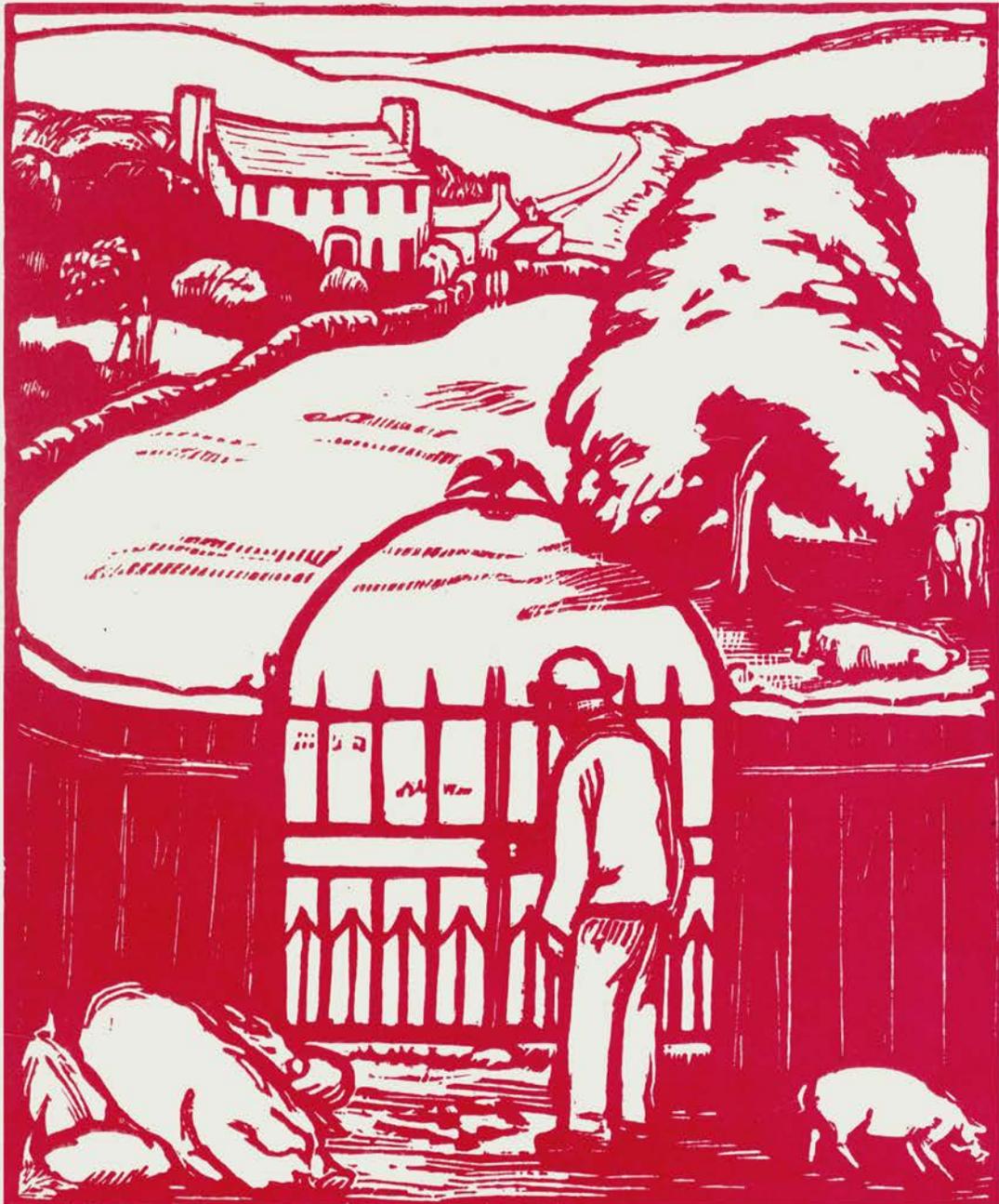


The Powys Review

NUMBER TWENTY-THREE



The Powys Review

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J. Lawrence Mitchell

“One foot in the furrow”: T. F. Powys in East Anglia

Introduction

Theodore Powys never could have written the kind of expansively self-indulgent autobiography that brought John, his older and more loquacious brother, such well-deserved acclaim. Nonetheless, *The Soliloquy of a Hermit*, his first ‘real’ book, is a work that is insistently and obsessively autobiographical; and in it, to borrow the words of Graham Greene, occurs “that moment of crystalization when the dominant theme is plainly expressed, when the private universe becomes visible even to the least sensitive reader” (“Henry James: The Private Universe”). One facet of Powys’s private universe is revealed in the remarkable persistence of a group of related images in his work: images of field and farm, of earth and clay. They are all but ubiquitous in *The Soliloquy*, as the following samples suggest:

