place where one may be imaginatively alive and spiritually whole; his awareness at the same time of the vulnerability of this way of life, the need for Wales to resist the deadening effects of materialism, industrialism and militarism, which he identifies from the outset, as we have seen, with the influence of England. The intense idealism and patriotism are already there in the young man in his early thirties. One notices, too, the rather curious chronological pattern of Thomas’s Welsh writing. After these early pieces in Welsh, most of his prose in the 1950s and 1960s is in English, critical essays, reviews, and introductions to his own selections of English poets, including Herbert, Wordsworth and Edward Thomas. This is also the period, of course, in which R. S. Thomas was establishing himself as a major poet in English. With the

move to Aberdaron in 1967, the subject-matter of his poetry changed; thereafter, his poetry concerns itself less with the cultural and political plight of Wales than with issues both more universal and more private: with man’s essential loneliness and his search for God. Thomas’s concern for Wales and her future has not, of course, decreased; if anything it has become more urgent. But, feeling that he has come home to “the real Wales” for which he had long searched, able now in Llŷn to live his life almost wholly in Welsh, he seems to have chosen to voice that concern not in English but in Welsh and not, therefore, in poetry but in prose. Since 1972 and, significantly perhaps, his account in “Y Llwybrau Gynt” of his early life and his first steps on the road to becoming a true Welshman, he has published very little prose in English, speaking instead directly and passionately to the Welsh-speaking Welsh themselves, through essays, letters to the press, public lectures and, indeed, from the platform of the National Eisteddfod itself, urging them to be true to their traditions, on their guard in defence of their culture: “Awake, awake; put on your strength”.¹¹

Aware of the central role which the poet once had in Welsh society, giving voice to its essential values and aspirations, R. S. Thomas has always perceived the poet’s function to be an essentially public one; in other words, as he has argued on a number of occasions, he sees his two callings, as priest and poet, to be inextricably linked. The poet, like the priest, should give moral and spiritual leadership; it is a far more idealistic notion of the poet’s role and his influence than has been the usual case in post-War English poetry. (“Poetry makes nothing happen”, wrote W. H. Auden.)¹² As Ned Thomas and Tony Conran in particular have pointed out, R. S. Thomas’s view of the poet’s social rôle is rooted in the idealism of the Romantic poets, to whom he frequently alludes in his essays.¹³ In the interview which he gave to John Ormond in 1972 he emphasizes the fact that the word “imagination” has for him the meaning which Coleridge gave to it: “The highest

means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with the ultimate reality . . . The ultimate reality is what we call God".¹⁴ The poet, therefore, the person of particular imaginative power and creative gifts, is possessed of special spiritual insight and as such is equipped to be, as Shelley saw him, society's "unacknowledged legislator". Thomas refers to Shelley's description of the poet in his essay "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing" and goes on to argue that only by expressing the highest ideals and aspirations in poetry is it possible to "at long last change the people and lead them to their essential dignity". This idealistic vision of the poet as spiritual guide, "winnowing and purifying . . . the people", is especially strong in R. S. Thomas's early writing. The poet should be a healer, rigorously purging the spiritual sickness of the age:

Consider, you,
Whose rough hands manipulate
The fine bones of a sick culture,
What areas of that infirm body
Depend solely on a poet's cure.
(*"The Cure"*, *Poetry for Supper*, 1958)

It is a stance Thomas himself has taken from the beginning, in his prose as well as in his poetry, urging, warning:

Degeneration is to be seen in every part of our national life. As long as there are food and drink, greyhounds and cinemas, the majority of our people don't care what government is in power. The churches and the chapels will be empty soon because of [these attitudes], and the fine arts are almost dead already.

In the essay quoted here, "Money and Position" [*"Arian a Swydd"*, 1946],¹⁵ R. S. Thomas compares the situation in Wales with that in Ireland, where he feels materialism has all but destroyed the idealism and optimism which gave birth to her independence. The comparison of Wales with her Celtic neighbours is a recurring one in his early writing. (We learn from *Neb* that he visited Scotland and Ireland in the 1930s, and a number of his early poems were published first in Dublin.) He looks back to the

power of Raftery in Ireland and Twm o'r Nant in Wales to attack the unprincipled and mean in the past. But in the 1940s, among contemporary writers he sees the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, as providing a model of what, for Thomas, the poet should be: a figure of lonely integrity, speaking out against the uniformity, materialism and bureaucracy of modern life, which stifle the imaginative and spiritual freedom of the individual. While Thomas, like MacDiarmid, sees these destructive influences as having their origins in English commercialism and English government, both writers reserve their fiercest scorn for those of their own people who fail to see the dangers, whose eyes are fixed on material advancement. In the 1980s Thomas sees the threat to be all the greater and the necessity for the Welsh writer to sound a warning to his society to be, consequently even more urgent. In "If I knew the language . . .", for example, he wishes his Welsh were as powerful and as flexible as that of Ellis Wynne, author of *Gweledigaethu y Bardd Cwsc*:

I would use it to reveal the hypocrisy, the idleness and the servility of the nation today, and scourge them until my readers would blush from top to toe, and take a solemn oath to regain through discipline and self-sacrifice the integrity and dignity which belonged to their ancestors.

The other side of the poet's role, of course, is to raise the eyes of the people to a higher ideal, to make them aware that even the things of their ordinary, everyday lives have significance. The task of the poet, Thomas told Bedwyr Lewis Jones in an interview in 1969, is

to show the true glory of life. I don't believe in poets who over-analyse and belittle man. The rôle of the poet is to elevate man also, and life, and the earth.¹⁶

He goes on to say that however dirty and humble the farm-worker may seem in his little field, "yet the sun shines on his field suddenly and without warning and there's some glory there too". As so often in R. S.

Thomas’s work, the labourer on the Welsh hill is an emblem which has more universal significance: whoever the individual is, however prosaic his or her life may seem, it can be transformed if seen in the light of its spiritual reality. (“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite”, wrote Blake, another Romantic poet to whom Thomas refers on several occasions in his essays.) By the expression of his vision in his poetry, the poet, Thomas argues, can begin to bring about a change of awareness, can re-vitalize the imagination of his readers, bringing them to a fuller awareness of their spiritual reality and, ultimately, of God: “The nearest we approach to God . . . is as creative beings”, he says in his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 1963. The harsher tones with which we are familiar in R. S. Thomas’s writing are, manifestly, an expression of his disappointment at society’s falling short, and a measure of his idealism:

I want to see the splendour of people and things, and their shadows which appear greater than they because of the light which throws their shadows on the screen of eternity.

(“If I knew the language . . .”)

The state of being which Thomas holds up as a condition towards which men should aspire is frequently expressed in terms of cleanness, simplicity, plainness and clarity, in contrast to the grey, impersonal complexity of our modern world:

. . . earth
That is strong here and clean
And plain in its meaning.

(“Those Others”, *Tares*, 1961)

What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours,
. . . I walked on,
Simple and poor . . .

(“The Moor”, *Pietà*, 1966)

Occasions

on which a clean air entered our nostrils
off swept seas were instances
we sought to recapture.
(“That Place”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 1975)

Only through being alert and honest and brave will we succeed in doing our duty and deliver a clean Wales [Cymru lân] to the future.

(“Around Us” [“O’n Cwmpas”, 1977])¹⁷

It is a nexus of ideas which has its origins, evidently, in Thomas’s own temperament. We notice, for example, in “Y Llwybrau Gynt” his fond recollection of the close of summer days in the sun and sea air of the countryside around Holyhead: “. . . a glass of cold water before going to bed tasted marvellous, and the white sheets were smooth and refreshing”. His autobiographical writing—“Y Llwybrau Gynt”, *Neb*, “Influences” [“Dylanwadau”, 1986]¹⁸—makes clear how potent an influence on the growing poet were those boyhood days in the countryside of Anglesey; in *Neb* especially he emphasises the sense of longing for the landscape of his youth which he felt as his career took him elsewhere, “a longing which would be an influence on him throughout the years which followed” (*Neb*, p. 29), and we notice, too, how he is able to identify with “the anguish and the yearning” for his home in Anglesey felt by the exiled Goronwy Owen.¹⁹

As R. S. Thomas stood in the 1930s on the “flat uninteresting land” around Maelor Saesneg, gazing at the mountains away to the west, the longing he felt “to get back to the real Wales of my imagination” was, in other words, intimately connected to his longing for the simple, spontaneous pleasure, the sense of imaginative freedom and vitality which he associated with the countryside around Holyhead, now seemingly lost forever. When, still in the 1930s, his reading of Yeats and “Fiona Macleod” (the pen-name of William Sharp, 1855-1905) suggested to him that among the peasantry of Galway and the Western Isles of Scotland it was still possible to find “exactly the life

he would like to live among the peat and the heather and the shores of the west" (*Neb*, p. 33), Thomas journeyed to those distant areas. But although the sound of the country people's Gaelic "and the smell of peat in his nostrils raised his spirits and filled his heart with new hope" (*Neb*, p. 36), he found that the rural way of life described by Yeats and MacLeod had almost completely disappeared. The way of life he was searching for *was*, in Thomas's view, once to be found in Wales itself, in the high summer pasture, the life of the *hafod*, a life he sees as having been free and clean and imaginatively rich:

There is Eden's garden, its gate open, fresh as it has always been, unsmudged by the world. The larks sing high in the sky. No footprints have bruised the dew . . . This is the world they went up into on May Day with their flocks from *yr hendre*, the winter house, to *yr hafod*, the shieling. They spent long days here, swapping *englynion* over the peat cutting.

Even as he evokes this romantic vision in "The Mountains" (1968), one is again perhaps aware of the depth of personal association for a writer whose boyhood was spent within sight of Snowdonia: ". . . to live near mountains is to be in touch with Eden, with lost childhood" ("The Mountains"). But the life of the *hafod*, too, has long gone, swept away by more modern patterns of agricultural life; in the hills of Montgomeryshire he finds only emptiness and the ruins of the *hafotai*:

The wind is licking their bones. The old people died, and the world drew their children closer to itself, leaving the area—desolate [yn anghyfannedd]. Yes, the word hurts the mind. When I am there, I hear the curlew mourning the people who have passed away, and I dream of the days that were, the days of *Calan Mai* and the *hafoty*; days when the Welsh went to the high pastures to live for a season at least "At the bright hem of God, / In the heather, in the heather".

("Maldwyn", 1951)²⁰

But in R. S. Thomas's writing, the search for a place where people may attain their essential freedom and dignity, where they

may gain intimations of the eternal, has continued, that place "we . . . would spend/ the rest of our lives looking for" ("That Place", *Laboratories of the Spirit*).²¹ It is a country place, clean and bright, usually with trees, a place where the silence is broken only by the song of birds and the sound of clear-running streams:

A bird chimes
from a green tree
the hour that is no hour
you know.

("Arrival", *Later Poems*, 1983)

Such scenes, such moments at the "intersection of the timeless/With time",²² run like an elusive thread through Thomas's writing:

For one hour
I have known Eden, the still place
We hunger for.
("Again", *Not That He Brought Flowers*, 1968)

For one brief hour the summer came
To the tree's branches and we heard
In the green shade Rhiannon's birds
Singing tirelessly as the streams
That pluck glad tunes from the grey stones
Of Powys of the broken hills.

("The Tree", *An Acre of Land*, 1952)

This last example evokes the brief period of communal harmony and freedom achieved by Owain Glyndŵr, inspired we notice by the songs of his poet; for the state of being indicated by this recurring set of images is one which R. S. Thomas repeatedly associates specifically with Wales and with the tranquillity of the Welsh countryside. The connection is made most explicitly, of course, in "Abercuawg", the remarkable lecture which R. S. Thomas gave at the National Eisteddfod in 1976: "Wherever Abercuawg may be, it is a place of trees and fields and flowers and bright unpolluted streams, where the cuckoos continue to sing". It is essentially a vision of a transfigured Wales, in which it would be possible to live a life of calm simplicity and spiritual awareness, a place for which, Thomas says,

he is “ready to make sacrifices, maybe even to die”.

But even as the social, and indeed political, implications of the recurring motif, the elusive place, receive their fullest expression, it is made clear that the place is not a geographical location but a spiritual ideal. The true value is in the aspiration *towards* the ideal; Abercuawg will never be reached,

but through striving to see it, through longing for it, through refusing to accept that it belongs to the past and has fallen into oblivion; through refusing to accept something second-hand in its place [man] will succeed in preserving it as an eternal possibility.

It is an ideal of continual imaginative aspiration, a refusal of the blunted responses and imaginative inertia of a commercial age—“No, this is not it”. It is by means of the power of the imagination—“The highest means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with the ultimate reality”—that the individual searches “within time, for something which is above time, and yet, which is ever on the verge of being”. The search for Abercuawg, in other words, is a search for spiritual awareness, for intimations of the eternal, of God: “May it not be that alongside us, made invisible by the thinnest of veils, is the heaven we seek?” (“Where do we go from here?” 1974). The search is a constant striving to keep clean “the doors of perception”. It is a struggle which recalls those images of lonely aspiration in “The Mountains”:

There is the huge tug of gravity, the desire of the bone for the ground, with the dogged spirit hauling the flesh upward. Rare flowers tremble, waver, just out of reach.

It is an image of the individual’s struggle to realize himself/herself fully, in the face of all those forces in modern life which seek to deny that individuality.

The search for Abercuawg is above all for R. S. Thomas an image of the lonely struggle of the writer to keep his/her own creative channels open, with the added burden of

having to provide a signpost for others. As we have seen, early in his career Thomas found a model of the stance the writer should take in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, admiring his determined resistance to “the all-pervading twentieth-century rationalism that goes hand in hand with western democracy and industrial development” (“Some Contemporary Scottish Writing”). But in Wales, in the writing of Saunders Lewis, Thomas found a figure whose stance was in many ways similar and even more sympathetic. Points of comparison between the writing of R. S. Thomas and that of Saunders Lewis have been mentioned by several critics,²³ but the relationship of the two writers’ work has still to be fully explored. One does, however, note that in *Neb* Thomas tells of visiting Saunders Lewis in about 1943. He had been so stirred by an essay which Saunders Lewis had published in *Y Faner* that he went, without invitation, to visit the author at Llanfarian:

[R. S. Thomas] was received kindly and began to talk in English about his ideals and his plans, but before long he was encouraged by Saunders to go on in his clumsy Welsh.

(*Neb*, p. 45)

This was a potent force with which to come into contact for a young writer just beginning to find his voice, and a young man setting out on his search for the “real Wales”. Thomas does not mention reading more of Saunders Lewis’s work, but it seems more than likely that he did (we remember that *Canlyn Arthur* had been published in 1938) and he refers to Saunders Lewis admiringly in “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing” as a writer who had set aside his own career as a poet in order to dedicate himself to the nationalist cause in Wales. In Saunders Lewis’s writing Thomas would have found many attitudes towards which he would have been sympathetic in the 1930s and 1940s, to judge from the opinions which he himself expresses in his early essays. He would have found, as in MacDiarmid, an antipathy to the (English) centralized democratic state whose social and economic

systems Saunders Lewis saw as taking away the independence of the individual: “It is not the job of the government of a country to create a complete system and an economic machinery for the people of the country to accept and conform to”.²⁴ In Saunders Lewis, too, he would have found a vision of a society based not on the impersonal city, the creation of capitalism and industrialism, but on small, mainly rural, communities, communities living and working in the Welsh countryside—and speaking Welsh. The language not only provided a living link with the traditions of the past but was fundamental to the maintenance of Welsh identity and unity in the face of those forces which sought to deny it: “To create a Welsh-speaking Wales [Cymru uniaith] is the surest way to build up a country in which the oppression of international capitalism cannot live”.²⁵ As we have seen, not only has R. S. Thomas from the beginning associated all that he considers most valuable in life with a vision of rural communities living a life which is simple but imaginatively alive, but that the survival of the “real Wales” is inseparable from the survival of the Welsh language is a view which he holds even more passionately today than in the 1940s:

I do not see any other way towards unity in Wales but through the Welsh language . . . If anyone believes he can experience the Welshness of Wales without the language, he’s fooling himself. Every mountain and stream, every farm and little lane announces to the world that landscape is not mere landscape in Wales.

(“Unity” [“Undod”, 1985])²⁶

By way of a brief aside, we might note that the vision of a society in which wealth is not held by a few capitalists or controlled by government but by a large number of small groups, communities, or individuals, a society in which the individual can work his/her own land, live his/her own life, free of the centralized state, Saunders Lewis found in, among other places, the “distributism” of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton.²⁷ Their criticism of a central-

ized system of government run by (and in the interests of) international capitalism was expressed in a number of books published just before the First World War, notably Chesterton’s *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910) and Belloc’s *The Servile State* (1912). What was wrong with the world, they argued, was that capitalist wealth had become concentrated in the hands of a small group of plutocrats who controlled not only the economic structure of Britain but also the Parliamentary parties and, in order to further their own ends, Britain’s foreign policies. Moreover, the plutocratic state was becoming as mechanized and as indifferent to the individual as the vast factories which financed it. Chesterton and Belloc essentially anticipated E. F. Schumacher and his view that “small is beautiful”. They advocated the break-up of the centralized state and a reversion to smaller, independent economic units, with industry existing in small, predominantly rural communities, a vision which formed the basis of the “Distributist” movement in which Chesterton and Belloc were involved in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸ Whether R. S. Thomas had any knowledge of the work of these writers is uncertain, though he would have found many of their ideas to his taste. It is worth noting that Belloc’s vision of a “Peasant State”, emphasizing political freedom, an attachment to a locality or region, and a concern with the produce of the land, was based on an idealised vision of French peasant life; he saw the life of the rural community as preserving a respect for tradition, a sense of rootedness and a strong religious sense, all of which was in sharp contrast to the rootlessness and materialism of modern industrial society. There is something, too, of the same nostalgia for a pre-industrial past of which R. S. Thomas has been accused. At the heart of this social vision is the figure of the peasant, sturdy and independent.

R. S. Thomas’s ideal of rural community—derived from Wordsworth, from Yeats and MacLeod, and perhaps from these other sources—met reality at Manafon in the 1940s and his early poetry is, manifestly, an

effort to wrestle with the discrepancy, as well as with his own sense of his incapacity to minister to the community as its priest. It is a community which, even as Thomas watches, is gradually being invaded by the values of the modern commercial world. Iago Prytherch, having been absent from Thomas’s poetry for some years, is finally laid to rest in “Gone?” (*Frequencies*, 1978); by now the countryside is a place of tractors and televisions, the trees replaced by “a forest of aerals”. The Wales Thomas surveys, far from being that tranquil place of birdsong, trees and streams, is increasingly seen to be in actuality a spiritual and imaginative waste land,²⁹ whose outer form is

street after street of modern characterless houses, each one with its garage and its television aerial; a place from which the trees and the birds and the flowers have fled before the yearly extension of concrete and tarmacadam; where people do the same kind of soulless, monotonous work to support more and more of their kind.

(“Abercuawg”)

It is the place of Blake’s “dark Satanic mills”, where “the doors of perception” are clogged and the life of the spirit cannot survive:

. . . the dust spreads
Its carpet. Over the creeds
And masterpieces our wheels go.
(“No Answer”, *H’m*, 1972)

And the language is lost, too:

In the drab streets
That never knew
The cold stream’s sibilants
Our tongues are coated with
A dustier speech.
(“Expatriates”. *Poetry for Supper*, 1958)

This sense of desolation is poignantly caught in “Unity” when Thomas speaks of one year when, because of the weather, the migratory birds—those birds that represent so much in R. S. Thomas’s life and in his writing—did not come to Aberdaron:

It was a sad experience to wander Mynydd Mawr in the dawn, and walk the lanes and hollows, without seeing anything. It was like a museum. I said to everyone: “I remember how it was once, the sky and the lanes full”. It is a symbol of Pen Llŷn without the Welsh language, the deathliness which would be there.

Moreover, these images of desolation which are associated with Wales are linked in a very direct way in Thomas’s mind with images of a more universal desolation. If it is man’s desire to better himself in material things, in the goods of the modern world, which is ultimately responsible for destroying the life of the *hafotai*, “leaving the area—desolate”, Thomas now sees the same values, on a national and international level, as threatening the future of the whole earth: “Man’s cupidity, to use a medieval term, has placed in his hands the ability to make the world desolate” (“A Nuclear Christmas” [“Nadolig Niwcliar”, 1983]).³⁰ The threat of nuclear warfare, and especially the absurd claims of some political leaders that it is possible to fight a nuclear war and win, has caused Thomas, whose pacifism was being sounded loud and clear in the 1940s, to speak out, not only in his writing but on public platforms, on behalf of the campaign against nuclear weapons. They represent the ultimate threat of the age of the machine, the complete negation of Abercuawg: “The earth smoked, no birds sang” (“Once”, *H’m*).

As people far beyond the borders of Wales have awoken to the threat to the earth’s survival from nuclear weapons, from industrial pollution and from over-exploitation of natural resources, the themes R. S. Thomas has been sounding for many years in a specifically Welsh context have taken on even more clearly a more universal significance.³¹ But while others are also now arguing that “small is beautiful”, the struggle, both in Wales and beyond, has become more urgent and his tones have become more bleak, at times even despairing, especially when he looks at Wales itself: “The end of the nation is plain

. . . Its people don't think like Welsh people nor act like Welsh people. There are only the relics of a nation left on their lips".³² Even after his long pilgrimage back to Welsh-speaking Wales, the sense of being an exile, "an exile in my own land"³³ is still present: a fervent supporter of the Welsh language in a Wales in which the language struggles for survival, an advocate of the simple life of the countryside in a land echoing with the sound of machinery, a man concerned with the things of the imagination and the spirit in a society devoted to quite different values. "A displaced person" Wynn Thomas called him in a recent television programme;³⁴ it is a very different picture from the earlier idealistic vision of the poet as imaginative leader of his society, "winnowing and purifying" the people. A recurring motif in the later poetry has been one of loneliness, of the poets and men of vision as isolated, their words unheard or ignored:

Among the forests
Of metal the one human
Sound was the lament of
The poets for deciduous language.

("Postscript", *H'm*)

NOTES

This essay is a revised, English version of Tony Brown's Introduction to a forthcoming selection, co-edited with Bedwyr Lewis Jones, of R. S. Thomas's Welsh prose. The selection, which will include the texts of most of the Welsh material referred to in the essay, will be published by Christopher Davies.

¹R. S. Thomas, *Neb* [Nobody], Caernarfon: Gwasg Gwynedd, 1985, p. 85.

²"Y Llwybrau Gynt" ["The Paths Gone By"] in *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey, Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983, p. 138. Where a translation of an essay originally published in Welsh appears in this selection, I have used that text in quotations. Otherwise the translations are my own and the original Welsh source is given. I am grateful for the assistance and advice of Mrs Megan Tomos of the U.C.N.W. Translation Unit in matters of translation. In the case of essays originally published in English, unless another source is cited, the text is to be found in *Selected Prose*.

It was a time when wise men
Were not silent, but stifled
By vast noise.

("Period", *H'm*)

I see the wise man
with his mouth open shouting
inaudibly on this side of the abyss.
(*"Eheu! Fugaces"*, *The Way of It*, 1977)

At times one is reminded of the Old Testament prophets whose words R. S. Thomas echoes on several occasions. He continues to speak out to the Welsh people from his western fastness, warning, criticizing, urging higher ideals. His geographical journey may have come to its end, but his late poetry, with its recurring images of travelling, of pilgrimage and exploration, shows that the spiritual journey goes on, the inner search for glimpses of the "ultimate reality", signs of God's presence. Despite the dust of the waste land, R. S. Thomas clearly still holds to his vision of man's spiritual existence, the shadow man casts on the screen of eternity:

Man is the dream of a shadow. But when the
god-given brightness comes
A bright light is among men, and an age that is
gentle comes to birth.³⁵

³"The Welsh Parlour", *Listener*, 16 January 1958, p. 119.

⁴See "Adar y Plwyfi" ["Birds of the Parishes"], *Y Llan*, 28 September 1945, p. 5; "Adar y Gaeaf" ["Birds of the Winter"], *Y Llan*, 28 December 1945, p. 8.

⁵During the week of the National Eisteddfod at Dolgellau in 1949 the Union Jack had been flown from the tower of the parish church, only to be pulled down by nationalists. The incident gave rise to a discussion in the columns of *Y Llan* as to the relationship between the Church and Wales of which the present letter formed part.

⁶*Y Llan*, 2 September 1949, p. 5. See also R. S. Thomas's letters to the same journal on 7 March 1947, p. 6, and 3 February 1950, p. 8.

⁷*Y Faner*, 11 January 1980, p. 4.

⁸"Gwilym Rees Hughes yn holi R. S. Thomas", *Barn*, 129 (1973), p. 386.

⁹See Ned Thomas's discussion of R. S. Thomas's

shift in attitude to the rôle of the Anglo-Welsh writer. Introduction to *Selected Prose*, pp. 13-15.

¹⁰See “The Creative Writer’s Suicide”, *Selected Prose*, p. 170, and “Pe medrwn yr iaith . . .”.

¹¹Isaiah, 52:1. R. S. Thomas quotes the verse at the conclusion of the letter cited in footnote 6.

¹²W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”.

¹³See Ned Thomas’s Introduction to *Selected Prose* and Anthony Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales*, Llandysul: Gomer, 1982, pp. 220-8.

¹⁴John Ormond, “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet”, *Poetry Wales*, 7, No. 4 (1972), p. 54.

¹⁵*Y Fflam*, No. 1 (1946), pp. 29-30.

¹⁶Bedwyr Lewis Jones, “R. S. Thomas”, *Barn*, 76 (1969), n. pag. The interview is in the supplement, “O’r Stiwdio”.

¹⁷*Y Faner*, 4 March 1977, p. 9.

¹⁸*Y Faner*, 7 November 1986, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹In R. S. Thomas’s speech as President of the Day at the National Eisteddfod at Llangefni, 3 August 1983. See *Y Glorian Ddyddiol* (‘Steddfod ’83), 6 August 1983, p. 2, and *Llawlyfr Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru*, 1983, pp. 105-7.

²⁰*Y Llan*, 9 March 1951, pp. 7-8. On the verse quoted at the end, see *Selected Prose*, p. 25.

²¹On this motif and its significance, see also Simon Barker’s review of *Selected Prose*, *Poetry Wales*, 20, No. 1 (1984), pp. 72-9.

²²T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages”.

²³See, for example, Dafydd Elis Thomas, “The Image of Wales in R. S. Thomas’s Poetry”, *Poetry Wales*, 7, No. 4 (1972), pp. 63, 65-6, and Randal

Jenkins, “The Occasional Prose of R. S. Thomas” in the same issue, p. 101.

²⁴Saunders Lewis, “Deg Pwynt Polisi”, *Canlyn Arthur*, Aberystwyth: Gwasg Aberystwyth, 1938, p. 11.

²⁵“Un Iaith i Gymru”, *Canlyn Arthur*, p. 60.

²⁶The J. R. Jones Memorial Lecture, University College, Swansea, 9 December 1985.

²⁷See, for example, Dafydd Glyn Jones’s essay on Saunders Lewis’s political thought in *Presenting Saunders Lewis*, ed. Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972, p. 36.

²⁸The fullest recent account of Chesterton and Belloc’s political writing and of the Distributist movement is Jay P. Corrin, *G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc: The Battle Against Modernity*, London: Ohio U.P., 1981.

²⁹“Border Blues” (*Poetry for Supper*, 1958) would seem at times consciously to echo some of T. S. Eliot’s techniques in *The Waste Land*.

³⁰*Barn*, 251/2 (Dec. 1983/Jan. 1984), pp. 420-21.

³¹See R. S. Thomas’s comments in “R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge”, *Anglo-Welsh Review*, No. 74 (1983), p. 42.

³²Interview with Rhys Owen, *Pais*, September 1983, p. 9.

³³Eisteddfod speech, 1983. See note 19.

³⁴*Bookmark*, B.B.C. 2, February 1986.

³⁵Pindar’s Eighth Pythian Ode, in a translation by E. M. Forster. R. S. Thomas paraphrased the ode in *Neb*, p. 87.

Charles Lock

“To Ravage and Redeem”: *Maiden Castle* and the Violation of Form

Maiden Castle overtly measures itself against a nineteenth-century antecedent. The presence of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* reminds the reader of the tenets of historicism, that character is destiny, and that books come from authors. *Maiden Castle* is Powys's extraordinary attempt not to think those things.

Hardy's novel provides Powys's with both a prior literary realisation of Dorchester, and a set of themes. But for the antitype of Henchard's wife-selling, Dud's buying of a wife would be absurd and fantastic. It is the reader rather than Dud who needs and accepts such a justification, for Dud becomes aware of the parallel-inversion only on p. 250 (262).¹ It is hardly necessary to emphasise the significance of Dud's being a historical novelist. For one who is "history-obsessed" the mystery and fascination of life lies in causality, not in typology. Dud acknowledges "the great Wessex author" in the use of descriptive similes and atmospheric moods, but he does not recognise that one of Hardy's novels is an active shaper of his own life. His obsession with history is presumed by Dud himself to be quite detached: "I'll write my books and I'll live in the present!" (23; 35) Yet while he supposes himself to be a harmless eccentric interested in history, Dud gives another and very different impression to others:

He had been tapping the ground steadily with his great cudgel as he went along, and his awkward figure with its long arms, bony countenance, and close-cropped skull might have belonged to some necrophilistic Cerne Giant, intent on playing the werewolf in a civilized graveyard, rather than to an innocent antiquarian recluse. (16; 29)

This is the moment, early in the novel, at which the novel's major theme is made clear: is a person an "innocent" and detached student of history, and of myth, or an implicated participant in history and in myth?

Dud's attempts to escape history involve his name and his sexuality. He has rejected both his names, his parents' surname "Smith", and his given, baptismal name which we never learn. His acquired first name, "Dud", was jointly invented by his mother and himself when he was an infant: in his babbling efforts to address his father as "Dad", he referred only to himself. It was of course his mother who knew that her husband—Dud's "Dad"—was not in fact Dud's father; it was thus the mother who diverts the name "Dud" from putative father to son. How Dud addressed his mother's husband we are not told. When as an adult Dud learns that Aaron Smith is not his father he rejects his surname and takes one that is "entirely his own choice" (6; 18), "No-man". Most fictional characters have names that have been doubly chosen for them: a name such as Jane Eyre is both historically plausible and authorially significant. Many fictional names are more plausible than significant; only Stephen Dedalus is all significance and entirely devoid of credibility. Dud No-man has a name that has been chosen for him neither by his parents nor by his author but only by himself. It is first seen by its future bearer not as a name but as a phrase: "The phrase had come upon him, in his sulky reaction against his parents, as an inspiration of pure misanthropy" (6; 18). The name is "misanthropic" not only because it negates man but because it tells nothing to others, it leaves its

bearer free of parentage, outside the human story that every name tells.

In his deed of self-naming, however, Dud has unwittingly, uncunningly, chosen one of the names of Ulysses:

In using this name that was no name, he had not been thinking of Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops, for he was at that time unacquainted with Homer. (6; 18)

In “Cyclops”, the twelfth section of *Ulysses*, Joyce makes extraordinary play with the link between the giant's condition and Odysseus's strategy: the one-eyed giant is outwitted by the one-I'd hero. I is the ideal name, the only name which plays no tricks on its bearer and reveals nought to others. “No-man”, meaning both I and not-I, was for Odysseus a dazzling gloss on the ideal name of “I”. But for Dud, coming after, the non-name “No-man” is easily, inevitably translated into “Ulysses”—of all names the least innocent, the most utterly implicated, storied and readable. The author is thus exempt from the folly of Dud: a story about sons and fathers cannot be “self-naming”, and this novelist has of course read Homer, and Joyce.²

The self-chosen name has yet another reference unknown to Dud at the time of choosing. Engraved on the tombstone of his wife, who died of pneumonia while nursing her sick parents-in-law, is the Biblical text: “Greater love hath no man than this.” (20; 32) Ten years later (for he is as slow-witted with his Bible as with his Homer) Dud realizes for the first time that “this scriptural anonymity it talked about was himself, . . . And that this ‘greater’ love, whatever kind of thing it was, was the prerogative of poor Dud!” (20; 32) It is this message from the tombstone that releases Dud from his ten years' devotion to Mona's memory, and inspires him to buy his “greater love” in Wizzie. One of the themes of *Maiden Castle* is the hubris of self-naming: a Smith is a Smith, but a No-man is both Ulysses and a saintly ideal.

Self-naming provides no escape from history. Dud's other strategy of escape is to

deny his sexuality, and that denial is of course already implied in his chosen name. Haggling with her master-employer, Old Funky, over Wizzie, Dud insists that “at any rate she's *somebody's* girl” (31; 43) and Funky retorts, with a notable distortion of Dud's words:

‘You’be a-said, sir, in me hearing, sir, that she in there were some man’s gal! but I tell ’ee sir, . . . she be no man’s girl and never will be nothink else.’ (31-2; 44)

The very ambiguity of Funky's words is prophetic—for although No-man buys her he never possesses her. Wizzie herself will eventually complain that “you're *not a man*” (428; 440), and Dud recognizes in this respect his inferiority to Funky, who had seduced Wizzie: “Old Funky had done for [not ‘to’] this woman's body what he wasn't man enough to do!” (269; 282) At the beginning of the novel we learn that “it was Dud's misfortune to be rendered nervously incapable of consummating his marriage” to Mona (8; 20); it would seem to be less of a misfortune than a strategy by which, as well as having no father, Dud will be no father.

Being sexually what is implied by both parts of his chosen name, Dud escapes the sequence of biological necessity. This, somewhat extremely, Dud considers to be unnatural: “‘There's something grotesque . . . about the relation of father and son. It's outside nature.’” (162; 174) The condition of Dud's obsession with history is that he has no part in it. One might assume that paternity mediates history and nature, but for Dud paternity is identified entirely with history:

For a moment he struggled desperately to find a rational defence for his loathing of the process of generation. ‘*Parthenogenesis* is the natural thing! That's why the act of love is monstrous and ridiculous. Lust isn't comic. Lust is grave and sacred. And there's nothing but poetry in conception. It's the act of paternity that's so horribly humorous . . . An interference with the beautiful processes of parthenogenesis.’ (162; 174)

One aspect of parthenogenesis is, oddly enough, illegitimate birth. Lust and conception bring to birth a child who will know no father and have no father's name. Adoption is the "natural" alternative to paternity:

He was ready to adopt Wizzie's child [Lovie] tomorrow. He remembered his thoughts about parthenogenesis in connection with his own birth. He would no more see Urgan's blood in Lovie than he was able to feel Uryen's blood in himself! (267; 280)

In acknowledging a father whom he does not feel to be his father, and in adopting a child whose father is known to him, Dud is the beneficiary of his idiosyncratic notion of parthenogenesis; his notion does not, of course, allow him to suppose that he could make himself the cause of various women giving birth as "virgins". For Dud paternity and the act of love are features of history, and unnatural. To nature belongs "grave and sacred" lust (presumably manifested in solitary acts, whether of masturbation or rape), conception and illegitimate birth.

What Dud objects to is not the facts of birth, sex and death, but their social and cultural ritualization: not birth but baptism, not sex but love, marriage and inheritance of names, not (as we see in the graveyard) death but burial. These cultural "rites of passage" are, in the anthropological use of the phrase, supposed to link all human beings in all societies. Dud rejects his baptismal name, makes by his celibacy a parody of marriage, and sees the grave-plot meant for him filled by his father. While rites of passage are common to all human societies, their function is, in Jung's term, individuation—by naming, by celebrating each person's participation in common themes. By his name, and by the denial of his sexuality, Dud resists individuation, resists being a person.

* * *

About halfway through the novel, and shortly after Dud has discovered the identity of his father, there is an obvious hint that

what we are reading is the romance that Dud is writing:

... he thought how, if he were writing a story about himself, he would make All Souls' Day, this last autumn, appear like a new birth, the birth of a middle-aged man over forty into normal human life. (249; 261)

All Souls' Day is the celebration of the totality of human being, of the non-individualized. The would-be anonymous and hardly virtuous Dud chooses, fittingly, to begin his story on the one day of the year that commemorates neither a saint nor a name. *Maiden Castle* does indeed begin on All Souls' Day, as if to suggest that the novelist has relinquished much more than his prerogative to choose his hero's name. Insofar as this day marks the beginning or "birth" of a man aged over forty, "parthenogenesis" is an apt word. The reader must be brought to wonder whether it is foolish to enquire into the paternal origin of a fictional character.

The progress of the book through one calendar year involves Dud's finding of his father, his eventual acceptance of "normal" life, and even the possibility of becoming a father. By Uryen Quirm, his father, and by Wizzie, Dud's attempt at anonymity—no name, no-man—is foiled. Dud has purchased Wizzie precisely for her anonymity and impersonality which would reinforce his own:

... yes, in relation to this girl he was a real *No-man*; or rather he was a Man without a Name, encountering, for the first time in his primeval wanderings, a Woman without a Name! (90; 102)

Just as the Mona to whose memory Dud was faithful for ten years was not the real woman at all but a fetish of his own making—"She had been a creation of anonymous desire" (474; 486)—so the kind of attention that Dud gives to Wizzie is little different from that with which she is all too familiar:

so accustomed had she grown in the Circus to these anonymous recognitions of the desirability of her person . . . (334; 345)

The purchase, that at first seems to fit the stereotype of the redeemed prostitute, leads only to a perpetuation of Wizzie’s enslaved and objectified status. In Dud’s company Wizzie misses the personal recognition that she had received from her horse, to whom alone she could relate as to a human being.

Dud had of course been determined not to find the identity of his father, “for the whole business of discovering ‘a local habitation and a name’ for his solitary spirit went against the grain of his life-illusion.” (231; 243) There are here parallels to *Wolf Solent*, but the differences are telling. Wolf persists in his “mythology” at the expense of reality, and his “mythology” consists in telling stories about himself. Dud similarly denies the reality of other people, but his life-illusion is that he is non-existent—if not non-existent in the body, then non-existent as an individual person. And this life-illusion is maintained by the *absence* of stories, until Dud finds his father and imagines himself to be writing his novel. About *Maiden Castle* the common critical complaint is that there is no story. It would be more precise to say that there are stories at cross-purposes: Wizzie was chosen by Dud for her impersonality, for her part in the story of anonymous “Man” and anonymous “Woman”. As she is quick to realize, she can have no part in the story in which Dud son of Enoch Quirm is an individual character.

As he enters a story, even history, by finding a father, so Dud sheds his anonymity and impersonality to become a character with a name. Out of his enthusiasm for Welsh mythology Enoch Quirm has chosen, like his son, a name for himself: Uryen. Dud objects to his father’s deed of self-naming, and to the name chosen:

‘What was it that made you change your name from Enoch to Uryen? Enoch’s a good Biblical name; and I’ve often heard it down here . . . I don’t think Uryen’s nearly as honest a name as Enoch. There’s something tricky and shifty, something fanciful and affected about Uryen to me! It’s like the name of a person in a book. It doesn’t sound authentic.’ (218-19; 231)

To the reader of fiction, however, Uryen sounds a deal more authentic than Dud Norman. Uryen’s response to Dud, in justification of his chosen name, is devastating:

Then he remarked in a low and perfectly calm voice: ‘It was your mother’s favourite name. We meant it to be *your* name!’ (219; 231)

The act of paternity involves the privilege of naming one’s child. This is the moment in which Enoch announces that he is Dud’s father. What Dud has called parthenogenesis precludes the naming of the son by the father: in carnivalesque consequence of which the father has taken the name which belongs to the son—Uryen—and the son has taken the name of the father—Dad/Dud.

Imaginatively the discovery of the father is likely to be a disaster, for it usually puts to an end the bastard’s privilege of fantasizing about his origins:

He began telling himself a childish story about his father being some great Welsh nobleman, who claimed to be descended from Sir Pellenore. (116; 129)

In Enoch Quirm Dud finds a father whose surname, we are told, is pure Dorset; happily there is a complication: Enoch is himself an adopted foundling, and is therefore unhindered in his own fantasies of Welsh descent (229-30; 241-42). A bastard and his bastard son both, unknown to each other, share a congruent fantasy of Welsh origin. (Might Powys be alluding to Bloom’s and Stephen’s “twin dream” of Turkish red slippers?) Father and son met and recognized, the fantasies of origin are not negated but combined and strengthened.

Enoch Quirm believes himself to be the reincarnation (another form of parthenogenesis) of Uryen who signifies, to Enoch, the power of the ancient pre-Celtic gods “to break the bonds of life’s natural law” (236; 248), “to reach the life behind life” (237; 249); “this ‘Uryen’ in me . . . is the old magic of the mind, when, driven to bay by the dogs of reality, it turns upon the mathematical law of life and tears it to bits!” (240; 252) Uryen’s lecture on the meaning of his name

(which ought to be Dud's) is given to Dud while father and son are sitting on the ramparts of Maiden Castle, currently under excavation:

'You think it's madness to talk of the old gods of Mai-Dun? You think I ought to be interested in their excavations, and their proofs that human beings lived in this place like hyenas in holes among bones. I tell you, lad, the truth of life's in the imagination, not in ashes and urns! I tell you *we*, I and others like me, are the gods of Mai-Dun . . . as I talk to you now I feel the power rushing through me. You may well clutch at the grass! This bank, and that one opposite us, that seem so solid . . . They're mists and mirages and vapours! . . . Don't you feel this whole great fortress ready to shake, shiver, melt, dissolve? Don't you feel that you and I are behind it, making it what it is by the power of our minds?' (238; 250)

Dud is disdainfully sceptical of all that Uryen says; yet Uryen's principle of manifesting his divine power is very similar to Dud's principle for preserving his life-illusion:

'Don't you see what force there is in sterile love? Why, my dear boy, it's the strongest force there is! Rampant desire unfulfilled—why, there's nothing it can't do! Stir up sex *till it would put out the sun* and then keep it sterile! That's the trick. That's the grand trick of all spiritual life.' (240; 252)

To Uryen's spectacularly challenging imperative Dud has been oddly, almost unknowingly, obedient. Dud's sterility has been maintained all the while that his cudgel has elicited comparison with that of the Cerne Giant, of all phallic representations the one that with most magnificent plausibility might be able to "put out the sun".

Readers often think of Dud as impotent. There is little if any evidence of this in the text, and the erroneous deduction obscures the crucial difference between impotence and sterility. In No-man's name we can find covert hints of sterile potency: his wife's name, Mona, suggests a marriage of one with the same, the figment being perhaps his own creation, his own reflection;³ "Mona

No-man" is a near-palindrome, and we might find a palindrome reflexively sterile; read aright, Mona-No-man can yield M—onan—oman; and, so neatly, onan is an anagram of anon. The Cerne Giant has both a phallus and a cudgel; Dud's cudgel represents his manhood, for without it even No-man is less than a man:

'How babyish he looks without his stick!' Wizzie thought. 'With it he looks like a selfish old man; without it like a selfish child!' (366; 386)⁴

The cudgel makes the difference between selfish impotence and a selfish potency.

Uryen's lecture to Dud is interrupted by the intrusion on the ramparts of some vulgar sightseers, one of whom calls out to Dud:

'Killed anything with that stick yet?' one of the boys shouted; and their giggling broke into a loud guffaw. (239; 251)

Dud is not at all surprised or agitated at this, for he had been anticipating such remarks:

It had been a wonder to him, all these months, that the people he passed in his walks refrained from jeering at this absurd stick. (238; 250)

Such a large stick is indeed absurd if it is not used for large deeds; likewise, our sense of the absurd in the presence of the Cerne Giant is dependent on the absence of a represented female. Soon after the jeer the cudgel's absurdity suggests to Dud a link with medieval chivalry and its twin virtues of strength and chastity:

'It's doubtful,' he thought, 'whether any of the men of old time, except perhaps a few mediaeval knights, would sit as quiet as I'm sitting here now, with this Cerne Giant stick on my lap, listening to the 'Horse-Head' putting me in my place!' (255; 268; Jenny Dearth)

Before the boys had been the first in Dorchester to jeer and guffaw, Wizzie had appreciated the uselessness of the stick; when Dud had placed it on her bed she had caused it to fall off, "with an impatient

movement of her knees” (180; 192). A mere sixty pages later, but immediately after the guffaw, while Dud is still on the ramparts, he reconstructs that scene with Wizzie:

. . . the grotesque incident of Wizzie’s kicking his stick under their bed rushed into his mind. ‘She kicked it with her bare foot,’ he said to himself with the bitterness of one who has received an irremediable wrong . . . this deliberate kicking of his stick assumed, as it returned to his mind, the proportions of an unpardonable crime. (245; 257)

Comparison of the two passages shows how drastically and melodramatically Dud has altered the facts. The falling of the stick to the floor, caused by “an impatient movement of her knees” *under* the bedclothes, is harmless. The stick had then rolled under the bed; after recovering it, awkwardly and gracelessly, Dud assumes, silently and without evidence or argument, “that it must have been a deliberate and vicious kick from one of Wizzie’s bare feet that had propelled this inanimate companion of his life out of his reach.” (180-81; 192-93) Given what it stands for, the stick being deliberately kicked by a bare foot might well appear an unpardonable crime. Like Wolf Solent, Dud must invent his enemies and their offences. On the one hand, through the stick Dud identifies himself with the Cerne Giant; on the other hand, through Wizzie’s supposed treatment of the stick Dud creates his own vulnerability, his own susceptibility to outrage.

That “inanimate companion” of a stick is active, or activated, only twice in the novel, at the beginning and at the end. On the way to the cemetery Dud “broke some thin cat-ice, that was already melting in the sun, with the end of his great stick,” (17; 29) and in the book’s penultimate sentence, “he dug his stick into the earth.” (484; 496) The progression, from the tentative breaking of the already melting membrane of ice, to the vigour of the final gesture, provides a measure of Dud’s development, even of his achievement. The stick survives the treatment of Wizzie and strangers, to become the

symbol of Dud’s personality: of Dud’s achievement of personality the stick is the sign.

When Dud digs his stick into the earth a connection is made, belatedly, between Dud’s problems and the novel’s public event: the stick in the earth is an emblem of excavation as well as penetration.

* * *

In the male characters we find a direct relationship between the degree of subjectivity and the importance of the meaning of Maiden Castle. Meaning is dependent on the personal. But the personal is not humanly universal. Of the thoughts of the female characters, with the exception of Wizzie, we know very little, and their personalities are vague. In his other novels Powys is accomplished at depicting contrasting female types (Gerda and Christie, Mary Crow and Nell Zoyland); the reader’s frustration at the weak characterization of Nance, Jenny and Thuella is thus likely to be intentional. These women are presented not in themselves, or as they are to themselves, but in and through their subservience to the male characters.

Wizzie is the only female whose silent thoughts are continuously disclosed to the reader: she is the only female to be “adequately” or “normally” characterized.

Wizzie’s thoughts about men have at least as much validity as the reader’s; faced with the tiresomeness of all the male characters—from the selfishly absorbed to the impersonally abstract—Wizzie becomes the reader’s accomplice in resentment and irritation. She represents the distinctively female apprehension of the elemental, the unquestioning acceptance of things as they are, which is, throughout Powys’s novels, the envy of men. Wizzie is entirely conscious of Dud’s selfishly imaginative use of her, as impersonal, timeless “Woman”. She complains to Funky about Dud “droning on about how . . . the history women worshipped bulls and how he and me were sweethearts before history began” (282; 295) and after visiting the excavations she knows that

Dud's "happiness just now was partly caused by that stone woman's head, with which he'd no doubt fallen in love simply because she'd been buried for a thousand years . . ." (365; 376-77)

In his obsession with Mona's ghost and in the presence of Wizzie Dud knows only imaginative exploitation. But when he finds his father and then distances himself from Uryen, Dud also removes himself from the egocentric and subjective regard of others which father and son had shared. Realising the illusoriness of their atavistic fantasies Wizzie says, to herself, "I wouldn't be a man for anything." (327; 338) At the moment at which Uryen approaches Wizzie Dud develops an affinity with Wizzie which is almost an apprehension of what it is to be a woman:

But if the humorous feeling that might be called a recognition of the eternal limitations of Homo Sapiens was on *her* side over Mr. Wye and D., it was on No-Man's side when Uryen came up to where she stood and began to talk to her.

"I didn't dress like this for *you*," she kept saying to herself . . . (327; 338)

And this introduces the passage in which Uryen tries to fashion a relationship between Wizzie and Thuella, a sterile relationship that will "put out the sun". The moment at which Wizzie turns for love to a woman is the moment at which Dud realizes that he is No-man not only in name, not only sexually, but in the very condition of being, in his self-consciousness. The rest of the book sees the friendship between Wizzie and Thuella grow in no accord whatever with Uryen's intentions; when Wizzie and Thuella take themselves off to America Dud is forced to accept the untenability, as name, as gender and as self-consciousness, of being "No-man".

It is, as we have seen, Dud's life-illusion that he is "new-born" at the beginning of the book. The No-man, born of a virgin at middle-age, sheds the illusion of being a miraculous nobody and accepts the reality of being a natural anybody. In a sophisticated

refinement the paradox of *Wolf Solent* has been not resolved but inverted. The earlier novel is troubled in its structural core by the objection that, if a life-illusion is necessary to human existence, Wolf cannot have his life-illusion destroyed and yet live. Dud's life-illusion is that he is a nobody; the novel ends when its protagonist accepts that, in spite of all, he has been not a historical novelist looking on, but the protagonist. Dud might even be seen as the type of the narrator of *Wolf Solent*. That narrator is hardly known to the reader but he is the occasion of a major crux: How can the narrator assert, as if from above, the universality of the life-illusion without excluding himself from the class of those subject to it? The narrator of *Wolf Solent* must assume that he is not human, and readers can assume that that is his life-illusion. The narrator of *Maiden Castle* is also elusive. In giving equal weight and sympathy to each opinion he or she is, like the narrator of *A Glastonbury Romance*, part of a polyphony. *Maiden Castle's* narrator goes further even than that polyphony in giving greater recognition to the value of silence, the absence of any voice or opinion. The masculine tendency to meaning and structure, and to artistic form, is subverted by Powys's and his narrator's awareness that a male author or narrator is subject, like Dud, to the (unspoken) rebukes of Wizzie. Among his contemporaries Powys admired few novelists, and no woman writer, as much as Dorothy Richardson. To emulate Richardson would be to succumb, as author and narrator, to the illusion of being without gender. No-man can thus be seen to constitute Powys's speculation on his own ability to represent with almost equal conviction and confidence both male and female characters. Somewhat analogously to Dud's withholding, Powys refrains from creating female characters except through the (inadequate) mediation of male perception. Rather than attempt to follow Dorothy Richardson in Miriam's unstructured flow of absorbed impressions Powys accepts that his novel will have structure just as, regard-

less of intention, No-man will be protagonist. But in order that the structure may be seen to be an illusion, a projection of meaning and peculiarly male, *Maiden Castle* is without some vital elements, and contains built-in flaws. Structure is life-illusion, and the structure of *Maiden Castle* incorporates its own undoing.

* * *

Dostoevsky was willing to sacrifice his novel as a work of art for the sake of a higher value. Sacrifice is central in *Maiden Castle* for it is through sacrifice that a person, whether as celebrant or victim, can move from innocence and detachment to participation and implication in myth and history. That the novel itself may not be immune, a vehicle for the *objective* understanding of life and reality and sacrifice, it too must be sacrificed, its form violated. Dud's own historical romance about Dorchester, shadowing the one we are reading, treats of the life of Mary Channing, publicly executed, for murder, in Maumbury Rings, once a Roman amphitheatre and place of sacrifice. Yet Dud's sterility, his illusion of non-being, is a refusal of sacrifice. In an important utterance, by which Wizzie actually expresses to Dud her thoughts about him, this contradiction is pointed out:

‘I can't understand how anyone like you, who's writing books about people’—Wizzie had no idea she was going to blurt this out, but the thought seemed to have got so heavy in her mind that it slipped out and fell of its own accord, like a ripe pear—‘can hate everyone like you do, D.!’ (346-47; 358)

Playing with the obvious vicariousness of the fictional experience, we can resolve the apparent contradiction: Dud chooses a sacrificial literary heroine to compensate for his inability to sacrifice real people. Sacrifice requires not hatred but a concerned purpose and determination, a quality that Dud lacks. His passivity that will not be roused by any provocation angers and frustrates Wizzie far more than would ordinary human failings. Dud in his illusion of non-being displays the false sanctity that equates virtue

with detachment. Because he will not make the sacrifice that lies beyond cuddling, Wizzie will not stay with Dud; his is an “objective” virtue that has nothing to do with persons.

In this novel there will be no resolution in which Dud performs the sacrifice by which another person is acknowledged. The gesture of digging his stick into the earth indicates such a possibility after the book's end. Within the novel the sacrifices are made by the other male characters, Uryen, Claudius and Teucer. Uryen is driven to disclose his subjective beliefs and opinions to the public, through journalistic reports on the excavation. In consequence he must give up either his life or his beliefs: “I was strong in my faith. But when I wrote of it for the world the virtue went out of me.” (456; 469) Claudius objectifies himself, for the sake of the future, to such an extent that sacrifice has ceased to be a matter of will or intention: his “desire was to get rid of desire, to become, in fact, an automaton of self-sacrifice, and he had gone further than many saints in this direction.” (112; 124) Part of this “automatic sacrifice” involves living with Teucer's daughter Jenny in complete chastity or, as the “Cast of Characters” puts it, in “Platonic friendship”. When Claudius is on his death-bed Jenny, because of a minor quarrel, refuses to help him, for that would be “putting weakness before principle”. (385; 397) Claudius is too selfless, too objective to complain.

It is the Platonist, Teucer, who understands the value of weakness, who senses its priority over principle, when he protests that his daughter is an “unnatural old maid . . . You're only *half* a woman . . . if you'd gone to bed with the man, Jenny, this old-maidish silliness would never have—”. Jenny interrupts:

‘How can you, how *dare* you, say these things to me? Isn't it you who've always told me . . . that real love had no need of—of what you're talking about?’ (401; 413)

Teucer replies calmly that she, like everyone else, has misunderstood him: “you do the

senses too much honour . . . when you deny them like this." (402; 414) Quite unreasonably, for he has not been inconsistent, Jenny challenges her father: "If you mean what you say, Father, *throw those books of yours into my stove!*" Sacrifice is seldom logical or clear in motivation; Teucer has not wavered in his Platonism and yet he agrees to destroy the only books he reads, *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*. Teucer is going to teach, and to be understood, by the example of sacrifice:

'It's a bargain, Jenny . . . Give yourself to your man; throw this cruel virginity of yours into the fire, and I'll throw these books, which are my life, into your stove! . . . This is a—a covenant between us. You've always been my dearest. You know *that*; and now I'm giving my best for you, more than my best! Shall we take'—he spoke almost exultingly at that moment—'the *Sortes Platonenses*? Shall we see what they say before they die? Mark you, my girl. This isn't only your father's sacrifice speaking, this is your proud virginity speaking—before we give them both to the fire!' (403-404; 415-16)

The *Phaedrus* falls open on the final page:

'O beloved Pan,' the old man translated, in a low intense voice, 'and all ye other gods of this place, grant to me that I'—here he paused and looked straight at [his daughter] who was trembling violently from head to foot while her fingers plucked at the fastening of her black blouse—'*and my dear daughter here, may be made beautiful in our souls within!*' (404; 416)

Much of the poignancy of this passage comes from the phrase inserted by the translator who would more closely resemble Socrates if he had no daughter. Teucer's sacrifice exposes the fragile tension between the Platonist and the parent—and yet sacrifice may constitute the link between them.

In this moving scene, which is so reminiscent of *King Lear*, the less preferred daughter, Thuella, is not forgotten. At the stove Teucer moves the kettle away from "the fiery red opening" (402; 414) where his Plato will be immolated. The stove's

opening should remind the reader of Thuella's mouth, when first seen by Dud:

But the girl had painted her lips so red that her mouth in her white face seemed like a wound, a wound that struck him at once as the outward sign of a complicated tragedy.

From this crimson mouth there now poured forth a stream of high-pitched words, words that seemed like the *spiritual blood* of an infinite grievance. (50; 62)

That a deep affinity develops between Wizzie and Thuella may be owing to their shared experience of imaginative exploitation. Dud's treatment of Wizzie as impersonal "Woman" is matched by Teucer's infliction on his daughter of such a name. Teucer explains to Dud the origin of the name, and Dud can sympathise with Teucer's assumption that name determines character:

'I called her Thuella, out of Homer. Thuella means a storm-cloud; and so . . . the clouds of the sky, the dew of the dawn, the waves of the sea, and all other elemental beings are her passion.' (53; 65)

Powys may well be playing with a pun, or a possible etymological link between "Thuella" and the verb "thúō", "to offer sacrifice". A recent French scholar, Henri Jeanmaire, supposes a common etymon for the verb of sacrifice and the verb in "Thuella", of storm-like action:

a verb whose sense remains somewhat ambiguous; it signifies to make a sacrifice, on the one hand, and on the other to hurl oneself impetuously or to whirl around like something caught up in a tempest.⁶

Thuella escapes the prescription of her father's imagination, to be instead the origin of sacrifice. When next seen by Dud, at the Scummy Pond, Thuella was completely changed: "She was transformed, transmuted, reborn", (194; 206) although she still has scarlet lips (203; 215). The attribute of the crimson orifice has been carried over to Wizzie, who has herself been transformed:

She wore a dress he had never seen her in before . . . It was a wonderful fairy-like grey,

with filmy flounces and loose sleeves, and it had a romantic touch of rose colour at the bosom, like a wound from a spear. (204; 216-17)

In the scene between Jenny and her father the red hole belongs to the stove at which the burnt offering is made. By these transformations, and by the transference from one to another of the signs of sacrifice—orifice, wound, blood—the three women are presented as sacrificial victims.

Three victims looking for executioners. Being “No-man” Dud refuses to sacrifice Wizzie; likewise by the Scummy Pond he enjoys Thuella from a distance, “after his own cerebral fashion” (198; 210). His desire to be “No-man” is akin to his father’s desire to “put out the sun”: both depend on sterility, and in the terms of this novel the opposite of sterility is sacrifice. A relationship between women is sterile, and hence to be encouraged by Uryen:

‘It’s nothing to you that I’ve taken *your*’—and he fixed his flaming eyes on Thuella—‘feeling for *you*’—and he turned them on Wizzie—‘to break through into the Mystery that maddens me!’ (454; 466)

Uryen is determined that his “Mystery” has nothing to do with and will not be uncovered by sacrifice, as we learn from his response to Dud’s challenge of sincerity:

‘But the question is—do you believe in what’s in it enough to fight for it, to sacrifice women for it, to desert children for it?’ (221-22; 234)

Uryen’s answer “No, lad! *No!*” is “decisively and abruptly ejaculated” and is followed by a more temperate explanation:

“my gods aren’t as real as your stick . . . and as to sacrificing women and deserting children *I might* do such things and I might not; but if I did it wouldn’t be proof of anything. I might believe absolutely in my gods and *yet* refuse to sacrifice anything to them!” (222; 234)

Uryen’s aversion to sacrifice is matched by his exhortations to Wizzie and Thuella not to be “sacrificed” by men but “to let your

love transform itself into—into the force that makes the mystery tremble!” (453; 465) In this complicity with Uryen, Dud will do nothing to relieve the misery of either woman. Sexual love might not make “the mystery” tremble, but it might bestow mystery on persons; it might give to this novel’s dimly-realized, almost notional female characters the freedom of their own personalities.

Wizzie has found happiness nowhere in the course of the novel. As Uryen looks back to the Golden Age which might be recovered by sterility, so Wizzie looks back with longing—to her seduction by Old Funky. The sight of Urgan injured in a fall reminds Wizzie of the loss of her maidenhood:

An emotion stranger than any she had ever had, or than she was ever destined to have, flooded her being at the sight of that white skull with the blood oozing from its wound. The past swept over her with an overwhelming rush; and it came into her mind that the last time she had touched that slippery surface it was from the marks of her own nails that the blood had come . . . Kneeling there, over that blood-stained skull, she reached the tragic level of mortal feeling, where love and hate, blind savagery and infinite tenderness, melt into something for which there is *no name*. [Italics added]

What she had suffered, in shock and pain and outrage, when she yielded her maidenhead to this grotesque creature, seemed to return upon her . . .

It returned softened, transformed, dissolved; no longer as a brutal violation, but as something in which, with a wild self-laceration, she could even exult!

And what she felt now as she pushed aside his repulsive wig and examined his scalp-wound, was something that never for one instant she had felt for her old D. How *could* a girl have any human feelings, good or bad, for a person like D., who if you tickled him didn’t laugh and if you pricked him didn’t bleed?

. . . as she bit her blood-stained fingers, what the girl said to herself, or rather what she said to the unconscious form beneath her, was something like this . . . “You taught me my job. You taught me my power. You taught me my life. You re-created my body!” (444-45; 456-57)

The innuendo of sacrifice and sexuality that runs through the novel punningly named *Maiden Castle* and in the shadow-novel *Mary Channing*, named after one hanged in a place of sacrifice for a sexually-motivated murder, makes plain Powys's intentional inadequacy of characterization. Explicit reference within *Maiden Castle* to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* would be suicidal were characterization to be the ground of comparison.⁷ For all their difference of philosophy and attitude, to others, to themselves, to *Maiden Castle*, the males are (except for Funky) bloodless. And through the symbols of redness, wounds and orifices, and the actuality of Wizzie's bleeding and bloodied fingers, each of the females makes an offering of blood. Geoffrey Hill's "Genesis" is apposite:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

The novel is lacking in plot and structure and characterization because the makers or bearers of the narrative are male mythologisers, bloodless representatives of Platonism and Communism or adherents of sterility: all refuse, until the final section, the blood-offerings of the females.

The women are weakly characterized not because they are presented through male eyes, but because for these males perception is akin to annihilation. As an exceptional example of vitality almost every critic has singled out Lovie, Wizzie's daughter by Funky. As Funky is seen by Wizzie to have at once violated and re-created her, so by the creation of Lovie he has at once violated the abstract texture of the novel, and redeemed it by the measure of life. Funky has very little understanding—his level of literacy is humorously presented—and yet his crude "mythology" of lust and power is presumably the very same that caused *Maiden Castle* and the Cerne Giant and Maumbury Rings to be created, and *Mary Channing* to be hanged. In their cerebralism the male characters who think about mythology are discontinuous with it.

* * *

Maiden Castle trespasses on the unthinkable: that No-man might not be the protagonist, or that no person might be the protagonist; that No-man might be the author, or that a novel might be without an author. Yet, for all its aspirations to pure polyphony and the anonymous status of myth, this novel finally acknowledges that such a project is truly unthinkable: that the protagonist is only named, but is not, No-man; that Powys is not the functionary-scribe of myth but the author. Albeit in modification of the extreme claims of historicism, characters do have some say in their destinies, as great books need some say from great writers.

Sacrifice mediates history and myth, nature and culture, balancing the demands of stories with the demands of persons. Each of the male characters in *Maiden Castle* has to "sacrifice" a female, to transform the character from being a pawn in his story to being a person on her own. On the outside of the novel the author sacrifices its aesthetic form by allowing the destruction and termination of each of the stories being told by the male characters. Any form, any pattern or system in its attempt to provide understanding and significance does violence to reality, and achieves significance only at the expense of the persons who are the objects of study and meaning. Powys has, as it were, made a compact with Teucer: the sacrifice of the Forms—by which "half a woman" is made whole—entails the sacrifice of form—by which significant characters become meaningless persons. Instead of meaning, mystery and life.

Dud's cudgel may also represent and be a substitute for the writer's pen: Powys was an admirer of Joyce's Shem the Penman. Against Uryen's and Claudius's protests against excavation, that cudgel is on the last page dug into the soil of the cemetery. At the novel's opening, shortly before picking up for the first time his oak cudgel, Dud decides to "postpone buying ink and paper and the few other necessities he required till he had visited his dead in the cemetery." (13; 25)

His ink and paper bring nobody to life, but his cudgel is the sign of No-man’s manhood.

The true representative of authorial creation is Lovie, herself the child of vitality, violence and blood. By scribbling on a scrap of paper she creates a doll whom she names Gwendolly. While playing with the doll Lovie is asked to tell her own name (asked by Uryen, of all disqualified inquisitors). Spectacularly, dazzlingly, Lovie offers a punning, cunning, ludic non-answer: “Gwendolly’s ’tending that Lovie isn’t her mummy.” (309; 322) Punning, that is, on “mummy” as “doll” (shades of emperor and butterfly), and quibbling on pretence as caring. A few pages on, Lovie is still playing: “the miracle was still going on at that warm stove, a scrawled-over bit of paper becoming a person with a past and a future!” “And now,” comments the narrator knowingly, “the paper doll like the rest of us had

to pay the penalty of being Something rather than Nothing.” (315; 327) The penalty *and* the miracle: to ravage and redeem. That is the sacrifice of making others into persons, of making persons out of dolls, fictional characters and other scraps of paper; and in turn we are the victims, dependent on others, as much as is the paper doll, for our escape from paper: “And like ourselves the paper doll had had no choice.” (315; 327) The sacrifice that this novel barely and subtly makes is to elevate persons above paper—be they bought women or even the products of paternity. The centre to which Dud ultimately holds, and the full circle, are both represented by the fiery orifice into which, in the interests of persons, this novel and even the works of Plato must be cast, that out of which—it can be supposed—may pour words of spiritual blood.

NOTES

¹All references included in the text refer to John Cowper Powys, *Maiden Castle*, London: Cassell, 1937; Macdonald, 1967 and Picador, 1979 (identical pagination).

²See Charles Lock, “John Cowper Powys and James Joyce”, in *John Cowper Powys: The Center and the Margins*, ed. Denis Lane (forthcoming).

³For reflexion as sterility, see also 257; 269. “This cry of ‘Echo!’ [local paper] always made him think of making love to Wizzie.”

⁴See also p. 329; 341: “I’ve left my stick in my room.’ The babyish way he announced this . . . annoyed Wizzie.”

⁵Cited by Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, London, 1968, p. 156.

⁶Henri Jeanmaire, *Dionysos*, Paris, 1970, cited in René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, London, 1977, p. 265.

⁷It is worth noting that each of these three novels has the same pair of initials, MC, which happen also to be the initials of the Powys mother, Mary Cowper. An argument that Powys intended such a pattern might be supported by Dud’s remarkable but essentially parenthetical speculation, in a novel much taken up with paternity: “And after all, fathers are nothing! It’s who your *mother* is that matters.” (161-62; 173) If that is the case, why is Dud so little interested in Cornelia Smith? Because he is attracted so strongly to books and earthworks initialled MC?

Peter Christensen

Wessex, 1272: History in John Cowper Powys's *The Brazen Head*

Although *The Brazen Head*, like *Owen Glendower* and *Porius* is a historical novel, it differs so much in scope and detail from its predecessors that it seems to belong to another genre, the romance, in which John Cowper Powys specialized during his later years. Indeed, *The Brazen Head* appears to be an "epic fantasy" surprisingly located in the Wessex of 1272 rather than in some invented time and place. We know that the weak king Henry III has come to the end of his long reign. His son, the aggressive and cruel future Edward I is away with Louis IX on a long Crusade. Wales has not yet been subdued. Peasant agitation threatens the social order. The Franciscans and Dominicans do not see eye to eye on ecclesiastical matters. The introduction of Aristotelian thought via Oxford and the University of Paris has led to major problems in formulating man's position in the world of matter. In short, we have various conflicts which typically go toward the making of the dialectical give-and-take of the historical novel. However, the novel's conclusion fails to (or refuses to) give us a resolution of these historical conflicts. Instead, the lovers Lilith and Peter Peregrinus turn into a "fiery ball" which falls on and destroys the Brazen Head.¹ It seems as if the epic fantasy has left the historical novel behind. Consequently, we need to ask ourselves if history offers something more than a backdrop for the working out of Powys's metaphysical speculations on sex, power, and religion.

When we turn to critics who have published on *The Brazen Head*, we see that the theme of history has not been foremost in their minds. G. Wilson Knight in *The Saturnian Quest* believes that the novel ranges two sets of forces against each other: on the

one hand, Aristotle, paganism, and male-female sexuality, and, on the other, Trinitarian doctrine, Christian blood-sacrifice, and virgin sexuality. For him, "[s]pace is on the one side, Time on the other". The destruction of the Brazen Head represents the vanquishing of the "Christian-theological and thence scientific side of our opposition" by the "sexual Antichrist of Welsh affinities and occult powers".² Glen Cavaliero, who does not give a reading of the final scene in *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, stresses the "regulative normal sexual power" of the couple Peleg and Ghosta. In contrast, Peter Peregrinus and Lilith "misuse" their sexual energy and are likened to Satan and the first wife of Adam, respectively.³ John Brebner feels that the "Head and [Peter's] lodestone are similar in having powers beyond those 'in harmony with Nature'; they have no place in this world; consequently they neutralize each other". The annihilation of both the fiery ball and the Brazen Head indicates the equivalence of their powers. Brebner believes that the Brazen Head is Friar Bacon's "attempt to cerebralize the pleasure" of sex; "the lodestone Peregrinus's effort to actualize the pain".⁴ The three readings appear incompatible. Whereas Knight sees male-female sexuality triumphing over virginity, Cavaliero opts for normal heterosexuality triumphing over perverted heterosexuality, and Brebner suggests (but does not state) an equivalency between parthenogenesis/virginity and heterosexuality. Nevertheless in all three cases, the dialectical interplay is not connected with the historical givens of 1272 as presented in the novel.

It is the Brazen Head itself, finally speaking just before it is destroyed, which tells us

that history must somehow be accounted for in this novel: “ ‘Time *was*,’ it said. ‘Time *is*,’ it said. ‘And time *will—*’ ” (348). Knight identifies this line as a quotation from Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594). Apparently, as the Head announces the existence of time in the future, its own time of existence is ended as the “burning meteor” falls on it. The Head suggests a time which always was and reminds us of the Aristotelian notion of the eternal nature of matter as explained by Albertus Magnus:

According to the philosophy of the greatest of all philosophers—I speak of Aristotle—the material stuff of which the Cosmos is composed is eternal, and contains within itself the creative energy that builds the world and produces all the innumerable lives around us, such as we know and such as we are. But we Christians have been given a—a—a—a—” (255)

If matter is eternal, then a historical system which derives its meaning from either the creation, the incarnation of Christ, or the Last Judgement distorts the world’s temporality. Instead, we are left with a world in which events simply succeed each other. Powys incorporates this idea of the succession of events into the novel itself by having the narrative voice continually refer to the story as a “chronicle” and by stressing the element of chance at work in the world. The novel, which almost all readers have seen as shapeless, is shapeless to a purpose, and the historical givens cannot be marshalled into an emplotted history. The chronicle structure, rather than the historical novel or the epic fantasy (or romance) vouches for the Aristotelian view of matter, which Powys accepts, without Albertus Magnus’s simultaneous belief in the Christian revelation. As the Dominican teacher explains to Raymond de Laon:

If Matter is eternal, why then the world we live in is like-wise eternal, for it is made of Matter or what the Greeks called “hulee”; and, if our world is eternal, it has not been created by anyone. When Jesus talked of ‘His

Father in Heaven’, it is quite clear that he spoke as a Jew, and that he was thinking of the God of the Jews. (257)

Thus in the conflict between the educated defenders of Aristotle and those accepting the Christian view of creation we have a major reason for setting a work dealing with history in 1272. A crisis was ranging about how history could be written. In our century this question of the plotting of history has continued to be raised, particularly by R. G. Collingwood in his *The Idea of History* (1945) and Hayden White in his *Metahistory* (1973), and we have seen an increased interest in narratology over the last twenty years. In Albertus’s dilemma, a version of the fall of man is inscribed: the division of man by the rival claims of reason and revelation, symbolized by the Brazen Head, conceived by science, constructed to utter revelations, and ultimately destroyed by the natural sexual forces unleashed by Peter and Lilith. To support my claims I will examine the use of historical givens in the novel and Powys’s statements on chronicle and fate. *The Brazen Head*, like *A Glastonbury Romance* in Charles Lock’s estimation, offers us a polyphony of voices.⁵ To understand it, we must be able to discover the symbolic value of events.

The narrative is arranged in twenty-two chapters forming six large sequences: 1-5, 6-7, 8-11, 12-13 (all February 1272); 14-18, 19-22 (all June 1272). Everything happens in the closing days of Henry III’s reign. However, even the most significant earlier events of his rule, the battles of Lewes and Evesham, are not mentioned, and the career of Simon de Montfort is evoked only in passing as we learn that Roger Bacon lost his money in supporting the king in his resistance to the barons.

Because so little is known of the external events of the life of Roger Bacon, Powys had much free room in which to create his story. The last twenty-four years of Bacon’s life (1268-1292), after his second stay in Paris, are particularly obscure. A 1370 chronicle states that Bacon was imprisoned

by Jerome of Ascoli, Minister General of the Franciscans, in 1277. In Powys's novel, he is already suffering a kind of imprisonment at the time when St Bonaventure was still Minister General. A schism in the Franciscan Order would lead to the condemnation of the dissident friars at the Council of Lyon in 1274. However, the issue of Franciscan poverty in the role of the church is not made clear as it is in *The Name of the Rose*, for example.

Roger Bacon condemned magic, and there is no evidence whatsoever for his creating a brazen head. The *Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon*, written at the end of the sixteenth century by an unknown author gives us the legend. In the fifth narrative of this work, according to Evelyn Westacott, Bacon makes a brazen head with Friar Bungay "in order that the Head might speak and enable Bacon to 'wall England about with Brasse' to prevent further conquests".⁶ The two friars fall asleep, after having ordered Miles the servant to wake them when the Head spoke. The Head proclaims "Time is", "Time was", and "Time is past", then falls down, waking its creators. In the play of Thomas Greene, the eleventh scene is devoted to this incident, as John Edwin Sandys notes.⁷ At the close of the play, Bacon repents of his youthful follies, magic, and ambition (369). The incident is recalled in Pope's *Dunciad* (3.104) and Byron's *Don Juan* (1.217), as well as other works of English literature before Powys.⁸

Powys does not mention what appears to be Bacon's major work from the time around 1272, the fragment *Compendium Studii Philosophiae*. It is much concerned with the approaching time of the Antichrist, as Stewart C. Easton writes in his biography of Bacon.⁹ This Antichrist will know science and make some use of it. Perhaps Powys found here the inspiration to make Peter Peregrinus a self-proclaimed Antichrist. As Francis Winthrop Woodruff tells us,¹⁰ Peter Peregrinus, or De Maricourt, is praised in Bacon's *Opus Tertius*, written in the 1260s, as a great

scientist, particularly with metals and minerals. He knows the charms of old women, as Powys also indicates. However, the real Bacon sees Peregrinus as a good man who does not seek any reward for his labours. Peregrinus's *Epistola de Magnete*, according to Woodruff, dated 1269, was an account of careful experimentation with a lodestone.

Bacon was not generally given to writing kind remarks about his contemporaries, and Easton feels that Albertus Magnus is one of the scholars attacked, but not openly by name, in his writings.¹¹ Bacon must have known Albertus at the University of Paris after he went to France in 1257, on his second trip. Whereas Albertus is treated by Powys in a sympathetic light, Bonaventure is caricatured. Yet he deserves credit for trying to steer the Franciscan Order through the stormy issue of apostolic poverty. Presumably, Bonaventure was in France in 1272, and Albertus in Cologne. That they both could have met Bacon and Peter Peregrinus in Wessex is quite fantastical.

Against this first historical plot of the spiritual and intellectual struggles initiated by the University of Paris is set a second historical plot concerning the closing years of the long reign of Henry III (1216-1272), the vacillating son of King John. Powys gives us no sense of the baronial reform movement, culminating in the Provisions of Oxford (1258) and of Winchester (1259), and his treatment of Simon De Montfort is out of keeping with a liberal interpretation of history.

Bacon supported Henry III against De Montfort, as we learn in his first scene, where he is thinking to himself:

The Legate could have soon found out, if he made any enquiries, how completely my family ruined itself by helping the King against the Barons. Anyone who knows anything at all knows how much more liberty there has been under poor old Henry than there's ever been under the Barons and their accurst house of De Montfort!" (92)

Here it is not clear whether Bacon prefers the King to the barons because the King's

rule is so weak that the people will benefit or because Henry is a better ruler in terms of protecting the people. The reader tends to choose the latter option, since even a nobleman like the Baron of Roque looks for a strong central power. For him, it is personified in Henry's son, the future Edward I, who was to remain away on a Crusade until 1274, two years after his father's death.

These attitudes, as depicted by Powys, cannot go unchallenged. According to R. F. Treharne, in his *The Baronial Plan of Reform, 1258-1263*, De Montfort's baronial reforms were far better for the average citizen than the rule of Henry III. He writes of the Council that ruled England from July 1258 to December 1259.

For eighteen months the rule of the Council was unchallenged, and, even more, was supported by the approval and goodwill of the whole realm, if we accept the King, a few of his intransigent relatives and friends, and perhaps also a handful of the richer London merchants. During this period the reformers had a free hand to carry out their promises and reforms, not only unhampered, but with the full and enthusiastic support of public opinion, and if we keep in mind the very important fact that they had, after all, only eighteen months in which to work, we can fairly judge them, for praise or blame, according to their achievements during the period of their power. It immediately becomes clear that they set out to rule in no narrow spirit of class selfishness and exclusive oligarchical power.¹²

Whereas Powys does not necessarily have to agree with this assessment, his failure to consider it, after having broached the topic, is unfortunate. The Baron of Roque's musings makes it sound as if the only choice was between a weak king or a strong king rather than an attempt at representative government.

What the Baron was thinking was: "All these confounded quacks, whether they call themselves scientists or astrologists or alchemists or metaphysicians or inventors or theologians, are only plotting to get power for themselves over other people and glory for

themselves over each other! What we must realize is that life goes on exactly the same whether we're with them or without them! When Lord Edward comes home from these absurd crusades we shall all know better where we stand. These damnable Scots want to be hammered into quiescence by somebody who understands the art of war, not the art of changing metals.

"And for these Welsh thieves who keep invading this country, if once metal-changers and sorcerers really begin, as they seem to be beginning, to rule the world, it won't be long before we shall be conquered by some British robber who claims to be descended from Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar. (236)

Although we may take this diatribe lightly, as there was not much chance that alchemists would overthrow the English government in 1272, it diverts our attention from the issue of peasants' rights, as seen through the figure of Dod Pole and the band of men he leads. In the final battle over the Brazen Head, Dod Pole's peasants join with King Henry III's men against the Barons, symbolized by the evil Lord Maldung and Lady Lilt; and the Church, symbolized by St. Bonaventure.

Dod Pole summons his men to action as follows:

"I call upon you, my brothers and fellow workers," cried old Dod Pole, in the trumpet-toned voice which had made him the prophet of these Wessex serfs for the last half century, "I call upon you to let these manor-lords with their reeves and their bailiffs and their priests and their prelates, know, once for all, how we, the people of the West Country, really regard them and hold them. We hold them to be thieves and robbers who claim the hell-born and not heaven-born right to hand down their stolen property from generation to generation! (324)

Dod does not seem to realize that the barons stand between the King and the freemen and villeins as a check against arbitrary rule. An earlier speech of his to the bailiff of Roque makes him appear as much a Messianist as a defender of the rights of man:

I tell you a day will come when we shall have a King after our own hearts, a King as wise as

Solomon, and as strong as Coeur-de-Lion, and as well-supported as Caesar, and with as many magic weapons as King Arthur, who will raise us up and thrust you down!

.....
 You wait a bit, my good master bailiff, you wait a bit, my noble lord, Sir Mort! A day will come when it will be to a really great and true King chosen by *us*, yes! by us, who are now serfs and slaves, that you and your barons will have to come for the making of all the laws in the land! (106)

How the people are going to choose their king is not explained. Dod's statement seems short-sighted, for the monarchy was not in a situation of being a friend of the common people against the barons, as we see in the final battle. Furthermore, as the Papacy had continually supported Henry III, even under Alexander IV going so far as to absolve him from obeying the Provisions of Oxford and Westminster, the alliance of the Minister General of the Franciscans with the nobles is quite curious.

In this second historical plot the four forces come together in an actual conflict which seems quite counter to what we would have actually expected in 1272. Thus we have not a romance with history as a backdrop, but a type of counter-historical fantasy. Since Powys obviously researched the period, are we supposed to allegorize the fantasy to reach 1956? Perhaps Dod Pole's men represent the proletariat; the barons, the middle class; the king, the Old Regime; and the Church, the opiate of the people. The novel can thus end with the victory of the poor over the Church-backed bourgeoisie. The King's men simply serve as an accessory to help explain proletarian victory.

Unlike the second historical plot, the first one, involving Roger Bacon in the religious controversies of the day, has no obvious climax. In the last battle, there is no debate between the four historical thinkers, and Bonaventure flees to France. In addition, Bonaventure and Peregrynus are too far from their historical originals to provide us with an undoctored confluence of historical forces.

The contrast between Bacon and Albertus Magnus is rooted in fact. Albertus is valued above Bacon by Powys as a deeper thinker:

The truth was that Roger Bacon had taken Aristotle for granted with one side of his nature and the New Testament equally for granted with the other side of his nature, and had never, as Albertus of Cologne did, brought them into logical opposition to each other and into logical relation with each other. (335)

Albertus's superiority as a philosopher is sanctioned by A. B. Wolter in his evaluation of Roger Bacon.¹³ Nevertheless, once we have accepted Albertus as a greater thinker, what are we to make of his viewpoint about Aristotle? Albertus tells Raymond de Laon:

"The first of these opinions [Aristotle's] is the one we hold when we follow our human reason. The second is the one we hold when we accept the view that Jesus is the Son of God, and what he tells us about the universe is the truth. Which of these two views about the beginning of things we as individuals accept will therefore depend upon how far we are ready to follow Faith, when it goes beyond Reason and even when it flatly contradicts the view derived from Reason. (257)

The novel offers no clear perspective on how to view this statement. We may choose faith over reason or vice versa, or we may hold that both need to be simultaneously maintained. To maintain them both we must see faith and reason not as negations which cancel each other out but as Blakean contraries, Powys seems to want to get us to read Albertus in a Blakean way. Otherwise, Albertus's act of juxtaposition of faith and reason would not seem much different from that of his fellow Christian, Bacon.

Instead of pitting the Franciscan against the Dominican, Powys takes another approach. He asks: what does the creation of the Brazen Head mean if Aristotle is right in believing that matter is eternal, and what does it mean if God brought the world into being? Bacon's wondering whether his creation is angelic or demonic has an appropriateness for 1272, but we can still see

the situation symbolically and ask what role artistic/scientific creation has today. Bacon stands by his creation, and he defends individualism and parthenogenesis. Unlike Berdyaev, for example, who would see in human creativity a way of understanding God's creativity, Powys holds up the invention of the Brazen Head as a demonic creation of a new Adam, that is, a manifestation of man's continual rivalry with God. The explosion of the demonic force during Albertus's vigil with the Head indicates this point. (270)

Although Albertus is impressed by the Head, he associates human creativity with procreation to an extent far beyond what Bacon would. Shortly before the final conflict, Albertus declares that sex is the "maddest force there is" (336) and marries Una and Tilton. In contrast, Bacon tells John that it is not essential for him to marry and that:

"As long as we are considerate to other people . . . and as kind and sympathetic towards them as our circumstances permit, we have all got to live to ourselves, for ourselves, in ourselves and by ourselves. This is how, as Aristotle teaches, matter produces us out of itself, as a product to satisfy its deep 'privation'; or its desperate yearning and craving to possess what it feels it *could* proceed from it, but what, so far in its long history, has *not* proceeded from it! (340-41)

This side of creativity, based on Aristotelian premises, does not suggest the demonic. So from the psychically split inventor issues a creation demonic only halfway. It is not likely that Bacon would agree with Albertus's notion that "[w]hen we Christianize marriage, it is to demonstrate our share in Christ's own desperate and eternal act of faith that He was the son of God" (336). Thus when G. Wilson Knight contends that male-female sexuality is aligned with Aristotle in the novel, he does not seem able to account for this difference between the two philosophers.

Despite the importance of faith to both Bacon and Albertus, they appear to be very rational men compared to the other two his-

torical characters, Boniface and Peter, who are set in motion by revelation. Bonaventure has "illuminations" from on High (128). Peter believes he is called to be the Antichrist. Addressing his lodestone, he says:

"*You*, and you alone, come what may, in this world or any other world, are my one true love, and with you at my side I shall feel myself to be the real and only real Antichrist, destined by the creative power of Nature herself to destroy once and for all this poisonous, this corrupt, this rotting, this suppurating, this decomposing, this contaminatory, this fulsome, this fetid, this fatal farce of an explanation of life, based on a crazy belief in the Persons of the Trinity." (325)

Appointed by Nature, Peter becomes Antimatter as well as Antichrist. Combined with Lilith in the ball of flame, he attacks the Head. The sexual union of Peter and Lilith destroys the Head, symbol of parthenogenetic human creativity. Procreation tries to make sense of life in one way, art/science in another, and they cannot be easily reconciled. Nevertheless, art/science have little value if the human community cannot continue. Thus the suicidal death of the lovers prevents the Head from saying "Time will be", for there will be no extended human time without procreation. Obviously, to make sense of the destruction of the Head, we have had to allegorize the first historical plot as well as the second.

The narrative voice does not reveal how to regard the destruction of the Brazen Head, but we are told that Bonaventure runs away from the "tragic drama" going on around him in the last chapter. (327) As we are not concerned here with the fall of a great individual, the tragedy must attend the irreconcilable forces in action: the feeling that creativity is both angelic and demonic in God's universe, and the fact that human creativity and individualism do not easily mesh with procreation. We can see that this tragedy is divorced from the politics of the other plot. This constitutes a chief weakness of the novel. The two strands simply do not unite.

Having used historical givens to create his symbols, Powys does not ask us to interpret

the novel according to historical forces. We are not in the world of Sir Walter Scott, enshrined forever by Georg Lukács. Instead, Powys thwarts reader expectations by declaring that his work is a chronicle rather than a history and by appealing to chance rather than historical causality. According to Hayden White, the chronicle offers us an “ironic denial that historical series have any kind of larger significance or describe any imaginable plot-structure or can even be construed as a story with a discernible beginning, middle and end”. Events turn out to have “nothing other than seriality as their meaning”.¹⁴ In the novel, meaning resides in allegory rather than history. When the Brazen Head is knocked to the ground shortly before its destruction, Powys does not appeal to any historical laws but says, “By what some would call Providence, others Chance, and yet others the protective power of the Devil, the Brazen Head descen-

ded to earth the right way up” (337-38). In short, history offers man little in the way of meaning because the major forces at play in the world are timeless psychological and natural ones. Yet this point about history’s lack of authority cannot be made unless there is some history there to be denied. A novel set in contemporary times could not make the point as well. Paradoxically, however, the novel doubles back upon itself. In the final battle centred on the peasants’ struggle with the nobles, we have the seeds of a pro-Labour reading of history in the ultimate victory of the workers. Finally, we can feel that this tension between historical meaning and the world of eternal constants proves *The Brazen Head* to be a weak novel. On the other hand, we can say that the meeting of historical and ahistorical forces is like the meeting of the fiery red ball and the Brazen Head, and stop waiting for oracles to set us straight.

NOTES

¹ *The Brazen Head*, London: Macdonald, 1956, p. 347. (Subsequent numerals in parentheses within my text refer to this edition.)

² G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest: A Chart of the Prose Works of John Cowper Powys*, London: Methuen; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964, p. 106.

³ Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys, Novelist*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1973, p. 142.

⁴ John A. Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys’s Novels*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973, p. 217.

⁵ Charles Lock, “Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55.3 (Spring 1986), 261-81.

⁶ Evelyn Westacott, *Roger Bacon in Life and Legend*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1953, p. 72.

⁷ John Edward Sandys, “Roger Bacon in English Literature”, *Roger Bacon: Essays*, ed. A. G. Little, New York: Russell & Russell, 1972, 345-72, p. 368.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁹ Stewart, C. Easton, *Roger Bacon and His Search for a Universal Science*, New York: Columbia, 1952, p. 137.

¹⁰ Francis Winthrop Woodruff, *Roger Bacon: A Biography*, London: James Clarke, n. d., p. 47.

¹¹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 210.

¹² R. F. Treharne, *The Baronial Plan of Reform, 1258-1263*, Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1971, p. 347.

¹³ Allan B. Wolter, “Roger Bacon”, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1967.

¹⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973, p.55.

H. W. Fawkner

John Cowper Powys and Ontotheology

The purpose of this essay is to open an ontological horizon of inquiry in Powys criticism. Ontology, of course, as the study of Being, addresses the largest possible issues solicited by man: one puts pressure on the "is" of reality, asking questions about the way things *are*. Since such a sphere of investigation becomes cosmic and all-inclusive, all ontology in the final analysis approximates theology, or at least the kind of enigmas that theology traditionally discusses. "Being", the object of study for ontology, assumes the features of "God", the object of study for theology. As these two fields of thought merge into "ontotheology", the modern thinker, doubting the universal mastery of God/Being, acquires a target that can be constantly aimed at during the various phases of his dissent. As I shall try to show in this essay, John Cowper Powys's writing generally speaking takes the shape, precisely, of a defiance of ontotheology. The defiance of Being and God, however, is not a negation suggesting that Being and God do not "exist". What is constantly suggested, instead, is that Being/God is not *all* that exists; or, put differently, that the cosmic mastery of Being/God is drastically limited. The vital and dynamic aspects of reality manifest themselves "outside" Being/God, in a margin or borderland that does not fall inside the ontotheological circle of meta-physical appropriation.

I shall be focusing on three novels in this essay: *Maiden Castle*, *Weymouth Sands*, and *Wolf Solent*.¹ In each of these works, love is absolutely central as an organizing structure—and it is precisely by considering John Cowper Powys's very original treatment of love that we can gauge the radical nature of his ontological thought.

We can schematize the tension between ontotheology and its opposite as the tension between the philosophy of Hegel and the writing of Jacques Derrida, between Hegel's "Absolute" and Derrida's "dissemination". Hegel saw Christianity as the final and most glorious religion, and its glorious subtlety came from its synthetic conception of love. "Love", here, is not simply a feeling between two amorous beings, but the general cosmic motion that brings inert and "cold" objectivity back into the Absolute Subject ("Spirit", God, Idea, Concept, Mind). The universe is a vast act of copulation, an astronomically infinite love-making, in the course of which reality becomes increasingly known to itself as the truth of its own ongoing possibility. When the sum total of all the planes of complex love-making (self-consciousness) has finally been refined into a comprehensive hologram of Absolute Truth, the "dialectic" has achieved its purpose and meaning: Being/God knows that it *is*; "is-ness" and knowledge are one. Derrida, attempting also to overcome Heidegger's conception of Being/God, challenges Hegel's love-oriented Block Universe by introducing the notion of a "dissemination" that bursts through the circular wall of Love/Truth/God/Being. There is, he argues, a vigorous pulse that furiously and joyfully overshoots the limits of "Being". The ejaculated seed, far from serving the exclusive purpose of triggering a new synthesis (inside Being), travels wildly into an adventurous margin beyond conception (outside Being).

If we look with the slightest care at John Cowper's writing, we shall see that he returns on countless occasions to this kind of problematic, and that his ontological per-

egrinations usually show him taking the “Derridean” (rather than “Hegelian”) side.² The discussion between Wolf Solent and T. E. Valley on love is paradigmatic: Valley claims that “every kind of love, even the most insane and depraved—even incest, for instance—is connected with religion and touches religion”; but Wolf, insisting on the radical discontinuity between opposed forms of love, refuses to believe in a common Ground or Being for reality (*WoS*, 133). For Valley, “love sinks down into the roots of the whole world” (133); but Wolf does not think “that most of the kinds of love we run across sink down to the bottom of the universe” (134). Not only are there forms of love that evade Being as Ground (“bottom of the universe”); also, most forms of love are outside knowledge (133). Nobody really “knows very much about love”. The central axis of ontotheology—Being, Love, Knowledge, Self, God, Truth—is broken up. There are margins of mysterious and dark unknowledge that upset the centre.

I am arguing, then, that John Cowper uses a *displaced apprehension of love* as a lever to overthrow ontotheology in general. I shall now review the nature of this displaced love before the act of deepening the engagement with the general question of Being.

II

It is of course a well-known fact that John Cowper foregrounded somewhat unusual types of love; but my current interest is not this dislocation itself, but the manner in which the displacement constantly comes to suggest a disruption of Being. Ideally, Being—as Creation propagating its own stable identity—needs to be conceived as fecund copulation. Love ought to be teleological, purposeful, aimed in a straight and uncomplicated line at the extension of Being—at an act of consummation in which the loving subject is swallowed by the cosmic process that he happens to be expressing. But the Powys hero sidesteps this plainly ontotheo-

logical paradigm by means of an entire spectrum of sly erotic strategies. Precisely because this sidestepping is a quite self-conscious and deliberate procedure, the abnormality or oddness of the individual act in no way whatsoever needs to be seen as a function of some congenital disposition: homosexuality, bisexuality, impotence, frigidity, and so forth. The sexual deflection, or deviation, is thrown into vivid literary and metaphysical poignancy by the fact that its desiring subject is constitutionally intuited as normal rather than disturbed, potent rather than timid, fecund rather than sterile. To have an erotically eccentric individual in an erotically eccentric act of pleasure is ontologically speaking to have something far less dynamic and imaginative than an erotically normative individual with an absolutely eccentric programme of sensual self-development.

A first way of deflecting love from Being and its dialectical copulations of binary opposites is to celebrate a love that falls short of consummation. In *Weymouth Sands*, Perdita feels that the spiritual rapprochement between the Jobber and herself makes physical ravishment strangely superfluous (*WeS*, 345). This rather conventional notion is only a fragment of a much wider structure of suggestion, however, and the wider horizon of implication can be gauged by considering Uryen’s soliloquy on erotic eccentricity in *Maiden Castle*. Man can “break through” the dialectical house of Being, if he allows emotion to become so extreme that the dialectical opposition pain/pleasure disintegrates:

‘It is a feeling so terrific that it often ends in madness; but if it doesn’t end that way, it ends in *breaking through* . . . And this . . . only comes when the passion remains sterile. Any fulfilment dissipates its power. Nothing but unfulfilled love . . . can beat hard enough upon the barrier of life’ (*MC*, 236; 248).

Let us capture the various features of emphasis: (1) collapse of dialectical opposites, (2) sterility, (3) nonfulfilment, (4) explosion of the wall of Being (“the barrier of life”).

The “side-steering, controlling, curtailing of the great erotic force that creates the world” (*WeS*, 382), this vast evasion of Being/God,³ very often involves an affirmation of virginity. In *Weymouth Sands*, Sylvanus Cobbold has given up life as a hermit, because he has discovered that he can only attain “the Absolute” through the souls of women; yet the women who help him overcome the limitations of “masculine reason” are not women that he really ever makes love to (*WeS*, 272). There is “something in virginity” (262), some “evasive point” (271) in “erotic virginity” (272), that builds toward a heightened atmosphere of “*unravished obsession*” (*ibid.*). Because the erotic mainstream is, as it were, blocked, the erotic energy is dissipated. From this there follows a general erotic radiation, so that the erotic subject, who lacks a fixed and solid partner, diffuses erotic thought into the entire space of perception. “Just because of her chastity”, Ruth Loder’s enjoyment of the inanimate landmarks in Weymouth is exalted, passionate, quasi-erotic (303). In *Wolf Solent*, Christie Malakite, as a girl “descended” from Merlin whose mother “was a nun” (*WoS*, 233), has a power of erotic presence that is “diffused”, “permeating everything around” the lovers (232). This type of “diffusion” also characterizes the erotic magic of Wizzie Ravelston in *Maiden Castle* (*MC*, 474; 486): the “diffusion of her desirability through the earth” is a function of the apparent capacity of her body to “diffuse itself” (*ibid.*).

Instead of a frozen and fixed erotic centre, then, the text seems to affirm an erotic dissemination: objective as well as subjective, physical as well as mental. (These binary oppositions are themselves moved toward dissolution by the disseminating impetus.) The erotic presence of the desired woman is almost physically and chemically *outside* the empirical frame of her mere biological being, and this means that the lover can touch her intimately without making commonplace physical contact. It is not a question, here, of platon-

ic inhibition or puritan sublation; for the “virginal detachment” (*WoS*, 236) of a girl like Christie Malakite belongs to the order of what is already knowingly provocative rather than to the order of orthodox timidity. Wolf sees a china bowl full of bluebells, primroses, pink campions and meadow-orchids (234) and inserts his fingers between the stalks into the water (235); but this odd move—hovering undecidedly somewhere between the clinically gynecological and the symbolically occult—suggests no shyness, in the ordinary sense, in spite of the fact that Wolf feels that his entry is an entry into the depths of his woman. In fact, Wolf actually manages to deepen a crucial dimension of erotic power that is already central to his entire involvement with Christie: the girl’s ability to attract in terms of absence rather than presence, distance rather than centredness, mystery rather than Being. She is “completely inscrutable to him” (*ibid.*), and the strange sequence of erotic moves that Wolf inaugurates needs to be seen as integral to a *negative seduction*: a process of seduction and courting that can have no true centre for its desire and no positive fulfilment for its ultimate consummation. Taking place in Non-Being rather than Being, as it were, the to-and-fro of love’s skirmishes cannot follow the code of dialectical, commonplace routines.

If passion is the normative event in literary romance, the Powysian romance deviates from this norm and centre by foregrounding erotic movements that are either more or less than passion. There is between *Wolf Solent* and Christie Malakite “something deeper than passion” (*WoS*, 240); and, conversely, the hero of *Maiden Castle* feels that his rejection of passion’s “horrible” nature is the result of mere “*cold-blooded lust*” (*MC*, 258; 271). Whereas Dud No-Man’s “coldly vicious” interest in the erotic woman may give the impression of an attitude that falls short of true passion, *Wolf Solent*’s displacement of orthodox passion seems to be the function of emotions that are too complex and refined for mere romance. This difference between the two Powys

heroes is rather illusory, however; for just as the “vicious” sensuality of Dud No-Man is based on something as “entirely imaginative” (*MC*, 258; 271) as Wolf’s most subtle responses to Christie, so Wolf’s general erotic impetus is energized by precisely the kind of “vicious” sensuality that Dud affirms. The fact that the desire for Christie can move “above” passion is linked to the fact that the love for Gerda can move “below” it—or at least on a more directly sensual level (*WoS*, 249, 251, 277).

The erotic cleavage in Wolf Solent—his simultaneous affection for two quite different women—is of course no isolated event in the Powys world. In *Weymouth Sands*, the beauty of Curly Wix is so stunning that one man alone cannot hope to completely master and possess it: “such loveliness almost had a right to be supported by one man and loved by another” (*WeS*, 370). If erotic power in this way tends to be multirelational, that is so because of its essentially suprarelational force. What we are taught to think of as “human relations” (a sine qua non of the modern novel according to orthodox literary theory) plays a secondary role in the Powys novel for the simple reason that the ecstatic force in John Cowper’s erotic visions burns “human relations” to cinders: Gerda’s aesthetic appeal and physical beauty is so astonishing “that it seemed to destroy in a moment all ordinary human relations” (*WoS*, 58). It is not a question, here, of a breakdown of faithfulness into unfaithfulness, the monogamic into the polygamic, ordinary human relations into extraordinary human relations. For there is no simple matrix or stable erotic dialectic from the outset. The Powys novel does not show us the “decline” or “fall” of a human individual: his loss of healthy “identity”, his failure to maintain “social interaction” with other “individuals”. Rather, the novel from the outset inscribes itself with a visionary field of suggestion where the neo-classicist rationalization of reality is displaced. According to that “rationalist” reality, the world consists of (1) units, (2) relations between units, and (3)

the study of relations between units. Following this paradigm, the scholar would no doubt want to identify the various units (people, events) in the Powys novel, and then “explain” the action of the novel in terms of the “relations” between these stable units. But what if the units are secondary? What if the “relations”, already, precede the units? What if the character, before he exists either in his world or on the page, is caught in a to-and-fro that solicits his being and destabilizes any fixed identity that he could have?

Is there *first* a character called Wolf Solent and *then* a sequence of problems and tensions that causes him to vibrate and fluctuate? Or is there—from the outset—a certain fluid indecision, erotic and cosmic, that gives birth to the kind of spiritual globulation that we (and Wolf) call “Wolf Solent?”

What I am trying to suggest, here, is that John Cowper does not present a stable hero who gets disrupted by a “crisis”. Rather, the crisis, or perpetually ongoing internal indecision, is there from the start as the hero’s condition of possibility: literary as well as mundane, artistic as well as “real”. The Powys hero grows, materializes, and comes into view only inasmuch as he suggests his own presence in terms of contradiction and central self-absence. Therefore, he does not solidly or empirically precede the kind of metaphysical and erotic dilemmas that he engages with during the course of the action; on the contrary, the hero first presents himself as precisely one who is paradigmatically and eternally torn asunder by metaphysical and erotic contradictions—contradictions, indeed, that are structurally and logically irresolvable. Because of this *original contradiction* in the hero’s very window of first possibility, the novel does not follow the traditional logical movement from stability to crisis and then back to stability. Instead, the hero slides on a variety of simultaneously present levels through numerous displacements and shifts of perspective, so that the innermost elements of his enigmatic disposition are

thrown into new and astonishingly bright combinations of spiritual suggestion. What orchestrates these interior movements of self-generating dislocations is no “centre” or solid nucleus that the hero could possess as “identity” or “personality”. Rather, the aesthetic and metaphysical sense of organic comprehensiveness is a function of richness as such: of our sense that a mind of such immense receptiveness and multiple affiliation—much like Shakespeare’s own magnificent spirit—can never lose itself in the vastness of the world, since that vastness is the rounded horizon of the imaginative soul itself.

III

As I have already suggested, the diffusion of the erotic centre opens an ontological horizon of inquiry, inasmuch as the displacement of One Woman (whether mother or mistress, origin or end) comes to suggest a displacement of Being as such.⁴ *Wolf Solent*’s ecstatic freedom—what he calls his “mythology”—is associated with Weymouth and with his father, and as a contrast to this magnetic field, the mother threatens with the weight and prosaic solidity of Being itself (*WoS*, 291). As matrix and as the Great Inside, the mother pulls Wolf inward, toward Being and life. In a sense, there is a tension between a centripetal, maternal force, sometimes advanced by Gerda and the mother in conjunction (251), and a non-maternal, ecstatic, outward-moving force—associated with Christie, Weymouth, and the eternally absent father. (He can *only* be absent, be absence; for he is dead.)

This crucial megastructure can be schematized as a tension between Being and Non-Being. The mother, as matrix and as symbol of centred love (love-as-centre), suggests Being (existence as given, a biological fact, mere here-ness, being-here), while the ecstatic, quasi-masculine forces suggest Non-Being as that which freely stands out (*ex-stasis*) from Being. It should be emphasized, of course, that the tension in this crucial megastructure is not strictly dialect-

ical or mechanical: clearly, what I am calling “Non-Being” cannot be a mere dialectical opposite and negation of Being, for that kind of Nothingness would be a mere vacuum and void. It is indeed precisely this evasion of the dialectical “either—or” that causes me to define the ecstatic force opposing the mother as “quasi-masculine” rather than masculine. At this level of literary and ontological complexity, we can never end up with something as banal as an opposition between mother and father, woman and man.

Once the danger of dialectical simplification is recognized, however, it is easy to perceive that *Wolf Solent* structures itself in terms of a negation of love in so far as love is an affirmation of mere Being. “Love was a possessive, feverish, exacting emotion. It demanded a response. It called for mutual activity. It entailed responsibility. The thrilling delight . . . the deep satisfaction he derived from [certain] things had nothing in [it] that was either possessive or responsible. And yet, he lost all thought of himself . . .” (*WoS*, 43). Love, then, is repulsive inasmuch as it is “possessive” and dialectical (“demanded a response”). Ecstasy, as the motor of Wolf’s crucial “mythology”, is by contrast nonpossessive and nondialectical. The ecstatic negation of possession and dialectic does not simply have practical or psychological implications. It is not just a question of giving up the loved one as objectified possession. Instead, it is a question of negating the entire ontotheological conception of the universe. According to this orthodox conception—promoted by state religion and dialectical philosophy since Plato—the universe, as completely self-mastering Being, *possesses* itself by means of its metaphysical (and therefore dialectical) understanding and knowledge of itself. According to this classical scheme, Being (or God, if you will) fully *knows* itself by means of an internal reflection (learning, philosophy) set up inside the building of existence. The more the dialectical extremes of this building *love* one another, the closer does the entire structure of Being come to

the absolute centre and essence of its ownmost truth.

Thinkers like Nietzsche, Powys, and Derrida distrust and question this ontotheological paradigm (and thus also ontology as such in so far as it serves the purpose of merely recording the inert glory and nature of Being). The resistance and distrust come about through the recognition of ec-static aspects of human desire: for instance in moments of writing or infatuation, when life is carried violently *outside* Being. In such moments of “white heat”, or absolute self-forgetting, the spirit leaps into a margin of Nothingness. Why “Nothingness”? Because the zone of ecstatic revelation that is broached is utterly new. In other words, the literary genius, imagining some absolutely extraordinary dramatic or poetic conception, like the lover discovering some astonishingly fresh combinations of aesthetic delight in his mistress, is *conceiving* something that is completely outside creation as it existed a moment ago. What is conceived is not a unit of a world already created by God, not an aspect of completed creation happening to get rekindled by the fire of passive human inspiration. Rather, what is illuminated during the glorious moment of visionary advance is something *entirely* new.

I have just used the word “conceive” in a deliberately equivocal manner in order to suggest the difference between ontotheological and Nietzschean apprehensions of conception. The Nietzschean scheme (that John Cowper affirms) apprehends the moment of radical conception not as a dialectical conceiving (copulating with a polar opposite to produce a synthetic offspring as self-reflection), but as a reckless and self-forgetting leap into the utterly unknown. This negation of Being as the locus of inwardly dialectical self-propagation can be gauged in Wolf’s recurrent rejection of anthropocentric and biocentric patterns of life: “Everything that copulates, everything that carries its young, how good if it vanished in one great catastrophe” (*WoS*, 413).

It is precisely at this juncture that we can

identify Wolf’s “mythology” as something that privileges ecstasy at the expense of love. The leading idea in *Wolf Solent* is the notion of a general assault on the “mythology”. Since this “mythology” very clearly is the scenario of ecstasy itself (517), the attacks on the “mythology” are in fact attacks on ecstasy. The things that “threatened this ecstasy” (414), this “trance-like ‘mythology’ of his” (106), are to a large extent governed by love—and this complicates Wolf’s overall strategy immensely, since the dimension of erotic desire in his soul is linked not only to “love” but also to ecstasy. On the one hand, his “mythology” must resist the world as such, what is mundane and cynically prosaic: “Would his inner world of hushed Cimmerian ecstasies remain uninvaded by these Otters and Urquharts’?” (20). On the other hand, he must resist a sphere of erotic suggestion where woman threatens to collapse the alien dimensions of ecstasy and love into a single emotional nexus.

As the crucial seduction scenes with Christie Malakite demonstrate, it is almost impossible to draw a line between love and ecstasy when the individual comes under the pressure of erotic praxis; yet in its rich material of metaphysical and psychological commentary, the novel quite clearly distinguishes the dialectical and biologically fecund sphere of “love” from the supradialectical and “sterile” sphere of ecstasy. Physical beauty provokes lust; but taken “beyond a certain point”, that same erotic beauty “is destructive of lust” (*WoS*, 91). Hence Gerda, as one who is aesthetically “flawless”, to begin with enhances the very “mythology” that she later comes to subvert and threaten. She attains “that magical level of loveliness which absorbs with a kind of absoluteness the whole aesthetic sense, paralysing the erotic sensibility” (*ibid.*) This kind of perception of “love” as something inferior to ecstasy is paradigmatic around the Powys hero. In *Maiden Castle*, Dud No-man is frustrated by the inability of Wizzie and Thuella to truly grasp his intuition of ecstatic awareness:

'What I can't get you people to see,' D. was saying, 'is that when, in that bit of road, for instance, between the barracks and Poundbury, which is now one of my favourite walks, I come on a patch of green moss on a grey wall, or catch the peculiar scent of trodden grass, I get a sensation that's more important than what you call 'love', or anything else, nearer the secret of things too! It *is* 'Love' in a certain sense; but it's love of life itself and of something that comes to us through life!' (MC, 353; 365)

The equivocation is crucial, here: the ecstatic "sensation" is and is not love. It is this type of contradiction that permits *ecstatic love* to be at once a negation and affirmation of love (in the ordinary sense) in the Powys novel. In *Weymouth Sands*, immediately after a peak moment of altered awareness (*WeS*, 344), Perdita Wane comes to recognize that the ecstatic quality of her desire for the Jobber in fact is perfectly concomitant with a slight dislike for the man (345). As she scrutinizes her lover with absolutely limpid intellect, "tearing away every shred of sentiment, every tag of reverence", she arrives at a kind of spiritual zero-point: a state of cosmic nudity in which the spirit has got rid of all emotion and sentimental prejudice, recognizing itself exclusively as its own fierce desire to leap forth into the other (*ibid.*).

IV

So far, the introductory nature of my remarks have merely sketched the Powysian tension between Being and Non-being in a tentative and rather general fashion. But if we examine the texts in detail, we can see that the Being/Non-Being opposition is explicitly identified as an ontological or onto-psychological macrostructure. The major works of John Cowper Powys constantly return to the idea of "another Dimension"—an idea that is easily misconstrued as a naive reference to some vulgar sphere of spectres, poltergeists, and occult visitations. This apprehension of Non-Being as a dark and vital margin quite outside centralizing Being can be discovered

not only in esoterically enthusiastic characters like Uryen in *Maiden Castle*, but also in men like Dud No-man who remain cold and sceptical vis-à-vis the entire realm of occult suggestion: Dud believes "absolutely in another dimension surrounding this one" (MC, 232; 244). It is in moments of peak awareness, or altered consciousness, that the individual becomes the privileged observer of this dimension. (I now quote the passage that proves John Cowper's identification of this "parallel" dimension as the sphere of Non-Being.)

Dud now became conscious of a weird sensation that he had once or twice before in his life; namely, the parallel existence of quite different layers of reality. It was a disturbing sensation and it made *all* reality a little shaky, as if there were yawning gulfs of Not-Being under every particular manifestation of Being (MC, 71; 84).

Two crucial movements should be observed in this commentary: (1) the unit "under" creates precisely the kind of ontological conception that Hegel worked with, the idea that Nothingness is integral to Being as its first and central condition of possibility—a notion that contains all the seeds of latterday "dissemination" theories and "decentered" scientific paradigms, since to posit Non-Being as the central unit of creation is to posit a dramatic void and non-centre in the middle of what is; (2) the unit "shaky" anticipates the kind of post-ontological and post-phenomenological thought that Jacques Derrida forwards whenever he uses the word "solicit" in his paradigmatic and innovative sense of "shake". To *solicit* the question of Being (rather than to merely re-open it, as Heidegger did) is to perform the kind of radical shaking of Being that John Cowper privileges. The "disturbing sensation" of universally but secretly active "Not-Being" is a dislocation of the reassuring centre of Being—something that "made *all* reality a little shaky" (*ibid.*).

Since John Cowper Powys is a novelist rather than an ontologist or professional philosopher, he obviously needs to work

with concrete and vivid images rather than with abstract metaphysical categories or scholastically obscure abstractions; therefore expressions like “the astronomical world” tend to replace the philosopher’s “Being”—as for instance in *Weymouth Sands*, when the philosopher Richard Gaul claims that “in every human soul there is something that is beyond and outside the astronomical world” (*WeS*, 161). It is Non-Being—the unknown, that which does not yet belong to Being/Knowledge/Man—that in this way is on the “outside”; and this notion, far from being the exclusive property of the philosopher Richard Gaul, is integral to the entire artistic and metaphysical conception of the novel. When the Jobber contemplates the death (the non-being) of his enemy and of himself, Non-Being in general asserts itself as an incoming “wedge of appalling reality of a different dimension altogether from any as yet known in our experience” (349). But Non-Being does not only manifest itself in other characters (outside the private metaphysical obsessions of Richard Gaul); it also throbs like an incomprehensible pulse through the inanimate objects of Weymouth. As the Jobber stares vacantly at St John’s spire and the statue of Queen Victoria, the objects recede “into some remote psychic dimension”, a site where their reality is not mastered as something exactly knowable (64). Indeed, the narrator himself adopts much of Gaul’s ontological thinking, when he discusses a radical and irreducible alterity in the various parts of a universe that is fragmented. “There are moments in almost everyone’s life when events occur in a special and curious manner that seems to separate that fragment of time from all other fragments. [It is] as if there were a spiritual screen, made of material far more impenetrable than adamant, between our existing world of forms and impressions and *some other world*” (48-49). This “*other world*”, as something outside this world (outside Being), cannot *be* Being. It must negate it. Or (to avoid the notion of dialectical to-and-fro) solicit it: shake it. Because stone, as the

ground and substance of *Weymouth Sands*, is shown in the novel to be subject to various states and stages of fragmentation (into boulders in the quarry, pebbles in the hands of Jobber and Perdia, and so forth), John Cowper can use the idea of *sand* to project an encompassing sense of the *dissemination of the ground of Being*. Sand, as the sweeping outline of the entire beach, is the rock and basis of the world taken to the optimal point of absolute dispersion. It is the universe of stable oolite shaken down to myriads of tiny grains—and this end-product is in the final analysis beyond human mastery (beyond any process of counting, calculation, control). The beach, as the locus of this disseminated ground itself, is of course projected as the paradigmatic site for the ongoing negotiation between Being and its other. The hypnotically fascinating (non)difference between “wet sand” and “dry sand” is systematically foregrounded as a difference that has something special to say. Liminality, or absolutely immediate engagement with otherness (Non-Being, the unknown), is permanently on show in the cryptic tension between the two “states” of the beach.

V

Most of us tend to think of identity and difference as opposites: we think of a unit as something lacking difference, and we think of difference as the rupture and discontinuity between such units. Difference holds things apart; unity holds things together. Hegel’s logical genius defined itself primarily by exposing this intuitive schematization of unity and difference as a fallacy. With tremendous originality of thought, Hegel realized that difference itself is what makes unity impossible. I can only get out of my bed every morning through the bed’s ability to be different from everything else; thus the threshold and difference between bed and non-bed, inside and outside, itself makes possible the smooth passage from one to the other. In other words, “communication” between things is not made possible by

common properties that they may have, but first and foremost by the differences between them. "Difference" is as it were a "double", two-faced thing: it contains difference as well as non-difference (unification).

It is in fact this kind of sophisticated logic that makes John Cowper's treatment of a dimension that is "altogether different" (*WoS*, 239) meaningful and fertile. Being can engage dynamically with Non-Being, precisely because all things are perpetually solicited by their negations and by negativity ("Nothingness") in general. The world, Being, in order to *be* must engage radically with what it is not: with the margin of absence and nothingness "around" it. Without such an engagement, there would be no becoming, and the world would not identify itself as it always does—that is, in terms of desire. (Life *wants*; it is not just a dead "fact".) Thinking of his "mythology", Wolf Solent asks Christie Malakite if she shares his own apprehension of belonging with some part of his soul "to a world altogether different from this world" (*ibid.*). Seeming to follow his line of thought, Christie answers that she has always accepted the sense of "an enormous emptiness" round her (*ibid.*). In the heading for chapter 15 in *Wolf Solent*, "Rounded with a Sleep", Powys rehearses the kind of ontological suggestion that Shakespeare toyed with: not simply that life is "surrounded" by non-life, but that Being is encircled by Non-Being. To know that existence is preceded and followed by nonexistence is just trivial information; but to realize that the "two dark horns of non-existence" (*WoS*, 426) are actively integral to our peculiar mode of being aware of ourselves as perpetual desire is to begin to free oneself from too-narrow conceptions of the human spirit. As soon as the main tension is perceived as one between Being and Non-Being, rather than merely between existence and non-existence, the "extreme dualism" perceived by the Powys hero (through the momentary intuition of Non-Being) can also be transmuted into a refined affirmation of something "outside any 'dualism'" (286). Non-being can

promote as well as cancel dualism, since the opposition it sets up against Being is not symmetrical and dialectically pure: not like the opposition of "black" to "white", or "nothing" to "something".

The importance of Non-Being as a crucial structuring aspect of the novels may be gathered by considering the use of bones, skeletons, skulls, and other objects representing lines of supportive absence, features of cogent negativity. In a fictional universe where the anthropocentric doctrine is frequently negated or displaced, man tends to foreground himself as a "flesh-covered skeleton" (*WeS*, 135), as something whose very frame and support is conditioned by death rather than life. In *Maiden Castle*, this centring of Non-Being and death manifests itself chiefly through the delineation of the sinister father-figure Uryen as a *rex semi-mortuus*, or corpse-god (*MC*, 154; 166). Far from being the emblem of a centred, or phallogocentric culture, a world assured of the origin and end of its seeds, Uryen comes to affirm a "sterile love" (240; 252). Desire must be stirred up to a savage extreme—but then, when the optimal thrust of energy is at hand, the "grand trick" is to "keep it sterile" (*ibid.*). At that moment, experienced as a "pecking" that is "sweet as an ecstasy" (242; 253), Non-Being enters Being so as to create the hybrid sphere of "death-in-life" (240; 252). That trick, giving to the man with the sterile life-seed "a 'repulsive mortuary smell'" (242; 253), becomes a "secret" in the bosom of the Welsh nation—something that is concealed from the inquisitive eye of Being and hidden in a territory that itself naturally works for absence, vanishing, and nothingness.

Uryen's face has a tendency to actually slip into Non-Being, "as if the man's lineaments were decomposing" (240; 253); and this odd fact is matched in *Wolf Solent* by a decomposition in the father-figure that is already completed. The head of the father, the face that laughs at Wolf during the course of the numerous imaginative dialogues between father and son, is only a "hollow skull". Being and Non-Being

reciprocate strangely as the presence of the face asserts itself from its zone of radical absence. The son is drawn into the general dialectic of “is” and “is not”: “‘Ho! Ho! You worm of my folly,’ laughed the hollow skull. ‘I am alive still, though I am dead; and you are dead, though you’re alive’” (*WoS*, 312). In such conversations, attention is drawn to the centrelessness of the father’s skull, to the void that has replaced the brain as seat of cogitation; and this attention to the void inside the skull is matched by an equally strong emphasis on the emptiness outside it. As Wolf and Gerda fall asleep after a turbulent day of nervous tension, they are simply “two skulls, lying side by side”, and such a receptacle for human thought cuts its outline into space as something surrounded by Non-Being, by “vast tracts of unknown country” (278). Each skull is the centre of its own peculiar landscape of imaginative projections; yet the landscape, precisely by being subjective and solitary, is not an empirical circle creating a reassuring domain in Being, but something essentially mysterious and unknown—mastered, provisionally, only by the imagination that fuels it.

I am trying to suggest, then, how negativity—shining forth through the skeletal contours of death—in fact clarifies itself as the cosmic and ontological scaffolding of the great Powys novel. *Maiden Castle* takes death as its point of structural departure, Dud approaching the mound of his unravished bride Mona in a visionary as well as quite physical fashion. “*And what was she like now?*” (*MC*, 19; 31) The italicized words draw our attention to the decomposition that we have already identified in Uryen’s face: a dissolution that works physically on physiognomy and flesh, but also on “identity” as such. Indeed, we are made to feel that humans, *already*, before any trespassing into spiritual and biological decay, are inscribed in terms of death/negativity. They emerge out of it, as crocodiles out of water or birds out of eggs. As Wolf’s gazing into the mound of death parallels Dud’s gazing into the erased features of Mona, the

hero’s entire being seems to identify itself with an ancestral origin that itself is made of “bones”, units of pallid absence: “His father *must* hear him! Surely, between those bones that had set themselves against his mother’s bones, so that he might be born, and his present living body, there must be something . . . some sort of link!” (*WoS*, 597) It seems to me, here, that “bones”, as things drawn into the circle of suggestion dominated throughout the novel by the paternal “skull”, identify Wolf’s point of origin from the outset as a crossing of negatives, a point where Non-Being leaves its cross and mark. Copulation, in this universe, if it is at all allowed as such, is strangely negative. Indeed, the ecstatic moment of love is at its summit of intensity explicitly identified as the secret partner of death: when Wolf’s “normal consciousness” returns after an overpowering moment of intimacy with Christie, the thought of their two individual deaths comes “galloping” like a “black horse”: “Moments as perfect as this *required* death as their inevitable counterpoise” (440).

If the foregrounding of death is one way of illuminating Non-Being as the innermost active formula of Being itself, the foregrounding of the excremental aspects of life is another. The Powys hero has a tendency to affirm something “monstrously” absurd or “grotesquely non-human” in his inmost nature (*WoS*, 277), and the attention given to this negative centre helps to decentre the individual as such. His centre is what most of all negates him—what threatens his human dignity and sane being. In *Weymouth Sands* the mystic Sylvanus Cobbold and his clown of a brother Jerry in different ways work toward the enjoyment of a “mystical ecstasy” in which the leftovers and marginal trivia of existence become strangely significant: “old withered horse-droppings”, “wisps of dirty straw”, and so forth (*WeS*, 221). Jerry Cobbold can “get an ecstasy” from “the excremental undertides of existence” (*ibid.*), and his brother Sylvanus promotes the tail-end of his own name to the level of a cosmic clue. In his efforts to disappear completely as an

empirical centre of human self-consciousness, he throws himself recklessly into all the objects of the natural world surrounding him, retaining for himself at first only the epithet “Caput” (381). As the centre of an absolute decentring, or as the void and decentring itself, Sylvanus “never call[s] himself ‘I’ or ‘me’” as he addresses the Absolute (ibid.). Yet even the “Caput” that functions as substitute is somehow too logocentric, too suggestive of a centered Cogito dwelling in the stable nucleus of Being and being-human. Hence “Anus” is added as a ritualistically important word that will ensure the dislocation of the centre and the promotion of the absolute margin (381-82). “Sylvanus” becomes “Caput-anus”: an entity, if you will, with head and tail, but no middle.

VI

The “anus”, as exit and farther side of man, belongs to an entire structure of images in which John Cowper Powys promotes the importance of what is averted: what is turned away from the centre and away from the inside. (In this way, Being, as that which turns into itself to inwardly establish its ownmost substance, is subverted, and Non-Being is affirmed.) Dud No-man takes special pleasure in Wizzie Ravelston’s figure “when her back [is] turned” (*MC*, 129; 141), and when Uryen tries to explain his cosmology and ontology to Dud, this idea of the ascendancy of the rear over the front (of absence over presence) is developed into a comprehensive ideology.

[B]ut lad, you *can’t* face life “four-square.” That’s where you make your mistake, and so many others. The back side of your square turns away from life. Life never sees it. It cannot see life. It’s like the other side of the moon! And yet nobody has ever doubted that there *is* another side to the moon.’ (*MC*, 221; 233)

This passage is absolutely crucial, for it proves beyond the faintest shadow of doubt that John Cowper was familiar with ontolo-

gical types of thought that stressed Non-Being and absence as integral to total reality. Indeed, negativity is not only integral to the universe, but the mainspring of its coherent complexity.

The ideas above, to be sure, are expressed by a single character, and Dud’s reluctance to swallow all of his father’s notions suggests that Uryen is no simple mouthpiece for Powys. Yet thoughts similar to these are scattered throughout the novels and over an entire spectrum of characters—giving to the total oeuvre precisely a sense that its author subscribes to an ontology where Non-Being plays a vital part. Moreover, this general fascination with what is absent and averted is related to the kind of psychological intuition that I have already discussed as a sense of significant movement “outside ordinary experience” (*WeS*, 243). Because crucial meaning is naturally averted, absent, and concealed (like the other side of the moon), some extraordinary effort of mind and spirit is needed in order to make contact with it. For Powys, it does not seem likely that any ordinary movement (still inside the reassuring citadel of Being) is going to bring the vital Outside into view; hence he tends to focus absurd, unusual, perverse, and uncanny events as “triggers” that somehow may provisionally disclose the absolute otherness of the wondrous other. When Peg Frampton observes the curious gestures that Sylvanus Cobbold makes, she associates their odd force with the Holy Ghost. But this association in no way takes place inside Being, or as something confirming Being/God/Spirit/Ghost. On the contrary, the thought is (outwardly) so monstrous in its associative recklessness that it may be viewed as a negation of Being/God. The “Absolute” that is joyously affirmed has nothing whatsoever to do with what we normally conceive of as godhead or Absolute:

She even went so far—and it was the reverse of blasphemy in her—to mix up the swaying of those horizontal fingers from the man’s bent wrists with her childish ideas of the Holy Ghost. The grotesqueness of the action was

what led her to do this. It seemed to contain a rebuke, a retort, a defiance, a challenge to Evil, from an armoury of the perverse, the weird, the monstrous, the half-mad; and this—with her loathing of conventional religion—was precisely her own private notion of how the Absolute *should* go to work, when it broke out. (*WeS*, 332-33)

The last unit here—"broke out"—parallels the piercing that Uryen associates with negated erotic fulfilment in *Maiden Castle*. The act of "*breaking through*" (*MC*, 236; 248) is an ontological move. It can be felt by an entire culture, if that entire culture is paradigmatically pushed from the centre, thrust into the absolute margin of existence. As we can see from the following lines in *Maiden Castle*, the moment when the spirit comes to "break through" (break through Being out into Non-Being) is a moment of truly ecstatic desire: of desire taken to an extreme pitch, where it literally stands-out straight into the Other. All the traditional units of Being are here negated: custom, causation, morality, comfort, and so forth. In Nietzschean fashion, moreover, the ecstatic act implies creation—a creating of things absolutely new, and a creating that takes place *outside* Being, in the empty margin where novelty still has not been thought, conceived, or forseen ("out of nothing"). Non-Being is the locus of the ecstatically new:

'*Hiraeth* is our word for it—no other tongue on earth has a word like that!— . . . Desire, but not ordinary desire. Desire grown beside itself! Desire driven against custom, driven against habit, driven against the cowardice of mankind . . . [It is] the power of the Underworld that our old Bards worshipped, *though it was always defeated* . . . [It is] the Power our race adored when they built Avebury and Maiden Castle and Stonehenge and Caer Drwyn, when there were no wars, no vivisection, no money, no ten-thousand-times accursed *nations!* [It has always] defied morality, custom, convention, usage, comfort, and all the wise and prudent of the world . . . It moves from the impossible to the impossible. It abolishes cause and effect. It

strides from world to world creating new things out of nothing! . . . And it will break through.' (*MC*, 453-56; 467-68)

VII

Because metaphysics since Plato has taken Being/God for granted as the monolithic centre and ground of reality, John Cowper Powys's consistent defiance and displacement of the ontotheological Block Universe can be viewed as sharing certain crucial intellectual properties with the famous modern solicitations of Being/metaphysics—the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Most recently, and most dramatically, Derrida has of course challenged the idea that any metaphysical concept can have an absolutely fixed and stable identity. Nothing is in the final analysis *absolutely certain and static*, since all the units of reality are thrown into the infinite "play" of the world. In the risk and play of Becoming, the solid landmarks of Being are caused to float and migrate. Hence, as soon as he himself approaches the vanity of creating a new philosophical category of his own, Derrida quickly punctures its possible essence. Each new idea or thought must be prevented from becoming a crystallization. Fluid rather than solid, philosophical concepts must exhibit consciousness of their provisional nature.

If we look at the rich philosophical commentary provided by the narrator and by the Powys heroes, we can see that John Cowper Powys works along very similar lines. Like Derrida, he is deeply fascinated by the logical and imaginative appeal in the great clue-words of Western metaphysics; but like Derrida, he also uses the reverberatory suggestiveness of these selfsame clue-words in order to dislodge them from fixed positions in frozen philosophical "systems".

We can observe this strategy with great clarity in the fourteenth and sixteenth chapters of *Wolf Solent*—a novel where the hero expresses thoughts that are strikingly similar to ideas forwarded by John Cowper

in his quasi-philosophical works. When Christie Malakite fails to exactly grasp why Wolf prefers the word “medieval” to “platon-ic”, Wolf enters upon a philosophical disquisition that very accurately identifies John Cowper’s own general attitude towards metaphysical clue-words. What is being suggested is not that the sceptic is a philosophical charlatan, somebody who with much shallowness makes philosophical ideas mean anything he happens to want them to mean; rather, the exact metaphysical notion is taken as that which it is, and then this central identity of its significance is deliberately decentred. The “softening” that occurs here is not simply the blurring of a sharp focus, a loss of intellectual concentration—but on the contrary a process of inward illumination that causes the abstractly pointlike idea to expand and glow into the luminous contours of what has formed its general planetary and cultural context. (Notice, in what follows, how Powys in Derridean fashion displaces the centre—“immediate meaning”—in order to privilege the “margin”.)

‘Medieval, Wolf?’ protested Christie.

‘Don’t be cross with me. I know I’m absurd. I suppose I’m more of a slave to philosophical *phrases* than anyone in the whole of England! I love the sound of them. They have something . . . a sort of magic . . . I don’t know what . . . that makes life rich and exciting to me.’

‘Oh, I know what you mean, Wolf!’ cried Christie. ‘That’s why I’ve loved reading those books in our shop . . . especially Leibnitz and Hegel. I’ve never been able to follow their real meaning, I suppose; but all the same it’s been a great satisfaction to me to read them.’

‘I don’t think it’s pedantry or priggishness in either of us,’ Wolf continued. ‘I think we’re thrilled by the weight of history that lies behind each one of these phrases. It isn’t just the word itself, or just its immediate meaning. It’s a long, trailing margin of human sensations, life by life, century by century, that gives us this peculiar thrill.’ (*WoS*, 340-41)

The main tension, here, runs between the central and the marginal—between what has an “immediate meaning” and what is in the

margin that philosophical Meaning leaves on its outside. As I have already suggested, love becomes a pivotal unit in this conflict between centre/meaning and margin/play, since love can be a centralising and appropriating matrix (promoting Being) as well as an ecstatic and decentralising release (promoting Non-Being). Wolf’s joyful release into “[r]oads and lanes”, away from woman as matrix (“that maternal hypnosis”, 305) is precisely a release from the womb of Being into the nomadic and eccentric sphere of fluid motion. This *nomadic* dimension in John Cowper, expressing itself in his enormous willingness to take long walks and to migrate across the vast surfaces of continents and oceans, can perhaps itself be posited as an antimetaphysical mode of being. John Cowper “wrote *Wolf Solent* travelling through all the states of the United States except two” (*WoS*, vii); and since this perpetually nomadic state of being is deliberately associated (in the novel) with a decentred apprehension of the philosophical “phrases” of “Leibnitz and Hegel” (340), a term such as Leibnitz’s famous “monad” could be replaced by what for John Cowper would be a “nomad”—a metaphysical notion that, unlike the frozen “monad”, is not an abstraction lacking extension in space, but on the contrary something that includes space and spacing in its prime condition of possibility.

The monad remains what it “is”. It belongs to Being. But a “nomad” does precisely the opposite. It moves. And it moves *away*. We can study this nomadic character of Powys’s nonconcepts in Wolf Solent’s discussion of the expression “immortal souls”. This idea, far from being an ontotheological, platonic notion (which is its normal force of suggestion), for Powys becomes a nomadic entity that walks “away”. The nomad, or originally restless idea, *itself* walks “away over the fields”:

Certain human expressions, meaning one thing to the philosopher and quite another thing to the populace, were always fascinating to Wolf. His mind began to dwell now upon the actual syllables of this phrase, ‘immortal

souls', until by a familiar transformation those formidable sounds took on a shadow personality of their own—took on the shape, in fact, of Christie Malakite—and in that shape went wavering away over the fields like a thin spiral cloud (293).

The essential suggestion in this passage is the notion that truth, rather than being a presence and a centre, is something furtively experienced at the outer edge of presence: in the twilight zone where presence, already, is feeling the impact of absence. Thus the "nomad"—being neither an idea nor a sensation, but being still something that can be thought and felt—emerges in terms of vanishing, appears in terms of disappearing. What he experiences is not "confined" to any strictly present locus. "It was much more as if he were enabled to enter, by a lucky psychic sensitiveness, into some continuous stream of human awareness—awareness of a beauty in the world that *travelled lightly from place to place*, stopping here and stopping there, like a bird of passage, but never valued as its true worth until it had *vanished away*" (292, my italics).

Because the "nomad" (as I am defining it) is the perpetually active erasure of its own fixed being (of any permanent "home" that it could have), it can never become an ontotheologically operative category. It can never be a simple and straightforward affirmation of God (of Being). Indeed, "God" is just about the only word/idea that *never* could be a "nomad":

As he moved slowly along now between the sculptured entrance to the school-house and the little low-roofed shop where the straw-hatted boys of the School bought their confectionery, it occurred to him as curiously significant that the syllable 'God', so talismanic to most people, had never, from his childhood, possessed the faintest magic for him! 'It must be,' he thought, as, passing under a carved archway, he came bolt up on the old monastic conduit, 'that anything suggestive of metaphysical unity is distasteful to me!' (293-94)

This viewpoint does not leave us in atheism; it places us in a creation where what is divine freely exceeds the limits of mere divinity.

NOTES

¹Editions used: *Maiden Castle*, London: Cassell, 1937; Macdonald, 1966 (& Pan/Picador 1979); *Weymouth Sands*, London: Macdonald, 1963 (& Pan/Picador, 1980); *Wolf Solent*, London: Macdonald, 1961.

²The difference between Hegelian and Derridean thinking is not, as many of Derrida's "followers" tend to think, a dialectical opposition. Derrida's thought can instead be seen as an "amendment" to the Hegelian corpus—as a Hegelianism that suddenly moves in a new direction when the final turn of the "dialectic" is about to be completed. Because of this secret affinity between Hegel and Derrida, the polarization of the two philosophers in this essay must be viewed as a provisional schematization for the sake of argumentative illustration rather than as a simple propositional truth.

³The godhead, pushed to the margin and horizon by this erotic "side-steering", seems to intervene in the shape of the revolving ray from the Portland Bill Light-house. The Absolute, like a lover now reduced to a Peeping Tom, can only intermittently "thrust" its great luminous "index finger" into the "gulfs of Nothingness" (*WeS*, 382).

⁴Derrida conceives ontotheology as "phallogocentric", so that the "sex" of logocentrism is masculine. Being is paternal, patriarchal, and grandfatherly. John Cowper, by contrast, frequently associates the father-figure with gestures that displace and oust the logocentric rationale. It is difficult to see how the Derridean paradigm could finally be more than an inverted form of sexism. A critique of ontotheology can surely "take off" from man as well as woman.

Ben Jones

John Cowper Powys in New Mexico

John Cowper Powys did not stay very long in New Mexico. Although he was there in the 1920s when its attractiveness to artists and writers was at a high point, he seems not to have had any aspirations either to set up or join a community there. He was still travelling. But in the summer of 1927 he did visit his close American friends, Arthur Davidson Ficke and Gladys Ficke, in Santa Fe. It was an experience that was important to him, to which he turned in his recollections, and which reveals to us some significant elements of his character. The record of his three-day visit to the Fickes sheds light on John Cowper's closeness to and, paradoxically, distance from American life. It connects with other events in his life in the period of the writing of *Wolf Solent*, with his relation with Phyllis Playter, and with decisions he was taking about the development of his commitment to writing fiction. Arthur Davidson Ficke was throughout this period—from the mid-1920s to 1934 when John and Phyllis returned to Britain—very close to being a *confidant* to John. The New Mexico interlude has been preserved for us in letters, in an extremely interesting typescript commentary—a perceptive character study—by Gladys Ficke, and in three engaging photographs. I would like here to present portions from the relevant letters and from the commentary by Gladys Ficke, and to offer some comments on the photographs.¹ The overall scene is a mixture of idyll, comedy, and peculiarity, and when it is placed in the large frame of Powys's and the Fickes' lives, it carries, as comedy always does, some of the weight of tragic experience.

Like Llewelyn, Arthur Davidson Ficke suffered from tuberculosis, and in 1927 he was in New Mexico to rest, and, he hoped, to

recover. Powys had known Ficke since 1914, through his lecturing in the Midwest and his involvement in Maurice Browne's theatre productions in Chicago. He writes about Ficke in *Autobiography* and *An Englishman Upstate*. Ficke was one of Powys's special American friends, and it was the connection with Ficke that facilitated the move to Phudd Bottom. He played a part in Powys's choice to settle near Hillsdale: he and Gladys lived nearby, and Edna St. Vincent Millay and Gerald Boissevain lived in the area. He financed the purchase of Phudd Bottom for Powys (who quickly repaid the loan from the earnings from *Wolf Solent*). Ficke aspired to poetry, Gladys to painting. The area had attracted artists and writers, and it was, perhaps, a counter-part to the more idyllic New Mexico. When the decision was made to return to Wales, Ficke was the first to know.² Powys was deeply moved by Ficke's suffering and death from cancer of the throat in 1945. The fullness of the relation to Ficke remains to be explored.

In July 1927 Powys was lecturing in East Las Vegas, New Mexico. He learned that Arthur and Gladys were living in Santa Fe. On 18 July 1927, Powys wrote to Ficke, suggesting a visit:

Well! it certainly will be a shame if we can't get a glimpse of each other being so near—they tell me about 75 miles apart only—we I suppose is nothing over here—tho' in England or in Germany I suppose it wd mean that never wd we meet! *Just* now with my lectures starting at this Chautauqua next Thursday, I don't feel much heart for adventure or even pleasure. My health is a bit shaky at the moment and these lectures seem likely as they loom up to absorb most of my strength. But as time goes on—for I do not leave here till August 17th—

I hope to have gathered from this good air—tho' its very hot today—sufficient spirit to make an effort to get over to see you. *See you I want to so much*. What ancient memories revive! . . . Aye! but it seems I am your debtor every way, Ficke my dear friend, for what you wrote about Ducdame caused me the only really overpowering thrill I got out of that book. I can recall the bathroom—tho' not the City—where I opened that letter. I don't suppose anyone ever got such pleasure from praise as I did then. I daresay I may be destined to live on that praise—"the perfect witness of all-judging Jove"—to the last—but who can tell? It may be that the novel I've now been writing for I've forgotten how long will get the same sort of letter.

The letter ends with some bits of news and a request for an early reply. The "novel I've been writing" is certainly *Wolf Solent*, much of which had been completed by 1925 (1,150 manuscript pages by 3 December).³

Ficke's reply was prompt, and on 21 July Powys wrote again to set out details for the visit. They arrange to meet on the 28th, and Powys will stay until the 30th (Thursday, Friday, Saturday). Ficke drove a car, which amazed Powys, who said that Ficke was the only poet he had ever met who was the least bit mechanical.

We are fortunate to have a detailed record of the visit set down by Gladys Ficke in her biographical record of her husband. This typescript text is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. It is a poignant testimony of her devotion to him, and it is, in its way, a powerful statement of loss as it traces auspicious beginnings, unrealized hopes, and a final burden of physical suffering. It gives us a sense of what "loss" was for the Lost Generation, and it is a rich primary source for cultural study of the period, resonating as it does with the connections to Fitzgerald and Hemingway, two other Midwestern Americans who tried to break away (Ficke's family came from Davenport, Iowa, where the father was a prominent lawyer). But here we are more immediately concerned with Gladys Ficke's comments on John Cowper Powys:

Arthur's description of him seemed to me a bit exaggerated: But I found that one could hardly exaggerate John Cowper Powys who was himself his own superlative.⁴

After some discussion of a poem that Ficke had sent to Powys and to Hal [Witter] Bynner, Gladys gets down to the visit itself:

Like everyone else, I was amazed when I met this renowned J. C. P.—gaunt and grinning wide with an odd pulling down of the long upper lip before it admitted the grin, a stooped shabbily clothed figure with grizzled curls and slender bony hands. He stared into my eyes as if he meant to fathom me to the deepest before he trusted himself to my company; and then he broke into ejaculations of utmost delight in seeing Arthur again and meeting "his lady". Now the talk started and never stopped during our waking hours for two and a half days, largely literary talk and over my head in good part. Jack Powys's conversation was as full of quotations and allusions as were his letters; his hands clutching or gesturing with an awkward grace of their own and his animated mobile face made one think of his punctuation full of exclamation marks, underlinings, dots, dashes and parentheses. He did not drink and hardly ate, no wonder he was a skeleton—but what an enchanting one! Poor fellow, he put up with a good deal and it probably lost him more weight. Arthur was by this time a thoroughgoing nudist, disallowing nudist colonies. We took Jack up the canyon for a picnic luncheon, and stopping beside a stream Arthur was all for a swim. Jack would not go in. "Go along," he said, "you two, nymph and fawn, you go in and disport yourselves. I'll sit in the reeds like a peeping Tom and watch the frisking." We had no idea that a nude person was more horrifying to his eyes than a dead bird. He endured it and grinned like a monkey, making little deceitful cries of delight. For my part, I was never embarrassed by nudity; and I doubt if anyone can draw hundreds of naked figures, as I had, and retain any prudish concern about the matter. Long afterward, Jack told Arthur that had I not been so slim as a boy with hardly any revolting "femaleness", he would have died of anguish. We being clothed again he not having died, we climbed half way up the great slope of the canyon spiked with enormously tall pines;

and there he nibbled at a hard boiled egg while talking to Arthur of Greek plays. I wonder if he fancied Venus in a Mother Hubbard, showing an ankle, perhaps. He allowed himself to admire fine ankles. I took a photograph of him and Arthur lying beside the picnic baskets, monkey and suave-looking bandit . . .

I drove my two cavaliers back to Canyon Road. In his bread-and-butter letter Jack spoke certain untruths, but he'd forgiven us the shock we had subjected him to . . .

The exact "untruths" of Jack's "bread-and-butter letter" (dated 3 August 1927 from East Las Vegas) are probably Powys's not infrequent exaggerations. The letter has its excesses, but the experience had been an idyllic one for Powys, and he was not one to let a rapturous moment go unnoticed:

Aye! but you two were so lovely to me—I can't think how you are so good—being a poet and such an Oread and horse-lover—for men who are geniuses and girls who are "long & lovely" don't often get this Homeric magnanimity and goodness as of "an empler ether & diviner air" than our selfish shallow world.

I wish I could put down in rhyme or at least metre something of what I feel about you two & how uncommon kind you were to me & evidently are to many a battered wayfarer. Aye! how happy I was with you two & how soothed my nerves were. For a morose malicious secretive bugger like myself it was like being fallen into an antique island of the blest to consort with you. How enchanting you both did look shadowed by trees & grass and water one so white and one so brown and both so dear to a touchy hermit! . . . God! I am more than ever a devotee of your blond unconquerable race. You Mr. Faustus will always have some special link with the earth-spirit as well as some secret way of calling up young daughters of the antique world for your delight & solace . . . which will remain the riddle to latin & celt.

Powys wrote again on 16 August, the day before he left for the East, to say a "good-bye and a 'so long' till we meet again . . ." He also acknowledges receipt of the photographs: "Aye! but I did so admire those

photographs & and was so proud of them & enchanted to have them—what a Water-nymph—what a Lorelie—Gladys does look! I *am* glad I've got them." In this letter Powys provides his next address: c/o Franklin Playter, Route 4, Galena, Kansas. From there, on 26 August, he wrote his final letter in this series, thanking them for a bottle of home-made wine and for some whisky for his flask (this was the period of Abolition in the U.S.A.). He praised Arthur's poem "Christ in China" and advised him not to desert his "graver muse" ("Christ in China" is a grave poem).

By 1929 Powys had made his decision to live near Ficke in Upstate New York.⁵ This was not an escape, however, since it was a career decision: to end his lecturing and devote his time to writing. The monetary success of *Wolf Solent* seemed to promise some possibility of financial security, but in 1929 and 1930 hopes for financial security were short-lived. We can assume that the New Mexico idyll of 1927 did have some influence on Powys's decision to create a similar idyllic life—idyllic in the artist's sense: a place in which to create, in close company with kindred spirits—in the wooded hills near Hillsdale, New York. The Fickes were kindred spirits.

The photographs have "documentary" interest: they record an event, they become part of Gladys's and Powys's memory and are written about in subsequent texts, just as the event itself is, and they contribute to the Powys "archive". They also provide the opportunity for some interpretive commentary. There is a wonderful contrast between the flatness and hardness of the adobe wall and the heavily attired figure of Powys, with his conspicuous watch chain, seated in a chair that seems to block him into a definite space. It provides a sense of a composed "being-out-of-place", a composed awkwardness, the "awkward grace" which Gladys noted about this "shabbily clothed figure". The heat-baked adobe wall contrasts pointedly with the residue of formality in Powys's suit and tie. It is strikingly similar to photographs of D. H. Lawrence in his

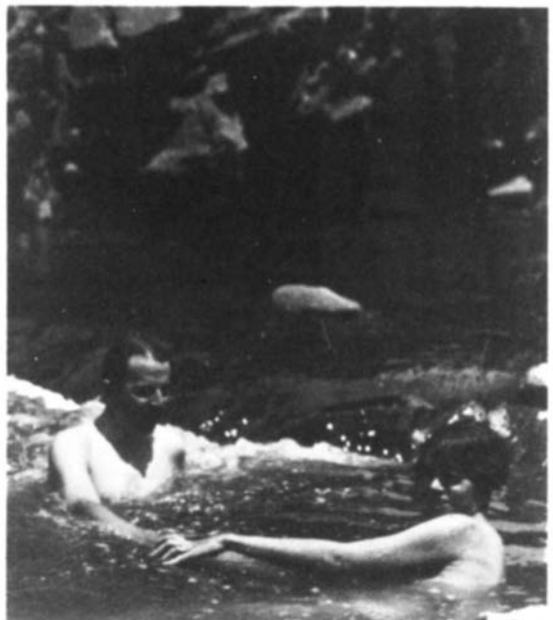


New Mexico years, particularly one from 1922, with Lawrence standing against an adobe wall, a “shabbily clothed figure”, preserving some residue of Englishness, and definitely out of place. Powys does manage a smile, although his expression does not seem incompatible with the recurrence of his dyspepsia which he records in the letters of the period.

Powys is wearing suit and tie again in the “picnic-basket” scene. Here the two men are described by Gladys as “monkey” (John Cowper, we assume) and “suave-looking bandit”. Wherever he was, Powys was not about to sacrifice his protective suit. It seems as if he were particularly concerned to keep his clothes on against the imminent threat of nudity which was so casual a scene for Arthur and Gladys. If the repast (hard-boiled eggs) seems something less than Dionysian, there is something of at least “fun” in the third photograph, the nude-bathing scene. We must assume that it was



Powys himself who took the picture. The picture is actually very well composed. Arthur and Gladys’s arms make a circle, and there is something of a circular motion to the water. Gladys’s body is turned in an almost classical pose, revealing yet discreet.



Powys's penchant for "looking" (Gladys had noted how he "stared" at her when they first met) provides continuity to his narratives, and he might even have become a good photographer. Powys was said by Gladys to have said: "I'll sit in the reeds like a peeping Tom and watch the frisking." The bathing scene does give us some of the basic conventions of photographic composition, the triangle (two points conspicuously related to a third point—that is, Arthur gazing at Gladys gazing at John Cowper who, camera in hand, gazes at Arthur and Gladys), and the circle (what I have already noted as the circular motions of the bodies and the water).

Ficke did represent for Powys a free spirit, and Gladys's presence seemed to confirm Ficke's special power. Powys notes on several occasions the physical power of Ficke, his affiliation to the "blond unconquerable race". But Ficke had power of position as well: he moved easily in important circles, his Harvard degree gave him credentials, he had established expertise as a collector and commentator on Oriental art, his financial situation seemed secure, and he showed promise as a writer of neatly turned poems. Powys gave him advice about his writing, not always affirmative advice, but he did encourage him to pursue success as a writer. This success Ficke did not achieve, although it is possible that his work will someday be re-examined. If he seemed to be a free spirit, he was nevertheless stricken by sickness, and, I think, by melancholy, which was unrelieved until his death in 1945. Powys wanted advice and sought encouragement in return, but Ficke was too stolid to take to *Glastonbury* and he disliked *Morwyn* intensely (which, of course, was consistent with the general response to that book). He had, however, given support to Powys's earlier fiction. We have already noted Powys's gratitude for his comments on *Ducdame*, and even earlier Powys thanked him for his response to *Rodmoor*: "I can't tell you, my dear, how your letter about Rodmoor recovered me."⁶

Gladys, too, fits into place in Powys's "mythology": nymph, boyish body, ankles, classic design. She takes her place among those "long and lovely" girls who populate Powys's fiction. Yet, it is her perceptive commentary that brings the photographs and the scene itself to life. She is the one who sees into the complexity of Powys's character. Her free spirit, and Arthur's (stolidly Germanic, but still a nudist), represented a way of life that remained apart from Powys's own unsettled, complex, obsessively sexual world. If, however, she is one of those "looked at", she provides, in turn, a commentary, a comedy, that places and, for awhile, keeps Powys in an actual, and even stable, world. Perhaps this was what Powys found in his New Mexico idyll: an actual, if momentary, connection to a world unencumbered by lectures, performances, difficult schedules, bad food, financial anxiety and an uneasy sexuality. It was the model for what became the next important stage in his development, his move, with Phyllis Playter, to Upstate New York, to give up lecturing and turn his energies completely towards writing.

Powys recalled the New Mexico adventure in a letter to Ficke written from Corwen in March of 1940, addressed to "Darling old Arthur of the Samurai". Various recollections of earlier days move towards the memory of Sante Fe:

Well we have known each other a great number of years! How long ago it seems now when you first showed me the Mississippi! And *how* I did enjoy those visits and rub my hands together with pride & happiness when you used to put me into the sleeper for Chicago & I wd have a cigarette in the Smoking Room before going to bed thinking of you & of the way you'd blown up my Self-Esteem till it was airy enough to cross the State-Boundaries of more than Iowa and Illinois—ready to whirl along like one of the Tyres of that Car that astonished me so! And then what a moment when I found you waiting me in that Las Vegas Dining Room when they made you put on an Alpaca Jacket—and how entrancing to my unpardonable feelings was it to see you and Gladys swim-

ming in that rock-stream at Sante Fé! With whatever it is that in the Heart of a Monster like me represents Human Love I am your

John-Descript
Non-Descript

New Mexico does not, I believe, enter directly into Powys's fiction, nor can we make out counter-parts for either Arthur or Gladys Ficke, both of whom, as I have tried to show, played important rôles in his actual life. We know so little about how this supposedly "biographical" and "autobiographical" writer transformed characters from his experience into characters in his fiction. It may be that it worked the other way around: his fictional world, like Wolf Solent's

"mythology", transformed his actual world into fantasy, imposed itself upon actual experience, dangerously, requiring acquaintances, to play out *his* interior life. I do not think we can escape this tendency towards shaping, dominating, the other that marks so strongly Powys's writing and his life, and that defines the motives of so many of his central characters. The brief interlude in New Mexico—marked out for us in letters, pictures, and inscribed memories—has that kind of centrifugal movement (we recall the moving water in the "rock stream" that so characterizes Powys's life and writing, a consciousness of centrality that seems determined to fall away.

NOTES

¹The letters cited here from John Cowper Powys to Arthur Davidson Ficke are from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Dates are noted in the text. The typescript biography of Arthur Davidson Ficke by his wife, Gladys Ficke, is also located there. The three photographs are in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Michigan Library. Michigan has a collection of Maurice Browne's papers. Browne, the theatre director and producer, was friend both to Ficke and Powys. The photographs are with the Ficke material in the Browne collection, and I think they got there in this way: John Cowper had received the photographs from Ficke, and after Ficke died in 1945 Powys sent them to Maurice Browne who had begun collecting Ficke's letters for publication. The project was dropped, and after Browne's death, his papers were left to the University of Michigan, and material he had collected on Ficke was deposited there at that time. Late note: the Editor has informed me of at least one other photograph from this occasion. Its inclusion would add to, and certainly not controvert, my discussion here.

²JCP to ADF, 27 December 1938: "You were the very first perambulatory upright anthropoid skeleton into whose ear—in that wood near your Pleasance—I breathed my resolution to go to Wales & write the greatest Historical Novel since Sir Walter Scott about *Owen Glendower*."

³John Cowper Powys, *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, ed. Malcolm Elwin, London: Village Press, 1975, Vol. II (1925-1939), p. 26. The unsettled years which preceded the move to Phudd Bottom in 1929 were the years during which *Wolf Solent* was written: the writing of the novel and the search for some

domiciled (if not domestic) stability are counterpointed in the letters to Llewelyn in this period. JCP's gratitude for Ficke's praise of *Ducdame* is also mentioned in the letters to Llewelyn (18 February 1925 Vol. II, p. 5).

Ficke's letter to Powys on *Ducdame*, dated 1 February 1925, should have thrilled him: "*What* an extraordinary book! A great achievement!—by far your best book so far,—and, unless I am crazy, one of the most thrilling and richly poetical novels in the language." Ficke's comments on *Ducdame* in the three page letter are detailed.

⁴From Gladys Ficke's unpublished biography of her husband, pp. 693-696. The typescript is made up of her commentary on her own and her husband's life along with extensive quotation from correspondence I have left uncorrected her idiosyncratic spelling "renowned", "addmitted", "concerne".

⁵In August 1928, he and Phyllis were still searching for a place. They had an offer to settle on Dreiser's "estate", but it was near a lake and Phyllis did not like lakes (*Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, II, p. 81). In this letter he also says: "But the future for all of us is uncertain—as you say, one step enough for me . . ." In a letter dated 22 January 1929, Powys asks Ficke about the possibility of finding a "very small little house in your district." On 25 April 1929, an agreement had been made to buy the "small farm opposite Albert Krick's place" at Harlemlville, the price to be \$2,300.00. By 7 May 1929 the title was closed, and by 29 May Powys was sending cheques to Ficke (the first for \$300.00). But Powys asks that, since letters seem to have been shared by the family, a code name be used to refer to the purchase of the house. On 12 November 1929, Powys told Ficke that "I am beginning . . . my

rebellion against my present manager [Keedrick].” Lecturing was coming to an end, and a new life devoted to writing had begun.

“JCP to ADF, from “12 W 12”, or 12 West 12th Street, in New York City, undated, but probably 24 November 1916 (from the envelope): “I can’t tell you, my dear, how your letter, about Rodmoor recovered me.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Donald Gallup, Literary Executor for Mrs Ficke, for permission to use the material at The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; also, the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Michigan Library, for their assistance with the photographs and with Powys/Ficke material in their collection of the Van Volkenburg-Browne papers; also Laurence Pollinger Ltd., for permission to use the unpublished correspondence of John Cowper Powys.

THE POWYS SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

FOURTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

"AT THE END OF MODERNISM"

TO BE HELD AT

CARLETON UNIVERSITY, OTTAWA, CANADA

3 TO 5 JUNE 1988

First Announcement and Call for Papers

Papers, not to exceed fifteen pages (double spaced), should be sent to the address below by 1 MARCH 1988. Papers should focus on the writings of John Cowper Powys, T. F. Powys, Llewelyn Powys, or on writers and thinkers closely related to their work. Suggested general topics, as they relate to Powys texts, might include:

Modernist Autobiographical Writing,
Myths of Sexual Difference,
Travel and Exile as a Condition of Modernism,
Modernism and the Novel of Ideas,
Historical Fictions in the Modernist Period,
The Essay as a Genre in Modernism,
Modernist Critical Reception and the Powyses.

INQUIRIES AND PAPERS SHOULD BE SENT TO:

Ben Jones, Department of English
Carleton University
Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1S 5B6

Patricia Vaughan Dawson

Notes on Etchings and Sculpture suggested by Scenes from J. C. Powys's *Porius*

These sculptures and etchings follow those based on *The Brazen Head*, but the projects differ as do the books.

The Brazen Head sculpture is a rocky landscape where seven groups of figures act out scenes that reflect the episodic nature of the story. The seven etchings have a similarity to playing cards, with their unity of size and colour and an emphasis on symbolic shapes. (See *The Powys Review*, Number 4).

The narrative of *Porius* presents one with a vast emotional and philosophic panorama, sensitively related to the landscape, the times of day, and the time of the year, October.

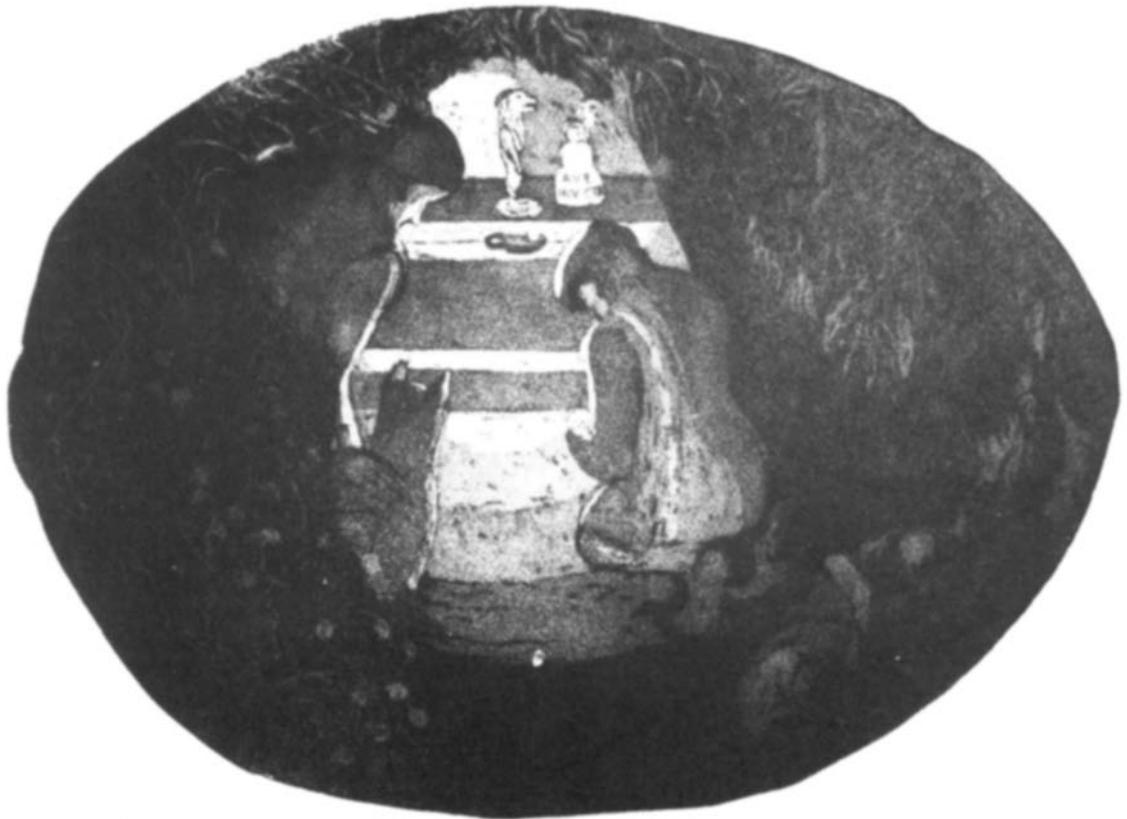
I have chosen eight images which depict particular aspects of the characters and some dramatic moments described in the text, and produced five etchings and three sculptures.

The Etchings

The Etchings are all printed in black from irregular shaped plates to evoke the colour, form and texture of stone. The mood of each scene is expressed by the degree of contrast in tones and the defining of the images.

I. The Cave of Mithras

Rhun with his hound shows Porius his Mithraic cave.





II.

II. Myrddin Wyllt in the Forest

Myrddin, in the clothes of a rough herdsman of the south, is in the forest at twilight in a mist. His presence has attracted birds and animals and he holds a fawn in his arms.

III. The Three Aunties in their Prime

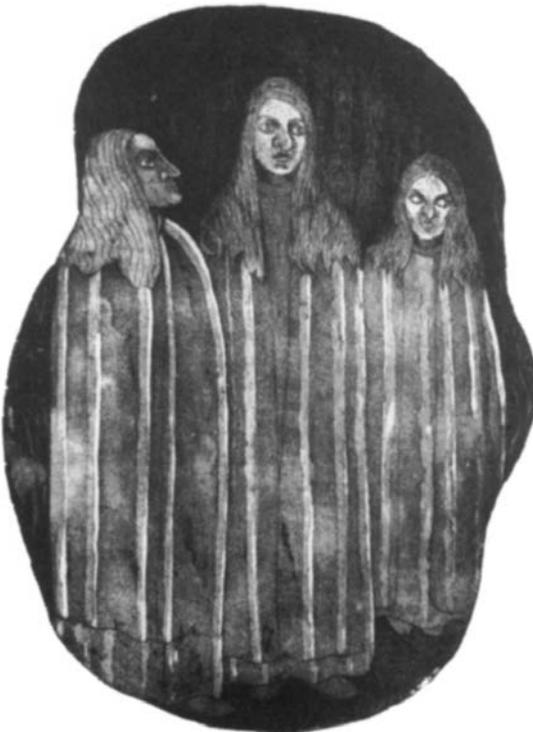
This is a personal view of The Three Aunties as they might have been when younger, many years before the book opens. They stand in a wood and represent the Celtic Triple Goddess.

IV. The Milk Offering

Although Myrddin Wyllt wears his courtier's cloak, he acts out a bucolic scene. It is night time and he has brought a black cow into a lamplit tent where are Gwendydd, his sister, and Nineue, his mistress. Gwendydd stands by the cow's head as Myrddin Wyllt milks, sitting on a three-legged stool.



IV.



III.

V. The Plunge of the Giant Gawr Holding the Body of Creiddylad

The giant plunges with the dead body of his daughter, Creiddylad, into a bottomless tarn in a cleft in the rocks.

She died while intercepting a blow which her father had aimed at Porius. The giant's anger had been aroused by the sight of Porius making love to Creiddylad.



v.

The Sculptures

The Sculptures are made of paper and paste and are painted in muted colours.

1. *The Three Aunties Mourn Round the Body of Morvran*

This incident is described as having taken place at the Gaer before the story begins. After I had finished the sculpture, I was told that it is more fully described in the uncut version of *Porius*.

The mutilated body of Morvran lies on the hollow stone of sacrifice and is surrounded by his three great aunts, Yssylt, Erddud and Tonwen.

In each is shown a different aspect of a mourning woman.

Yssylt represents the priestess as she cries out to the gods of her Druidic beliefs.

Erddud represents the mother. She protects his head with her arms and her posture suggests his birth in reverse. We are told in the text that the birthstone stands nearby.

Tonwen's kneeling body is bowed with grief and given over entirely to her feelings.



1.



2.

2. *Morfydd Comforts Rhun*

Morfydd has discovered Rhun weeping in the chapel at the Gaer. He has broken his spear in a fight and has been spurned by Gwendydd, Myrddin Wyllt's sister whom he loves.

Morfydd has pulled his head onto her shoulder to comfort him.

3. *Myrddin Wyllt Transforms the Owl*

This conjuring trick with which Myrddin Wyllt confronts Minnawc Gorsant, the Christian priest, forms one of the most dramatic scenes in the book.

Myrddin Wyllt has caught an owl that has been seen fluttering round his head, has drawn it under his cloak, and, while it was hidden, transformed it into a naked girl. The story of Blodenwedd has been reversed.

The cloak billows out in a pregnant way. As she emerges from its folds, the girl's skin, colouring and features suggest the texture and colouring of a barn owl.



3.

Reviews

The Kingfisher's Wing,
MARY CASEY.

Rigby & Lewis, 1987, £9.95 (hardback),
£4.95 (paperback).

When Mary Casey died in 1980 she left not only a considerable body of poems (two selections from which were published the following year by the Enitharmon Press) but also three novels. That these should have been unpublished was a deliberate choice on their author's part: as with her poems, she wrote them entirely for her own satisfaction. But there was nothing self-indulgent or careless about her work, which both elicits and rewards a reader's close attention.

Dedicated to her mother Lucy Amelia Penny, the youngest of the five Powys sisters, *The Kingfisher's Wing* is an imaginative reconstruction of the life of the third-century philosopher Plotinus. It was the outcome of thoughtful study of the *Enneads*. A philosophic romance of this kind is more common in nineteenth-century literature than it is in our own—one thinks of the writings of Walter Savage Landor, of J. H. Shorthouse's *John Inglesant*, and most particularly of Walter Pater. The influence of *Marius the Epicurean* on John Cowper Powys has been demonstrated by Ian Hughes in an earlier number of the *Powys Review*; and there are faint Paterian echoes to be heard in *The Kingfisher's Wing*, with its meditative manner and conflation of landscape with mood. But the prose lacks Pater's opulent quality, its leisurely grandiloquence; rather, its relative simplicity recalls the limpid vocabulary of George Moore's *The Brook Kerith*, a novel concerning Jesus of Nazareth which was widely read during Mary Casey's girlhood. But her own novel has none of Moore's easy flow; the sentences and phrases are set down simply in a way that arrests rather than encourages the forward-looking eye, requiring that one linger over them to ponder their meanings and suggestiveness. It is a prose of perception and meditation, not of rationality and action. At times the stylistic economy verges on the cryptic, but as the result more of concentration than of clumsiness. One is aware of a distinctly personal voice delighting in what it records, intent on capturing and conveying an exactitude of inference and meaning.

There are hazards attendant on the writing of a biographical philosophical novel such as this. For the fictional presentation of Plotinus's life is necessarily interiorized: its conflicts and developments are intellectual and mental rather than emotional or dramatic. We move from Lycopolis on the banks of the Nile to Alexandria, the intellectual heart of Empire, where Plotinus attends the schools and himself becomes a teacher of philosophy: the descriptions of the city, though oblique, are effective. Plotinus then accompanies the young Emperor Gordian on his campaign against the Persians; following the Emperor's death at the hands of his own soldiery he escapes and stays for a while in Antioch, then finally moves to Rome. His story is unfolded through a series of encounters, dialogues and epiphanies, while as a background there is a deft and meticulous use of physical detail, delicate evocations of the various landscapes, together with an awareness of the encompassing life of Plotinus's own time, which offsets any tendency to become too introverted. Mary Casey is especially sensitive to stillness, the power of silence. Her writing is steeped in a sense of the pervasive beauty of the natural world. But if the book is quietly passionate, it is never precious.

As Kathleen Raine writes in an informal preface, "Plotinus was something far other, and far more, than a philosopher in the diminished modern sense of the term. He was a true 'lover of wisdom'—of the spiritual knowledge that has been virtually forgotten in the secular world of the modern West." In a further introductory piece Gerard Casey, in addition to translating the *Isha Upanishad*, provides an outline of Plotinus's life and thought, one which is expanded in the book itself. The central tenet of Plotinus's belief, that the individual soul is a manifestation and expression of the one world soul and can only find its fulfilment in a return to its source, is not one which lends itself to dramatic treatment; but Mary Casey had studied her subject closely enough to perceive that to put this belief into practice involves a questioning of the nature of human identity as such, let alone the validity of the life-experience of those who are not touched by the contemplative ideal or have no leaning towards it. "Why live and fast and deny sleep for a rare or imperfect freedom in knowing that would, in the body's death, be fulfilled once and

for all?" The slight clumsiness of style performs a useful function here. The absence of hyphens after "freedom" and "in" will force readers back to the beginning of the sentence to find out if they have understood it aright: its meaning will not be absorbed easily. So Plotinus is seen as wrestling with these problems in the circumstances of his own life, at once single-minded in his quest and yet responsive to the insights and perceptions of his fellow philosophers—who here include Ammonius, Origen and Porphyry. Both Christian and Manichean teaching are set in dialogue with that of Plotinus. One feels that in writing the book the author is testing and sifting her own beliefs.

In the process she forges many memorable epigrams and phrases—translations or adaptations, presumably, of Plotinus's own. The dialogue is dense with the rapid communication of ideas. "The light one has seen shines for all." "You believe you can teach others knowledge; I that it can only be known." "Right and wrong are not absolute but each man's knowledge of the one. That is absolute for him." "I must think of the soul not as looking to knowledge but as living knowledge of the good." Here the syntactical ambiguity (is the participle "living" used as a verb or an adjective?) enriches rather than obscures the meaning. The phrase reminds one of Blake's "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would question a window concerning a Sight. I look through it and not with it."

The sense of timelessness, so vital to any imaginative presentation of this philosopher's thought, is in purely literary terms achieved here through two devices that are presumably deliberate. One of these is the fusion of Plotinus's thoughts with their physical occasion: simile blossoms into metaphor as his awareness is shaped by what he sees. But there is a more original method at work in the repeated introduction of characters whose physical presence is made known but whose names are withheld until they are slipped in almost casually after the dialogue is well under way. By this means, individuals are subordinated to the interchange of spirit which unites them. They encounter each other in the ambience of the Divine Mystery of which they form a part, and in which their singularity is secondary to the indwelling power which moves them. The whole novel maintains this proportion between spiritual and mental action and its physical manifestations. Not for nothing is its subtitle "A vision-

ary recital". It is not a story out of the past: it is a reading of a reality which is as valid now as it was in Plotinus's own time.

GLEN CAVALIERO

The Second Light,
VILHELM EKELUND.

Translated and with an Introduction by
LENNART BRUCE; with an Afterword by
ERIC O. JOHANNESSEN.

North Point Press, San Francisco, 1986, \$25.00.

Vilhelm Ekelund (1880-1949), little known outside Scandinavia, was engagingly introduced to members of the Powys Society by Carl-Erik af Geijerstam at the 1986 Bath Conference. Readers ignorant of Swedish can now savour an enigmatic but rewarding personality in the pages of this pioneering American anthology. The uninitiated will find the afterword illuminating since it places Ekelund in the Swedish and Swedish-Finnish contexts, while stressing his indebtedness to wider European traditions, in particular to German literature and philosophy.

"An aristocratic and exclusive spirit", Ekelund was indifferent to the lure of forging a career, seeking satisfaction instead in the solitary sculpting of his perceptions of reality. As his speculations grew more self-centred so their expression became ever more hermetic, yielding in the pronouncements of his later years rich pickings for the commentators. Most societies exact a high price from those who reject tribal norms, and Ekelund, with his solipsist instincts and Nietzschean contempt for the vulgar, was a ready victim. Much of his life was to be soured by alienation, poverty, illness and conflict with authority. Like Strindberg, Ekelund failed to be elected a member of the Swedish Academy of Letters.

Yet, given notable early successes, a less ill-starred future might well have been predicted for this blacksmith's son who, after a happy childhood, relished studious pursuits in the university city of Lund. Early maturity as a lyricist enabled him to publish seven volumes of verse between 1900 and 1906, so that at twenty-three he had already established a reputation as "Sweden's foremost poet". The editors make little attempt to convey the structure and flavour of this impressive achievement, though they would perhaps

argue that their main concern in this anthology is to portray Ekelund as an aphorist and critic: itself a daunting task, involving the analysis of twenty-four books of essays and aphoristic prose. Ekelund himself proffers a characteristic paradox in accounting for his switch from poetry to prose: "Once Emerson, Amiel, Nietzsche had discovered the great poem, can anybody any longer take 'lyrics', this art of the intellectually impotent, seriously?"

After an unsavoury brush with the police in 1908, Ekelund sought refuge in Germany and did not return to Sweden till 1921. He seems scarcely to have noticed the upheavals of the Great War as, engrossed in his quest for self-understanding, he struggled to make a living as a translator. He viewed the contemporary German scene with mixed feelings, castigating the philistine aspects of bourgeois society while deepening his acquaintance with congenial writers like the Romantic poet August von Platen, whose homoerotic verses had partly inspired his own, and Friedrich Nietzsche. While spurning the excesses of the Superman and the Will to Power, he greatly admired the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*, finding parallels to many of his own key ideas in Nietzsche's philological disquisitions on the culture of the Ancient Greeks; such linguistic probings into the classical roots of western civilization were indeed increasingly to dominate his own later studies.

Two related concepts much bandied about in critical appraisals of Ekelund are Decadence and Aestheticism. Certainly this doughty if maladjusted genius felt an affinity with a whole gallery of writers who may loosely be termed Byronic. His translations embraced Leopardi and Ferdinand Lassalle, whose treatise on Heraclitus must have exercised a strong appeal. Included in the present anthology are revelatory essays on Poe and Baudelaire. The panegyric on Poe ("one of the richest personalities of romantic poetry") had been written for the 1909 centennial celebrations. Seated in a library in Unter den Linden, Ekelund complains of having to consult the new de luxe edition printed "for the millionaires of America", adding that "the writings of Poe, the proletarian, are not available in any complete edition for common mortals". These judgements encapsulate Ekelund's austere Protestant work-ethic. He seldom misses an opportunity to carp at the enervating effects of affluence, to which he ascribes the falling-off in the later stories of Bret Harte, shrewdly noting that "people who spontaneously succumb to

opulent living conditions probably possess insufficient mental capacities at the outset".

In his afterword Eric O. Johannesson examines in depth the question of Ekelund's debt to Aestheticism, interpreted by some critics as a narcissistic weakness, by others as the essence of uncompromising artistic integrity. In a magisterial evaluation Fredrik Böök, perhaps the most authoritative of Swedish critics, likens Ekelund to Thomas à Kempis and Kierkegaard, while deploring his indifference to social life and the solace of everyday human companionship.

Few writers have cultivated the aphorism as tenaciously as Vilhelm Ekelund, yet much of his work may seem marginal to the mainstream of aphoristic tradition. Perhaps this is because in its concise, conventional form the aphorism is better attuned to ages of rationality than to less self-assured times (like our own), when modes of thought and their expression tend to be more hesitant and speculative. We customarily expect wit, balance and dogmatism as hallmarks of the genre. We anticipate the worldly wisdom of La Rochefoucauld or a Baltasar Gracián, the acuteness of Lichtenberg or the sledgehammer blows of Samuel Johnson. Though not unappreciative of the French Encyclopaedists, Ekelund's own manner was sometimes tentative, quirky and lacking in crispness. At his best, however, he can be as lapidary as other masters of the art, while still sounding his own original note: "The day is like a stranger of divine origin, wishing to pay you his visit. You're fortunate if he finds you at home."

Within the compass of a brief review it is impossible to do justice to the range and profundity of Ekelund's thought; and there is the added difficulty, encountered by Lennart Bruce in his translations, that graceful Swedish rhythms must on occasion be sacrificed to eke out essential meaning, so that in their English dress certain aphorisms wear a lack-lustre air; yet their creator's idiosyncratic values remain manifest throughout:

The confession-in-disguise of the inadequacy of all that he has lived and fought for, the sense of the hollowness of his fame, kneeling before his own innermost demands: that is the genuine and valuable I now find everywhere in the writings of Ibsen—every place where he is honest and 'great'. The disguise is the real Ibsen, and it is remarkable that in a final analysis it is on the ground of this confession-in-disguise—only vaguely sensed by most

people—that his great fame is founded. Ibsen possesses in his personality a mystique of the saga, which links him with the Orient! (p. 69)

The arcane and frequently elliptical utterances of his final years, typically apparent in the collection *Plus Salis* (1945), together with the urge to link Greek with oriental mysticism, may well have furthered Ekelund's self-development; but others may find themselves struggling with his cloudy, inspissated arguments:

Without any question the *metron* doctrine—that is the doctrine of Enough—coincides with the Indian-Chinese teachings of a fully realized way of breathing as the source of the perpetuation of thought, the principle of hope and belief: *entelēcheia*.

(To be seized by Enough: to be seized by the eternity of thought.)

The boundary is the meeting place—the meeting the border. *Hora vivendi* occurs and stands firm when the insight of this concurrence, its need to be the first and the most essential, has become all-fulfilling, all-encompassing, all-illuminating. (pp. 136-7)

Since it is a common practice to encode private musings, we should not perhaps criticize Ekelund for the resulting loss in ready intelligibility. At the same time there is a disquieting side to his narcissism, for by a *reductio ad absurdum* the pregnant significance of his truncated thoughts would seem ultimately to lead to the silence advocated by Schopenhauer and the Trappists. Sadly, too, his impenetrability robbed him of a number of readers who favour epigrams but are put off by cryptograms.

It is here that Ekelund parts company with that unfailingly loquacious communicator John Cowper Powys, whose own ardent belief in a personal mythology never precluded vivacious dialogue with his fellows and who until his retirement from the lecture-platform, far from seeking seclusion, maintained bustling contact with a broad spectrum of humanity. Personal lifestyles apart, there remain many striking parallels between these two underrated writers, not least in the breadth and direction of their literary preferences. Both venerated Goethe and Whitman. Both derived inspiration from Nietzsche but ultimately found Dostoevski's humane message more to their taste. Both were steeped in the language and philosophy of Ancient Greece. Both were masters of allusion and delighted in original cross-references, as when Ekelund

compares the sceptical humour of Gogol with that of Cervantes. Both men were regionalists who yet drew intellectual nourishment from European culture at large. Though rooted in the Gothic and Celtic fringes of our continent, they probed the Mediterranean sources of western civilization, seeking to temper northern vigour and asperity with southern ease and liberality. The synthesis achieved by Powys was the happier one, possibly because he was less reluctant than Ekelund to compromise and accept inconsistencies. As Goethe has shown, the union of Faust with Helena is fraught with danger.

CEDRIC HENTSCHEL

Henry Vaughan: Poet of Revelation,
NOEL KENNEDY THOMAS.

Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1986,
£5.95 (paperback).

Thomas's book claims that Vaughan has not been well-served by his critics, that many of these are unaware of the tensions generated by the Civil War, and that they have in particular underestimated the influence of the Bible on Vaughan's work. All these claims are difficult to understand, especially the last. If modern readers cannot identify the exact provenance of the many and interlocking Biblical allusions in, say, "Religion", the first poem from *Silex Scintillans* which Thomas discusses, then Alan Rudrum's Penguin edition of Vaughan has been thoroughly identifying them ever since 1976. Since the gist of the book and perhaps its usefulness is the determined noting of Biblical allusions and images in the poetry of Vaughan, it is strange that in a treatment of "The Night" Thomas comments (p. 164) that Vaughan's picture of Christ there "is probably the warmest and most intimate he has ever achieved . . . a direct and strikingly fresh picture of Jesus, appearing in the pastures of dew, which Vaughan has seen with his own eyes". But (apart from the critical questions which this begs) lines 31-36 of "The Night", which are quoted in illustration, are suffused with allusions to the lover of the Song of Songs, his head filled with dew and his locks with the drops of the night, whom exegetes from at least the time of St Bernard had interpreted as Christ. Although Thomas doggedly identifies Biblical sources and even ventures apparently subjective comments on

their symbolism, no mention is made of the vital traditions of Biblical exegesis, allegorical interpretation and typology. These could have strengthened in particular Thomas's arguments about the poet's apocalyptic and eschatological hopes for deliverance from bondage, his hope for renewal, and his images of light and darkness. Vaughan's fondness for the Book of Revelation can come as no surprise. It would have been remarkable if a religious poet of his time had not been interested in the Apocalypse, whose influence on Renaissance literature has been examined, *inter alia*, in a collection of essays edited by Wittreich and Patrides. Perhaps what might have been interesting is the way in which Revelation was read in conjunction with and was seen as answering other Biblical passages. A longing for deliverance in the coming of the Bridegroom and Judge draws on exegetical and typological play among the Song of Songs, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins and parts of the Apocalypse. The interconnections, although quite commonplace, might illuminate Vaughan's poetry as they do J. S. Bach's cantata *Wachet Auf*.

Thomas's apparent reluctance, like that of Ben Jonson's Ananias, to consider "traditions" which are not exclusively Biblical extends to his apparent distaste for investigation of Hermetic and occult influences on Vaughan which he feels have "distracted" Vaughan's critics (p. 13). Thomas's almost puritan critical position seems at odds with the man he sees as an Anglican and Royalist poet in sad captivity to Puritans claiming the exclusive authority of the Word and denying any learning other than inspiration. He resolutely gathers a whole herd of Biblical asses (pp. 96-101) in explicating "The Ass", "arguably one of the most moving of all seventeenth century religious lyrics". But the poet's crucial petition, which Thomas quotes, "Let me thy Ass be onely wise / To carry, not search mysteries" also alludes to a tradition, that of *asinus portans mysteria*, which is discernible in Erasmus, at the end of Agrippa's *De Vanitate Scientiarum* and in Una's mount in *Faerie Queene*, especially I vi. One of the things that may mark Vaughan as not Puritan is a syncretism in outlook and in his combination of sources and traditions. A critic's turning away from these may falsify a picture of Vaughan.

As one is unsurprised to find that a mid-seventeenth century Christian poet is influenced by the Apocalypse, so a chapter on his use of the imagery of light and darkness, on ideas of

renewal and the harmony of creation is equally unsurprising. The book may have some usefulness for sixth-form readers of Vaughan in its paraphrase, explication and annotation. It has a useful index of poems discussed. This discussion cannot be said to be very subtle. Observations on lyrical beauty, a poem being one of the greatest of Vaughan's lyrics, or a poem having fine passages are hardly penetrating. The comment on the end of "The Call", that it is a perfect example of Vaughan's ability to express "even personal passionate emotion by using Biblical thought and imagery", would be unremarkable about any seventeenth-century English poet.

GARETH ROBERTS

From Fox How to Fairy Hill. Matthew Arnold's Celtic connections with special reference to the Bensons of Fairy Hill, Gower, South Wales,
JOAN H. HARDING.

D. Brown and Sons, 1986, £7.95.

"Genealogy has its own charm, and families are the real units of social history", claims A. L. Rowse's preface to this study of Matthew Arnold's Welsh in-laws, and the text demonstrates it. A fascinating aspect of social history—of Victorian social history, certainly—is the way all well-known families turn out to be related to each other, and the middle class, which historians assure us was getting bigger and bigger, actually appears to be contracting to a handful of interrelated individuals. The Arnolds are as good an example as any of the phenomenon. Thomas Arnold himself was at the head of a clan which in its own name provided notable figures in the new, expanding areas of the middle class, in the colonies, in the services, in education, in literature: his younger sons, Tom and William, opened up or helped to administer New Zealand, Australia, India, and his eldest son Matthew, the most famous Arnold of them all, as well as being Professor of Poetry at Oxford, was among the first school inspectors. Tom, thwarted in his design of marrying the daughter of Archbishop Whately, his father's old friend from Oriel days, and still a household name, married into a family of Australia administrators; and William married the daughter of the explorer who discovered the sources of the Ganges. Matthew married a Judge's daughter, Frances Lucy

Wightman. Meanwhile the doctor's daughter, Jane, married W. E. Forster, the noted educationalist who gave his name to the Education Act of 1870 which changed British society.

In the next generation the daughter of his second son, born while Tom Arnold was inspecting the schools of Tasmania, became Mrs Humphry Ward and an astonishingly successful novelist, reviewed by Gladstone and esteemed (however ironically) by her friend Henry James; and his sister Julia married Leonard Huxley, son of T. H. Huxley, who shared his father's passionate interest in science. Julia became the mother of Julian and Aldous Huxley, thus continuing the Arnold commitment to literature, science, and high moral purpose. Mary Arnold's daughter, meanwhile, married George Trevelyan, the historian chiefly responsible for the twentieth-century school of history, and himself in close line of descent from both Hannah Moore and Lord Macaulay: the Arnold clan extended further still.

These are well-known facts. But who would have thought that Thomas Arnold, notorious as the enemy of the Oxford Movement, the vehement anti-Tractarian, would also number among his descendants "the reviver of the Religious Life in the Church of England", R. M. Benson, founder of the Cowley Fathers? Dr Harding's extensively researched little book is full of such nuggets of information like this about the scarcely thought of branch of the Arnold family in South Wales. Arnold's Cambrian and Celtic themes are an important part of his work, and his essay "On the Study of Celtic Literature" is an early landmark in the area. Dr Harding pinpoints a memorable visit to the Bensons on the Gower in 1879, and mentions many meetings between the families. One notable visit to Wales was at the invitation of the National Eisteddfod in 1885, when Matthew stayed not with his in-laws but at the house of Lord Aberdare.

Usually, however, the Arnolds stayed with the Bensons. Richard Benson, brother-in-law to Mrs Arnold's sister, went to Oxford in 1843, and became Vicar of Cowley there in 1850. In 1866 he and two other priests founded the Society of St. John the Evangelist, better known as the Cowley Fathers, and Father Benson became the Superior. The new order spread all over the world, and the Superior was much occupied in travelling between the communities in India, South Africa and North America—though at home Wales, according to the *Swansea Glamorgan Herald*,

viewed the Popish extravagances of a Ritualist priest with deep distrust.

It is interesting, though not, perhaps, surprising that the Arnold connections with Church history should be persistent, pervasive, and controversial. (Dr Harding quotes a more recent descendant of the doctor as being actively concerned in resisting Welsh Disestablishment in 1912.) Thomas Arnold was a great reformer and, in turbulent times for the church, his orthodoxy was frequently suspect, for he saw the ideal church of England as including all British Christians sharing a basic common denominator of belief. For his eldest son, Matthew, the religious question was the greatest challenge of his career, and one at which he toiled all his life. He felt the social necessity for religion, and he largely rejected orthodox Christianity, and, as the sage who succeeded Carlyle in popular esteem, his answers to the dilemma were public. Dr Harding comments on the possible embarrassment caused to the High Church Benson family by their heretical relation. His brother Tom, however, resolved the same dilemmas dramatically by his conversion to the Roman Church in 1855, which wrecked both his professional and his domestic life, first in Australia and then in England. Nine years later he reconsidered his decision and returned to the Anglican communion; but in 1876, as he was on the point of securing the Chair of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, he reverted to the Catholic Church, and Oxford lost interest in him.

His daughter Mary has recorded the traumatic effects of his spiritual agonizing in the context of his home life. She herself, however, was later to flutter ecclesiastical dove-cots on her own account with her phenomenally successful novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), in which a young priest imperils his marriage (much like her father) by his dawning conviction that, in Matthew Arnold's words, "miracles do not happen", and that all the supernatural elements of Christianity are a sham. Robert Elsmere, to the dismay of his wife, feels obliged to renounce his orders, and goes on to achieve sainthood in the secular context of the East End slums. *Robert Elsmere* is as much a sign of the times, in fact, as *Culture and Anarchy* or even "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" and must have embarrassed the family at Fairy Hill as much as the works of Mary's Uncle Matthew. How, we may wonder, did the pious Bensons regard their unorthodox relations? No evidence is available—though the affection of the Arnolds for Wales and the

Welsh is demonstrated throughout Matthew Arnold's letters. The inaccuracy of the notes, in this context, is the one irritating detail of the book.

BARBARA DENNIS

Gissing: A Life in Books,
JOHN HALPERIN.

Oxford University Press, 1987,
£6.95 (paperback)

John Halperin's study must surely be the definitive biography of George Gissing, and its publication now in paperback should do much to ensure its very welcome place on the shelves of Gissing enthusiasts. Pooling the knowledge of previous biographers and drawing on the unpublished study by the foremost Gissing authority, Pierre Coustillas, Halperin lucidly and dramatically traces the many falls and the occasional rise of one of the most prolific of Victorian novelists. And with remarkable skill Halperin succeeds within this chronological framework in dealing with Gissing's entire literary output. The result is a full-length but never tedious literary work in its own right.

In the light of this achievement my reservations may appear hypercritical since they are not addressed specifically either at Halperin's craft or at his knowledge of George Gissing. Nevertheless, some words are perhaps necessary on the place of biography within Gissing studies, especially as they have a relevance for the study of other writers.

Halperin's subject is Gissing. Gissing's subjects, Halperin tells us, are sex, money, and class, dovetailing into the single subject of marriage. The problem for me is not that this observation has been made before, which it has, but that in dealing with these topics Halperin rarely allows himself to consider their significance within a wider perspective. For example, Halperin ascribes to Gissing a sexual fantasy which recurs in the novels, that of being married to a respectable woman whilst sleeping with a (redeemed) prostitute. To be sure, Gissing himself married two lower-class women, one probably a prostitute, but this shows not that such fantasies are purely personal, despite the personal investment, but that Gissing's fiction deals with contemporary themes. One needs to look at Victorian attitudes to sex in marriage and

the role of prostitution in order to see beyond Halperin's conclusion that Gissing's sexual fantasies "embodied a measure of sado-masochism". Wider influences are at work.

The same is true of the morbidity Halperin finds in Gissing's attitude to death: Gissing certainly visited many cemeteries on his travels abroad, as Halperin notes, but one would want to know how typical such behaviour was before judging it as odd. We might then be able to reconcile it with Gissing's absence from his first wife's funeral; here Halperin quite helpfully draws attention to the popular practice of paying others to represent the mourners.

Perhaps this is indeed hypercriticism. Halperin's subject is Gissing and understandably he analyses Gissing's behaviour in terms of personal psychology rather than in terms of Victorian culture. And the book is already a long one. Nevertheless, whilst Halperin's approach produces a lively biography, I find it unhelpful in his discussion of Gissing's fiction, which is after all the basis of interest in Gissing.

According to Halperin, Gissing's work "demands of the reader an awareness of biographical matters for fullest understanding." Certainly as more biographical details have emerged since Gissing's death it has become increasingly difficult to read the novels without reference to the life, and Halperin's study is particularly good in drawing the parallels between the biography and the fiction. Yet I think it insufficient to use such parallels primarily to explain the frame of mind of the author of the fiction, to give the novels the status of what Halperin calls "a spiritual autobiography."

Halperin's thesis is that the flow from life to art is in Gissing a two-way movement and that "Gissing used his fiction as a sort of testing-laboratory for actuality". This is seen particularly, according to Halperin, in Gissing's second marriage. Gissing's meeting with Edith Underwood in September 1890 and the relief of his (sexual) loneliness enabled him to recommence and finish *New Grub Street*. However, his marriage to Edith Underwood in the following February followed the miserable pattern worked out in several of the plots of *New Grub Street*. Similarly, as Peachey leaves his wife in *In the Year of Jubilee*, written in 1894, so Gissing was to act and feel when he left Edith in 1897. "The immense power of *In the Year of Jubilee*," Halperin concludes, "like that of *New Grub Street*, lies in its autobiographical content."

The basic problem of this biographical/spiritual autobiography approach is its somewhat simplistic division between life and art. All that Halperin says of the novels seems fair and reasonable if we separate the life from the fiction (though there is an unreasonable tendency to use autobiographical content as a way of discriminating between the good novels and the bad), but it is not such a huge step from such observations to argue that if Gissing's actions and the actions of his protagonists coincide then both are subjected to similar cultural forces. Indeed, Gissing himself held the view that the worth of his novels should be judged according to how they portrayed contemporary life. The parallels between Gissing's fiction and his life are extremely important, but not because Gissing may have been punishing himself by entering a marriage he had foreseen would prove disastrous, but because they both realize behavioural narratives latent in late-Victorian society. If Gissing's fiction was a testing laboratory, it was a testing laboratory for a whole social reality, for the way a society defines itself through and by its narratives.

The weakness of Halperin's biography is very much the weakness of the biographical project as a whole, that of privileging the life of the individual. This does of course produce an interesting book but it should be remembered that biography is never neutral, that it too as a genre contributes to our perception of the world. What I am therefore drawing attention to here is the necessity for a wider understanding of the forces that surround and to some extent create the individual, precisely those forces such as sex, money, and class which were Gissing's subjects. In this way we can come to see the limitations of the division between the life of the individual and art, and, getting beyond a simplistic biographical account of Gissing's fiction, understand it as a staging of Victorian culture. This to be sure is a complex project and one that can take many forms, but with the publication of this definitive biography of George Gissing it is to be hoped that the limited biographical project has run its course and that the new project can address itself more thoroughly to the task of analysing the many parallels between Gissing's life and fiction within a more rigorous framework.

ANDREW HASSAM

Caitlin: Life with Dylan Thomas,
CAITLIN THOMAS with GEORGE
TREMLETT.

Secker and Warburg, 1986, £10.95.

In 1985 George Tremlett spent three weeks in Catania at Caitlin Thomas's home. There he recorded fifty hours of interviews which produced 250,000 words rearranged and edited into the 85,000 words of the volume now under review. It is a book to be read with caution. Not only is it about a relationship that ended a long time ago and, then, was often hazed with alcohol, but we have also to wonder about the effect of the editing on what purport to be Caitlin's own words and the effect on the editing itself of the book's determinedly popular appeal. To judge from the provision of basic information it aims at the non-literary reader for whom Richard Hughes has to be identified as "the author of *A High Wind in Jamaica*", Montale as "one of the most distinguished Italian poets" and who, to judge from the insertion of basic biographical information into Caitlin's narrative knows little of Dylan Thomas's career. And the text is organized to make the most of Caitlin's revelations about sexual life with Dylan, with asides featuring Augustus John and others: the first chapter describes Caitlin's first meeting and love-making with Dylan, Chapter Four ends with the repetition of the preface's observation that their main marital problem was, as she puts it, "that I never had an orgasm in all my years with Dylan". Why this was a greater problem than, say, the couple's chronic lack of cash is never explained. A further reason for caution is that Tremlett writes as a family friend: the history of the *genre* bears mute (and not so mute) witness to the dire effects of that relationship on the would-be candid biographer.

That said, Tremlett's text is lively and compulsive reading, albeit invariably sad and occasionally harrowing. Caitlin's account of her upbringing is a useful supplement to her sister, Nicolette Devas's *Two Flamboyant Fathers*; her description of life with Augustus John and his circle is notable for its vivid (and slightly comic) account of Augustus John raping her after each of numerous portrait sittings and of his jealousy of Dylan, and for her description of unrequited love for Caspar John.

But the bulk of the book is about married life with Dylan and though the standard account of this—in Ferris's *Dylan Thomas* supplemented

by his edition of the *Collected Letters*—is not substantially altered, modern frankness provides new details of their sex-life, of Caitlin's abortions, of Dylan's "femininity", and blow-by-blow accounts of their quarrels. And the widow adds her weight to what Paul Ferris suggests in his biography, that whatever Dylan's general psychological and physiological state (in Caitlin's view neither were of mortal seriousness) his death seems to have been the direct result of dubious medical attention. We learn also, for the first time with certainty, that the death anticipated the break-up of the marriage. This last fact notwithstanding, central to this new memoir is Caitlin's expression of her deep and enduring love for her long-dead husband. Her final words on the subject are very moving:

I still feel that Dylan is with me . . . I felt he was right for me from the very beginning, and if you think someone is meant for you, you can accept a lot . . . Our love was pretty simple, really . . .

. . . much of my last thirty years has been an emotional blank: I haven't felt the same intensity of emotions since Dylan died. I feel as though I am out of this world; I just keep going, that's all, and I am very attached to my children.

The force of such feelings survives time and editing. They are essentially a gloss on the title and theme of Caitlin's Thomas's first book, the anguished and inchoately impressive *Leftover Life to Kill* (1957). Such moments of deeply-felt reflection comprise the most valuable parts of this new exploration and succeed in making two points.

First, that Caitlin's love did not help her towards a full understanding of her husband. Of course she had a fine grasp of aspects of Dylan's character: she realized at an early stage that "underneath all the external flamboyance, Dylan was a fairly conventional man" and "a typical Welsh nonconformist at heart". That we now see clearly his provincialism, suburbanism, and middle-classness is a tribute to Caitlin's quick perception. But she saw these qualities as faults, and from her own point of view as the aristocratic Celt who was also the true bohemian they may well have been. We are slowly realizing, as she did not, that they are the source of Thomas's poetic strengths; his writing, for so long seen as a stylized and perhaps *avant garde* reaction to prosaic social routine, in fact

depends upon its links with it. Dylan Thomas is important because he celebrates the middle-class, suburban world, which might seem surprising to those who watched his more outrageous antics or read his work superficially.

The second point is a version of the first. Caitlin can only puzzle over the relationship between the deeply-flawed human being and the fine poet. "Genius is selfish", she surmises, and "I could see some God-given quality in him, something special". To say that he often behaved abominably is an understatement; Caitlin's sense of pain at his failure to turn up at the hospitals when the children were born and the way he left her "to face the abortions alone" still persists. There was, she concludes, "some part of Dylan that could not come to terms with life . . . [with] . . . loyalty to one woman, having babies, deaths in the family, kindness to friends . . . It's quite a common thing in people, but it's strange in a poet whose finest work was analysing life, birth and death".

"Strange" is as far as she (and we) can get. Certainly she doesn't get far with Dylan's poetry: the observation about his "finest work", supported by a brief reference to "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines", is unusual in a book mainly concerned with the personal rather than the creative side of Dylan. In a letter to Paul Ferris in 1977 Caitlin insisted that she was "not clever enough to read the poetry". Now she is less modest, stressing her liking for the "short, passionate poems like 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion' or 'The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower'" and later "simplifying" poems like "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October". Occasionally, she tells us, Dylan would read drafts to her, ask her opinion and sometimes accept suggestions. But such references hardly convince us that she played much of a part in his literary life. And, to judge from this memoir, she could not offer him any knowledgeable criticism.

The point is important in emphasizing that "loneliness" is a key concept in Dylan Thomas's life and one that has considerable critical potential: he was ostensibly at odds with the world of his upbringing, had no close friends who could command his constant loyalty, the most solitary of professions, and a marriage to a woman whose lack of intellectual grip and understanding of his personal complexities, together with the bitterness she felt at the way her life had gone and at her husband's treatment of her, her own drinking and *genuine* disdain for conventional

behaviour, isolated him, paradoxically, within a loving relationship.

It is idle to speculate on what might have been if Thomas had not married her or if, in 1953, they had gone their separate ways. All that can be said is that their life together was a context for many fine poems. To amend a famous opening: out of the sighs came much of great and enduring value. *Caitlin: Life with Dylan Thomas*, read with care, is a fascinating insight into a life and world that is still not properly understood.

JAMES A. DAVIES

The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales,

Edited by MEIC STEPHENS.

Oxford University Press, 1986, £17.50.

The first thing to be said of *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* is that, like any good companion, it is thoroughly enjoyable. It is also informative and wide-ranging; it wears its evident learning lightly; it is not without a sense of humour; in the areas in which I can judge, it achieves a decent level of accuracy (something one cannot say of all guides and companions); and it moves between Welsh and English with commendable facility. Although its 2,825 entries are the work of 222 contributors, a harmonious tone and an admirable sense of proportion is everywhere evident. The submission of entries in the English and Welsh languages could not have made the editor's task easy but the very process of close application to language may very well have proved an aid to achieving so homogeneous a result.

Just under half the entries are devoted to authors, the majority of whom wrote in Welsh. A few English writers, among them Arnold, Borrow, Hopkins, Kilvert and Peacock, whose work "touched on Wales and the Welsh" are included; authors such as Mrs Hemans, born in Liverpool but who lived for some twenty-five years in north Wales, are noted, as are some English works with Welsh subjects, such as the play attributed to Robert Armin (the actor who played Lear's Fool), *The Valiant Welshman* (1615), and T. W. H. Crosland's *Taffy was a Welshman* (1912). The cross-referencing of authors and entries generally is an important feature of the book and is well done. Possibly this could have been extended a little further to

include titles of translated works which are discussed only under their first-language titles, such as Saunders Lewis's *Treason and Tomorrow's Wales* and, even more usefully, the medieval mystery play, *The Three Kings from Cologne*. There are suggestions for further reading after many entries and these are well chosen.

The second largest category of entries is devoted to prosody, literary genres (with special reference to Welsh literature), motifs, manuscripts, serials, novels, verse, story collections and anthologies. But, as the editor correctly states, "the book is much more than a gazetteer of writers and their works". It is a genuine *companion* to literature and has entries on those, from patriots to politicians, saints to soldiers, villains and eccentrics, who have contributed to Welsh life and history. There are entries on customs and games, on folk traditions and sports, trade unions and political movements, on institutions and events. Thus, Devolution and, under Temperance, Sunday Closing are discussed (Neil Kinnock's rebellion against his own party in the campaign for the former being given prominent mention); there are entries on such topics—taken at random—as hiraeth, cnapan, noson lawen, knitting nights, pilnos, Old King Cole, love-spoons, the summer birch, drovers, *Rebecca* and the riots that gave that enterprising journal its name, corgis and corn dollies. It might have been handy to have listed the many castles discussed under the heading, "Castle". The origin of the "Angels of Mons" legend is found under the "Bowmen of Agincourt"; there is space for a joke against the Welsh under "Welsh Rabbit"—St Peter's cry of "Caws pob!" ("Toasted cheese!") to clear heaven of Welshmen clamouring for the best jobs; and there are succinct accounts of the Welsh language, Patagonia, grammar schools, the Demetae, the Battle of Bosworth (a little too full, this one), and many more. A note on the pronunciation of Welsh and a chronology of the history of Wales are also provided. It really is a rich haul and can fairly claim to be a cultural, historical and social companion. The critical element in the entries is judicious and condescension is avoided in commenting on entries in the popular field—on Max Boyce, say, or "We'll Keep a Welcome". There is the very occasional uncertainty of tone, in, for example, the suggestion that Mrs Hemans's "fondness for the scenery of north Wales was doubtless sincere".

It is easy to suggest for any work that must perforce be selective items that might have been

included. Shakespeare's Welsh characters (especially the Lady who sings in Welsh) and Jonson's *For the Honour of Wales* deserve entries (if not Fielding's *The Welsh Opera*), and Welsh gold, mutation, and satire might have been expected in the *Companion*. But space is always short and much had to be omitted. However, in so generously-framed a companion, an area that strikes me as done less than justice is music. There are entries on hymns and hymn-tunes, on certain songs, the harp, Cerdd Dant, and Stable Loft Singing, for example, so music is not ignored, but I am surprised not to find an entry for Music itself, nor for Chorus, Choral Singing, Song, or Male Voice Choir, nor for one of Wales's contemporary glories, the Welsh National Opera. One might think that the South Wales Voice is restricted to *Llais Llafur!*

One or two minor modifications seem desirable. St David's, Lampeter, was not concerned only to enrol candidates for the Anglican ministry; a shorter course was offered to non-conformists from early days and the fourth charter of 1896 reaffirmed that the College's practice had always been to "receive and educate any person whatsoever, whether destined for Holy Orders or not" (D. T. W. Price, *A History of St David's University College Lampeter*, 1977, i, 167). St David's, incidentally, does not deserve to be included in the general stricture in the entry on the University of Wales that the University was slow to promote the study of Anglo-Welsh literature. The entry for Carol makes no mention that this term was originally applied to a round dance; possibly in Wales it was only found in the sung form but that might well be made clear. Rugby was played in Wales before the 1870s and it was not then "confined to the coastal towns" alone. As D. T. W. Price states, "In the 1860s St David's College had a good fifteen, which may indeed have been the first established team in Wales" (i, 152). And, a final Lampeter contribution: Unitarianism in Wales goes back more than a century before the date given in the *Companion* for the establishment of the first meeting-house (c. 1794). If I remember rightly from living nearby, Caeronnen, Cellan, was founded in 1654.

But let not these minor quibbles dissuade anyone from enjoying a thoroughly useful and a most entertaining book.

PETER DAVISON

[A Welsh edition, *Cydymaith i Lenyddiaeth Cymru*, is published by the University of Wales Press.]

Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History,
ROLAND MATHIAS.

Poetry Wales Press, 1987, £5.95 (paperback).

First the Oxford *Companion*, now an illustrated history: these are brighter days for Anglo-Welsh literature. God has indeed put a new wick in the sun. Initially *Anglo-Welsh Literature* might raise a few eyebrows; to cover five centuries in little more than a hundred pages, half of which are devoted to the period before 1900, smacks of the superficial and unbalanced, but this emphatically Roland Mathias is not. His survey sets literature firmly in the social context and his broader concerns—the historical relationship within Wales of English language, society and writing to their Welsh counterparts—marshall a text where assessments of individual writers seem rather less important; they are subsumed within a persuasive social and cultural analysis.

For the earlier periods the approach works particularly well. Mathias here performs work for which he is outstandingly equipped. And it is pioneering work; a comprehensive mapping of previously obscure terrain. The erudition goes hand-in-hand with a sober critical judgement. His authors are mostly unread and, so it seems, unreadable: by his own estimate no more than a half-dozen Anglo-Welsh authors of the period before 1900 produced imaginative literature of enduring value; they are of interest sociologically or not at all. Outside the domain of literature, the record is better, with early offerings in history, religion and science being particularly impressive. This sixteenth-century outflow is a manifestation of the stiffening pride and rapid advance of Welshmen under the Tudor crown. With the Stuart succession begins the slow decline of national confidence, a process not arrested until the eighteenth century and the naturalization of Methodism. Religious dissent had the effect of further alienating the English-speaking minority, and Mathias's chapters on the Anglo-Welsh gentry and bourgeoisie are a dismal catalogue of non-achievement, a situation he sees bound up with "confidence and viable tradition": "those who spoke and wrote only English, of whatever class, were farther than ever from a Welsh tradition and disinclined, except in rare cases of bitterness, to use it: English verse models were inevitably to hand, and those of the simplest: the determination to develop even an occasional Welsh subject became progressively feebler".

The nineteenth century affords the greatest contrast between literary achievements in Welsh (across a wide intellectual range and reflecting a strengthened nationalist purpose) and the pallid growths of English-language poetry and fiction. Faced by such paucity at the centre, Mathias resists recruiting indiscriminately to the ranks of the Anglo-Welsh. Henry Vaughan remains a Metaphysical ("the love of his native region is not in doubt, but the Welshness is in the location of it, not in the poetry"), though certain nineteenth-century immigrants, by their long residence and receptivity to Wales, merit consideration: the poets range from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Felicia Hemans. Mrs Hemans's popularity mystifies modern readers, as does Carmarthen-born Lewis Morris's at the turn of the century; his *Collected Works* sold 11,000 copies in five years. Both of course were left trailing by the novelist Allen Raine, who gave Anglo-Welsh literature its first true commodity texts. Writers like these remind us that literary history is also the history of publishers and readers. (Mrs Hemans, one might note, was published by Blackwood.)

Chapter Eleven, "Changes in Society", provides an excellent point of access for readers particularly interested in twentieth-century literature. Taking a cue from Glyn Jones, it sketches the background of writers who contributed most to the great outpouring of the 1930s and 40s; those who grew up in South Wales between the wars and during the Depression, of unexalted social rank, nonconformist in religion and radical in politics. Their background ruptured the social basis of English-language writing in Wales, allying them to their Welsh-language contemporaries. English-language authors of this generation came from Welsh-speaking families and were intimately in touch with a Welsh way of life. For Roland Mathias this proximity to Welsh tradition classically defines the Anglo-Welsh core and shapes his view of modern developments. The so-called "first flowering" he sees as a presentation (involving more than a little exploitation) of Welsh subject matter for a substantially English market. The overlapping "second movement", with its call to an older Welsh tradition "in which the poet had a duty to his community as well as to his muse", performs a healing mission.

Mathias's discussion of movements and trends rarely blinds him to individuality: particular authors are recognized for their creative achievement as much as for the worthiness of

their Anglo-Welsh intention, though a book of this length can barely encompass that glorious outburst fifty years ago when, in little more than a decade, there arrived Dylan Thomas, Margiad Evans, Jack Jones, Geraint Goodwin, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Jones, David Jones, Idris Davies, Richard Llewelyn, Vernon Watkins, Alun Lewis, Gwyn Thomas, R. S. Thomas and Emyr Humphreys. Comments on these and others are delivered with the practitioner's awareness and a sometimes refreshing astringency. Gwyn Jones escapes the schematic net: at once translator of the *Mabinogion* and unabashed champion of the first flowering: "I think they arrived in the best possible way, with the maximum of offence and the maximum of effect". Gwyn Jones has also spoken of the Welsh tradition as a repository needed by Anglo-Welsh writers, the great bank on which they all draw. Roland Mathias makes a similar point and in acknowledging that many of the younger English-language writers of Wales are now oblivious to that tradition, that their models and influences have become naturally and inevitably English, he foresees the demise of Anglo-Welsh literature as anything more than a geographical label. Though he sketches scenarios that might allow for a literature of Wales true to the tradition he celebrates, through his final chapter sound the requiem chords.

Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History might have placed more emphasis on the book trade. If authors make books, so do publishers, reviewers and readers: the forces that institutionalize authors, with vital consequences for reputation. Roland Mathias mentions the varying commercial impact of categories of writer, the audience for R. S. Thomas as opposed to Dylan Thomas, the changing readership for an Emyr Humphreys or a Dannie Abse; literary historians will need also to consider how Dylan Thomas, in a way not matched in modern literature, simultaneously engaged two quite distinct readerships, one still happily oblivious of the other. The basic fact of Welsh book-trade history is, of course, that the Principality never developed its own publishing houses (as opposed to printer-publishers). But the situation is changing and in Welsh Arts Council subsidies for local publishers Mathias sees a significant shift: as Anglo-Welsh authors publish more frequently in Wales so their access to London reviewing columns diminishes. There are consequences here for readership; this, it is argued, has now come to include a disproportionately large number of Welsh speakers. Allied to local

developments are major changes in the London (one might say international) book trade: London publishers, looking back on Anglo-Welsh bestsellers, lament that contraction of the market for "regional" fiction. One can only speculate on the implications for writing from Wales, traditionally rooted in place, but with or without Arts Council subsidy there will be new circuits for the Anglo-Welsh book.

A sense of the book trade sheds light on a matter raised more than once by Roland Mathias: the publication of *My People*. He revives the notion (it has surfaced in the new *Companion*) that Caradoc Evans was led by the *The Perfidious Welshman* and *Taffy was a Welshman* towards a lucrative English market for anti-Welsh books. Evans attached himself to more than one literary tradition (including that of Welsh underground satire represented by Thomas Cynfelyn Benjamin), none designed to make him rich. As a purveyor of popular fiction in the columns of *Ideas* he knew what kind of book sold and could have been under no misapprehension about Johnson and Crosland. The undoubted success of Crosland's *The Unspeakable Scot* (1902) spawned a host of imitators, none of which made money. Crosland comments on this himself, and a glance through the *English Catalogue* confirms their lack of commercial success. Crosland placed *Taffy was a Welshman* with Ewart, Seymour and Co.; meanwhile Hutchinson were pushing Allen Raine sales up to two million. No wonder Caradoc's reply to the repeated accusation that he sold himself for English gold was that if *that* had been the intention he would have fashioned "nice false novels" about Wales; then "I might gather enough wealth in three years to enable me to retire". And anything less like a commodity text than *My People* is difficult to imagine.

Ninety-eight illustrations adorn *Anglo-Welsh Literature*. They are interesting and attractive, though with a couple only of full-page dimension one wonders whether the larger format has been fully exploited. And the 5½ inch line-length is excessive. But at this price the book is a bargain and an excellent addition to the impressive Poetry Wales Press list.

JOHN HARRIS

Richard Hughes: Novelist,
RICHARD POOLE.

Poetry Wales Press, 1987, £12.95.

Richard Poole is a familiar name to anyone interested in the writings of Richard Hughes. He edited a collection of Hughes's North African stories for Chatto & Windus in 1979, *In the Lap of Atlas*: brought together that fascinating selection of Hughes's essays, *Fiction as Truth*, five years later, and is himself author of one of the most stimulating articles on the novelist, "*In Hazard: The Theory and Practice of Richard Hughes's Art*". Mr Poole has now produced the most significant work yet to appear on Richard Hughes, being a critical survey of his entire career. The most substantial work available on him, until now, has been Peter Thomas's monograph in the *Writers of Wales* series, published in 1973, three years before the novelist's death. With this new work, we now have—in a compact 253 pages—a biography, a critical introduction to the works, and a bibliography of his principal writings, including essays, introductions and reviews as well as the fiction.

Mr Poole prefaces the biographical section of his book with the warning that, "I have sought to compete neither with Penny Hughes's delightful Memoir of her father (*Richard Hughes: Author, Father*) nor with the work of Hughes's authorized biographer, Richard Perceval Graves. Rather, my purpose has been to sketch in enough of the life to show what sort of writer Hughes was." Even this "sketch" shows what a very eventful life Hughes led. It would indeed have been difficult for anyone born in the last year of the nineteenth century to have led a completely uneventful life. Hughes served briefly during the First World War (though without seeing action), and held an important post in the Admiralty between 1940 and 1945 (after which he was presented with an OBE). He travelled widely in Eastern Europe after coming down from Oxford in 1922, becoming involved briefly in Balkan politics. During the later nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties he made several trips into the interior of North Africa. And even as he approached sixty, he made an extended journey from Malta, around Greece, to Istanbul in a tiny sailing boat, together with his daughter Penelope and a few friends. After reading this *curriculum vitae*, however, what particularly remains in the memory is an incident from one night in the middle of the Second World War.

Hughes was fire-watching from the roof of the Empire Hotel in Bath (requisitioned by the Admiralty) when the first of the “Baedeker Raids” on the city was made by German bombers: his reaction was not simply one of fear or horror, however, but also of awe and wonder at this real-life *son et lumière*. Poole quotes Hughes’s reaction from his account (in a BBC broadcast):

As a spectacle, for sheer pyrotechnic grandeur, this was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever witnessed. Far too beautiful to be frightening. You may be shocked at this: I can’t help it, I am telling truly what I felt. Every fire had a colour of its own, which changed from minute to minute. Burning buildings were flung so high they almost seemed to hang in the air before they fell again . . .

One suspects that Hughes was shocked at his own intoxicated reaction. Compared with the poignant account of the raid’s victims later in the piece, this seems an almost cold-blooded, aesthetic appreciation of the event as a massive firework display. Hughes, of course, was the first to appreciate these utterly contradictory reactions within himself. An appreciation of paradox is detectable from his earliest novels, but this incident seems to have moved him especially, and he also discussed it in a letter home at the time (quoted in his daughter’s memoir). This apprehension of the undeniable co-existence of the utterly beautiful and the utterly cruel in a single “historical” event may even have been one of the seeds which resulted in his ambitious last project, *The Human Predicament*.

In the second part of Mr Poole’s book, a chapter is devoted to each of the novels with another on the early works, interspersed by two separate sections entitled “Theory”. An immediately noticeable aspect of this critical part is the absence of a rigorously consistent approach to the works. As the author makes plain in his introduction, though, this is deliberate: “I have no single, dominant thesis to propound . . . I have sought, by identifying and attempting to keep in play as many significant threads as possible, to explore as much of the tapestry as I could in the space at my disposal.” If there is no overall vision of Hughes’s canon, then, it does contain much else which is full of interest.

There are revelations about Hughes’s exploitation of his source material (in particular about

SS Phemius, real-life counterpart of *Archimedes*, the experiences of which in a Caribbean hurricane provided him with the raw material for *In Hazard*). There are many occasions where one feels that Mr Poole is absolutely right and that his conclusions chime with one’s own (always an agreeable sensation); there are occasions, too, where one disagrees with him, and—where a case is properly argued—this is equally enjoyable: with Richard Hughes in particular, contradiction is as important to the apprehension of a work as to its conception. An example of the former is the characterization of *A High Wind in Jamaica* as “a novel which asks to be read as a post-Darwinian fable.” This is spot-on: not only in seeing the competition for survival between ruthless children and not-terribly-ruthless pirates, but just as tellingly in the similarity of *tone* which is identified between Charles Darwin’s descriptive prose and that of Hughes’s ambiguously cold-blooded narrator in the novel. We should also be grateful to Mr Poole for his bringing into the light and discussing of Hughes’s lesser works. If the novels have had little critical attention paid to them, these poems, plays and stories have been largely ignored; indeed, the poems and “grownups’” stories have been out-of-print since the nineteen-twenties! Of particular interest is the reproduction of Hughes’s undergraduate poem, “The Heathen’s Song”, for the first time since its notorious appearance in *The Isis* in 1921, when it almost resulted in his expulsion from Oxford University for blasphemy. The failure by so many to realize that the poem, mocking the gentle God of the early Christians, was an exercise in irony, in an assumed voice, curiously pre-figures the misinterpretation of Hughes’s major works which has continued to this day.

There are certainly reservations one would wish to express about *Richard Hughes: Novelist*. It does contain a fair number of errors in spelling, punctuation and even in factual detail. Unless there is evidence of a widespread sloppiness on the author’s part, however, such things ought not to be pored over in a review. To do so would be to take up a disproportionate amount of space and thus give a false impression of the work under discussion.

More seriously, there is the matter of Mr Poole’s methodology. Firstly, the “theory” chapters sit rather uneasily between those which deal with the actual texts. They do contain much interesting material, and for that very reason would be much better integrated with the dis-

cussions on the works rather than segregated in this manner. The second "theory" chapter, in particular, includes much which would have strengthened that on *The Fox in the Attic* and *The Wooden Shepherdess*. Then there is the question of Mr Poole's treatment of unpublished material. In a review of *Fiction as Truth* (*Powys Review*, 16) I expressed concern that Mr Poole was not as stringent as he might have been in his editorial practice, thinking in particular of the "Preface to his Poetry" where matter from two separate manuscript sources had been intercut, without any indication of which was which. In this book, too, arguments are supported by selective quotation from unpublished material unavailable to the reader. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to evaluate such quotation oneself, and thus to engage fully with the author's argument.

A final reservation concerns another matter where the book makes difficulties for itself. Apart from Peter Thomas's monograph, Mr Poole does not refer directly to a single other critical writing on Richard Hughes. Of course, it is fair enough for him to consider that this is his book. Nevertheless, a small corpus of critical writing on Hughes does exist—a few dozen articles and books published in the United States and Europe as well as Britain—and this work would have been the more valuable for entering into discussion with them. This is a pity since, by isolating his own discussion from this discourse, Mr Poole weakens rather than strengthens his own often very good arguments, and is unfair to himself.

These cavils apart, however, this is undoubtedly the most interesting, as well as the most extensive work yet to appear on Richard Hughes. If somewhat unfocussed as a whole, it is full of insights, is well-written and contains an extremely useful bibliography (up-dated from that which appears in *Fiction as Truth*). Richard Poole and Poetry Wales Press are to be congratulated on this readable and timely introduction to one of Wales's most eminent yet neglected novelists.

PAUL BENNETT MORGAN

*The British Novel Since The Thirties:
An Introduction,*
RANDALL STEVENSON.

Batsford, 1986, £7.95 (paperback).

Randall Stevenson's book "is directed towards . . . showing how the novel has developed in Britain in the past half-century or so." Stevenson believes that as the present century moves towards its close there appears to be more need "for a general assessment of what has happened in fiction since Joyce wrote." His study assumes that what has occurred has been qualitatively worthwhile, and that practically "there were obviously limits to the number of authors who can be discussed in a single volume, and to the extent of attention to each." Consequently, "major authors' careers are considered in detail," non-major authors "are approached through concentration on one or a few representative examples of their work." Many of the authors are still actively writing, their work may well take different directions, and in any case Stevenson's concern is "not only with surveying the work of individual novelists, but with indicating general patterns to which their fiction contributes; developments in the vision of the novel in the later twentieth century as a whole." So those disappointed that their favourite author or novel has been omitted should be able to fit them into one or other of the developments described in the study which is "intended for non-specialist readers—for any interested novel-readers, in fact" in addition to literary students. Thus "conventional terminology" has mostly been retained throughout although Stevenson's writing must have been influenced "by the evolution of theories of narrative" produced over the last two decades or so.

There are six sections to *The British Novel Since the Thirties*, references at the end (pp. 231-43), a select bibliography (pp. 244-46) which is annotated, an index (pp. 247-57), author-based with titles of novels indexed under their author, and a few concepts indexed such as "allegory", "empire, fiction of," and "interior monologue." The opening section "The Novel, 1900-1930" (pp. 11-29) establishes "particular patterns of evolution arising from the situation of the novel" established during the Modernist period of "the first three decades of the century." (p. 7). Conrad and James are early exponents of what became one of the principal features of modernist fiction: "its desertion of

the perspective of the omniscient narrator—in favour of a more subjective point of view” (p. 15). Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1915-38) is interestingly seen not merely as an “alternative to” realism, but with Compton Mackenzie’s *Sinister Street* (1913-14), Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1915), and Bennett’s *Clayhanger* (1910-18), as late examples of the *bildungsroman*. Ford Madox Ford’s use “of other characters’ reflections” to contribute to “a range of ironically disparate versions of events” has been overshadowed by the achievements of Lawrence and Joyce. The former’s concern was largely with “expansion into new areas of the novel’s subject-matter” and a development of “new fictional styles for presenting subjectivity” (p. 17). Joyce’s experimentation, technically and in terms of subject matter, was so diverse and varied that “later novelists were confronted by the need to come to terms with the possibility of divergence from traditional forms and styles which it had created” (p. 28).

The second chapter “In the Thirties” consists of six sections: “Between the Acts, Politics and Literature in the Nineteen Thirties” (pp. 30-40); “New Realism and the ‘Mild Left’: Christopher Isherwood, George Orwell, Graham Greene” (pp. 34-44); “Fantasy, Marxism and Class: Rex Warner, Edward Upward, Walter Greenwood, Lewis Grassic Gibbon” (pp. 44-51); “Satire and the Right Wing: Wyndham Lewis and Evelyn Waugh” (pp. 51-56); “Politics and Beyond: Compton Mackenzie, L. H. Myers, Ivy Compton-Burnett, John Cowper Powys, Malcolm Lowry, Rosamund Lehmann, William Gerhardie” (pp. 56-63). The “Conclusions” (pp. 63-67), whilst agreeing with conclusions made by other students of the 1930s such as Hynes and Bergonzi that “one of the clearest trends of the age was to reject modernism in favour of realism and political commitment,” points out the obvious fact that “the modernists themselves did not simply cease to write in 1930,” and that Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Durrell, and Flann O’Brien, amongst others, had begun publishing fiction during the thirties (p. 65). There are some most useful generalizing insights in this chapter, and in the book as a whole. For instance, Stevenson remarks that for some modernists the First World War came as an “interruption” to them, and that “the strategy of much of their fiction, with its intense reliance on memory, may be seen as partly directed by a desire to recover or escape back into the benign atmosphere” of pre-war

years. On the other hand, those writers whose youth coincided with the 1914-18 War “were more disposed as a result to confront the ‘nightmare’ of history not through imaginative or aesthetic transformations which partly denied or tried to escape its processes, but through direct, political attitudes which sought to transform reality and historical process themselves” (p. 32).

Chapter Three “War and Post-war, 1940-1956” (pp. 68-122) assesses the developments in the novel as a response to, and consequence of, the 1939-45 War. The first section “The War-time Scene: George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, C. S. Forester, J. B. Priestley, Alexander Baron Evelyn Waugh” (pp. 68-76) brings together diverse authors and work in terms of subject matter, technique and dating. All deal with war-time experience. Stevenson does refer to the technical virtuosity of C. S. Forester’s devices in *The Ship* (p. 73) but relies on P. H. Newby’s accounts in *The Novel 1945-50* of Alexander Baron’s *From the City, From the Plough* (1948) and omits Baron’s other war-time fictional sequences. The second section “No Directions: James Hanley and Henry Green” (pp. 76-81) focusses on novels which “examine one of the strangest of wartime experiences, the Blitz” (p. 77) and “the bizarre effects of the air raids and their challenge to imagination” (p. 78). However, in a rather brash and unsubstantiated generalization, Stevenson observes “Green himself is not only a wartime novelist, but one of the outstanding English writers of the twentieth century” (p. 74); He notes Green’s deletion of pronouns, conjunctions and adjectives from *Living* (p. 86). The four pages on Green (pp. 78-81) need expanding given the large claims made for him. Green is also included in the third section “Innocence and Experience: Henry Green, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, L. P. Hartley, P. H. Newby” (pp. 81-93) where escape from conflict and anxiety in the creation of allegory and fantasy focusing on the concern with childhood, becomes the central motif. The fourth section “Good and Evil: Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Joyce Cary, Philip Toynbee, C. S. Lewis” (pp. 93-105) again uses thematic preoccupation, “good and evil”, to draw together the works of disparate novels and novelists. There is some good critical writing present, for instance on Greene (pp. 97-98) and once again a failure to sustain judgement: why one asks is Joyce Cary “even on the strength of the fresh forces exhibited by *Herself Surprised*,

To be a Pilgrim and the Horse's Mouth alone . . . one of the best of modern English novelists" (p. 102)? The next two sections, "Dream Worlds: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Mervyn Peake, Wyndham Lewis" (pp. 105-109), "Self-condemned: Wyndham Lewis, Malcolm Lowry, William Sansom" (pp. 109-15) are self-explanatory. Stevenson's "Conclusions: The Death of the Heart" (pp. 115-22) sees politics as fading from fiction during and after the war and being replaced "by a greater concentration on some of the moral and religious questions . . . which characterise Victorian novels" (p. 121-22).

There are nine sections and forty novelists cited in the fourth chapter "Recent and Contemporary: The Novel since the Nineteen Fifties" (pp. 123-93). Most are self-explanatory, reflecting a clarity in Stevenson's schematic framework. The first focuses on "'The Angry Decade': William Cooper, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe" (pp. 123-31), the second is concerned with "Beyond Fifties Realism: David Storey and Angus Wilson" (pp. 131-36), the third with "Chronicles: C. P. Snow, Anthony Powell, Henry Williamson" (pp. 136-43)—with some particularly interesting observations here on Powell (pp. 140-41). The fourth, rather perfunctory section, focuses on Ian Fleming, Paul Scott, J. G. Farrell, Julian Mitchell and the literature of "Lost Empire" (pp. 143-49). No doubt the last hasn't been heard of this genre of fiction, nor of the "New Women" (pp. 149-61) genre, section five, with its eight authors in which Doris Lessing appears as the major figure. "The Ineluctable Shadow: Susan Hill, Paul Bailey, Olivia Manning, Richard Hughes, Gabriel Fielding, D. M. Thomas" (pp. 161-68), uses Walter Allen's superb words from his fine *Tradition and Dream* to bring together novels having in common the shadow of war. Major novelists, Golding, Murdoch, Burgess and Spark are wedged together in a section "Old Conflicts and New Synthesis" (pp. 168-84) which has good perceptions on Burgess (pp. 180-82). "Contemporary Gothic" (pp. 184-89) is used to characterize "a Gothic gloom lately deepened by recession and continuing world violence" (p. 188) exhibited in Spark, Bainbridge, McEwan, William Trevor, and Martin Amis. In his section "Conclusions: Martin Amis, David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury" (pp. 189-93) Stevenson expresses the belief that "the English novel in the past two decades has probably come closer than at any previous stage

of the century to combining the various strengths of conventional and of innovative fiction which have been available at least since 1930" (p. 193).

Chapter Five, "Modernism and Post-modernism: the Experimental Novel since 1930" (pp. 194-224), is divided into five sections and a conclusion. There are worthwhile comments in each: "The Autonomy of Language: James Joyce and Samuel Beckett" (pp. 194-200), "Literary Reflections: Flann O'Brien and B. S. Johnson" (pp. 200-203), "The Game of Mirrors: Lawrence Durrell and John Foster" (pp. 203-209), "The French Connection: John Fowles, Samuel Beckett, Nigel Dennis, Christine Brooke-Rose, Rayner Heppenstall, Giles Gordon" (pp. 209-14). There is too short a section on "Free Narrative: Andrew Sinclair, Julian Mitchell, David Cate, John Berger, Alasdair Gray" (pp. 214-18). The conclusion to the chapter (pp. 219-24) does not demonstrate Stevenson at his best. Synthesis becomes too formulaic, there is a loss of accuracy in the attempt to bracket dissimilar writers (see for instance the comments on Beckett and Fowles, p. 224). Similarly the "Postscript: 'English' Fiction in the Twentieth Century" (pp. 225-30) attempts too much.

Naturally there will be criticism of such an attempt to survey so much. Readers of *The Powys Review* will be disappointed in the relatively sparse mention of John Cowper Powys and his brothers. They merit less than two pages (pp. 59-60). John Cowper is a "unique figure"; his "prolix style and amalgam of natural and supernatural, physical and metaphysical, are illustrated in the extraordinary opening sentence of *A Glastonbury Romance*" (p. 59). Llewelyn gets few words as "a distinguished essayist and novelist." J. F. Powys was, Stevenson writes, "a more concise and less clumsy writer than John", whose best-known work is *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (p. 60). But then one can't have everything in life, although John Cowper Powys's 1931 study of Dorothy Richardson does get a mention in a transition passage in Randall Stevenson's well-written but rather plodding monograph.

WILLIAM BAKER

The Presence of the Past,
JEREMY HOOKER.

Poetry Wales Press, 1987, £12.95.

In the sixteen essays which are brought together in this book, the reader is offered a wide range of

critical approaches. The title of the book is taken from the first essay, and although the relationship of the past to contemporary poetry, along with the problem of defining what a sense of history signifies, is a recurring point of reference in many of the essays which follow, the over-all nature of the book is to be a series of discrete discussions linked spasmodically by a debate on "the diversity, complexity, and tensions of the historical sense at work in poetry", and by Jeremy Hooker's sensitive response to the allied problematic of the function of language as the poet's medium. Of Bunting's "rhythmic order" for example, Hooker writes that he both sees it and hears it "in speech, in song, and what he hears he recreates, in the poem's corresponding form."

Besides a general concern for the relationship of history to poetry, Hooker discusses the specific case of Anglo-Welsh poetry. He identifies a creative tension between the traditional, rural historical sense where myth operates as a living force, and a more rigorously polemical Marxist view of the influence of the past on the present. He is quick to point out that there is no crude polarity here. Gwyn A. Williams, the Marxist historian "understands myth in a sense akin to the historical lie, although he is fully aware of its function in shaping history." Williams's response to R. S. Thomas's poem "Welsh History", therefore, is paradoxically both to admire and deplore it. The television series to which Williams's book *When Was Wales?* was linked, served to dramatize the distinct understandings of how the past exists in the present for Wales through its choice of presenters: in the red corner, Gwyn A. Williams; in the blue corner, the late Wynford Vaughan Thomas, the pair of them hitting it off in one of the most unlikely partnerships imaginable.

The Presence of the Past also contains a good deal of detailed discussion of the poetry of individual poets, where close reading of the text excludes development of the larger historical and political perspectives regularly alluded to. The book is clearly intended in part to encourage the reading of a number of less well known poets, and Jeremy Hooker's enthusiasms never fail to be infectious.

The final piece in the book (not strictly an essay) moves to a genre distinct from those which precede it. "Barbarous Reflections" is a series of confessional fragments by a writer who is essentially a poet, and it expresses the misgivings that arise when the creative mind is drawn into the

business of criticism. If Jeremy Hooker displays an unwillingness to get too close to specific political and social issues often raised in connection with poetry elsewhere in this book, then "Barbarous Reflections" begins to explain why. There is an intellectual impasse here; a keen, perceptive sense of the past that sees political and economic forces shaping our sense of the present, of "community", of language and culture. Yet here also is an underlying embarrassment turning to despair when the implications of "explaining" culture in those terms is considered, and when it seems that the future of art might be built on critical foundations that reduce the human condition to such historical determinants:

Poetry too can be a destroyer. Again it is the desire for power that kills: the use of a gift to promote and assert the separated self. Under communism, the State kills or silences poets. Under capitalism, they destroy themselves.

This suggests a writer in the grip of the kind of alienation that can only terminate in frustrated silence.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this book is the way unfamiliar names jostle with the familiar and critically acclaimed. An essay on T. S. Eliot follows a meticulous discussion of Mary Casey's work. Our opportunity to appreciate her remarkable talent has now been extended by the publication of her novel, *The Kingfisher's Wing*. The appearance of the novel post-dates Hooker's essay, yet much of what he has to say about the theme of "aloneness" evident in the poetry is central to a full appreciation of the novel's recreation of the life of Plotinus. Anthony Conran, John Tripp, Robert Minhinick and Gillian Clarke are set down alongside R. S. Thomas, David Jones, Geoffrey Hill and George Oppen, Oppen being discussed in considerable detail over two essays. In the case of Geoffrey Wainwright, Hooker is content to do little more than offer a brief sketch; the same is true of John Tripp. But always the points are stimulating as well as informative; the style of these shorter essays tends to one of hints and suggestions. When, for example, we read that in "The Birth of Venus at Aberystwyth" John Ormond is diminishing the distance, "some would say the regressive distance, from Christian to mythic awareness, and from dogma to archetype", it seems an opportunity missed when Hooker does not pursue the contentious issue implied by his "some would say regressive"

phrase. Why exactly "regressive"? Who says it? Where does the essayist take his stand on this one? One looks for this kind of precision because Hooker clearly declares himself aware that different expressions of historical sense inform the heart of poetic expression, and that the religious and political implications have to be recognized; questions are raised that need detailed discussion on their own terms, yet so often the essays fail to take on the challenge.

It is with the fourteenth essay, "The Poetry of Nearness: Anglo-Welsh poetry in the 1960s", that such issues are indeed squarely faced. For a number of reasons this impressive piece might usefully have been set much earlier in the book; many of Hooker's major concerns are crystallized, and feeling that I was getting to know the writer and where he stood more clearly enabled me to reread many of the earlier, shorter essays

with a much clearer sense of their purpose and an enhanced sense of what was being achieved. Hooker's own sense of "the presence of the past" becomes apparent; he is prepared to get his fingers dirty, and there is a strong note of positive conviction combined with impressive clarity. "I see placelessness", he writes, "which is now widely increasing or in possession, as an effect of imperialism and of technological change . . . Poetry of place, whether hieratic or demotic, historical or mythological, is a poetry of nearness, of presence, of the location of meaning in people and things."

The Anglo-Welsh experience as it is presented here provides an analogue for the problems, the failures and the triumphs, of contemporary British and American poetry.

JOHN WILLIAMS

'This extraordinary book deserves the widest acclaim..'

Charles Lock

THE KINGFISHER'S WING

Mary Casey

'This is an absorbing book, and a book to grow into, with understanding.'

Jeremy Hooker



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