A priest *has his roots in the deep darkness* of human desires. (p. 1)

The common man . . . talks about . . . “*driving pigs to market*” “*sowing red wheat*”. (p. 3)

his [the priest’s] is *the soil* in which God practises His divine moods. (p. 3)

I love a *broken roller left in a field* . . . that belongs to a *crippled farmer*, a weakly tottering old man, crooked and bent; all his *farm tools are broken* and tied up with string . . . (p. 5)

God often rests by the side of the roller and watches my little boy play and the *old farmer at plough*. (p. 5)

It is the priest’s duty to *dig in the clay* through which the moods of God pass; (p. 7)

Man is a collection of atoms . . . but always deeply *rooted in the soil*. (p. 7)

The people of the earth are *clay pieces* that the moods of God kindle into life. (p. 7)



High Street, Saxmundham.

We shall not, however, recognize the import of such rustic imagery until we erase from our minds that persistent and powerful picture of Theodore: "of a windy November afternoon, making his way, like Christian with his forlorn pack, to his weekly purgatory at Saxmundham Market" (J.C.P., *Autobiography*, p. 190). John has summoned this "symbol of ultimate desolation", not from Theodore's experience, but from the furthest reaches of his all-too-sympathetic imagination. The allusion to Bunyan betrays the literariness of the image just as his admiration for his brother's alleged "courage in giving orders to those difficult East Anglian peasants" reflects his own fear of the inarticulate farm-workers in Sussex from whom he so evidently shied.

Once John's misleading vision of Theodore in purgatory is set aside, the agricultural, earthy images in *The Soliloquy* reveal themselves as markers of Theodore's buried life; they suggest how much Powys the writer draws upon Powys the farmer of yesteryear. So to understand the former, we must search out the unknown Powys—and we will find him in East Anglia, the "country of his past" as D. H. Lawrence calls it, where the topography of his imagination first found shape.

Norfolk interlude

The Powys family had East Anglian connections through their mother Mary Cowper Powys (née Johnson), whose father, the Reverend William Cowper Johnson, was Rector of Yaxham, and, from 1880, of Northwold, Norfolk. He was also a Canon of Norwich Cathedral. Both John, in his *Autobiography*, and Littleton, in *The Joy Of It*, have recorded memories of holidays spent with their Johnson relatives, recalling with particular affection the devotion of their maiden aunts, Dora and Etta. "Aunt Dora was never a teacher, she was *one of us* . . . my father and all us sons simply adored Aunt Dora; & I do still" wrote John in a letter to Louis Wilkinson, 8 November 1956. Theodore visited Yaxham at least once, in 1878, at the age of three, in the company of

his older brothers; but Northwold and its environs became, in Littleton's words, their boyhood Earthly Paradise. Here they spent three glorious weeks of many a summer, obliged only to report for meals on time, to participate in post-breakfast bible-readings, and to attend church on Sundays. Their days were filled with the kind of activities beloved by children of any generation: boating, fishing, and exploring the world of nature. Since their grandfather had thoughtfully bought a flat-bottomed punt for them to use, they could paddle lazily along the tributary of the Wissey which abutted the Rectory garden, or brave the waters of the swift but shallow 'big river', as they called it. The waters themselves seem to have been a fisherman's dream, to judge by Littleton's account; he mentions the presence of chub, dace, gudgeon, perch, pike, roach, and trout. Littleton was, of course, the main enthusiast, when it came to fishing, and soon became the family expert too. John once presented Littleton with a little notebook in which to record his observations; this still survives in the Bissell Collection, together with the impressive pen-and-ink drawings with which Littleton embellished his notes—evidence that like his sister Gertrude he had inherited some of his mother's artistic talent. And, one summer, when Littleton was for some reason not going to Northwold, he conscientiously drew a map of the river for young Theodore, detailing the location of various kinds of fish and the best way to catch them. Perhaps it was the memory of these idyllic boyhood summers as much as the family connection that drew T.F.P. back to Norfolk in 1894. In a letter to J.C.P., moreover, we have explicit testimony to the lasting impression Northwold made upon him. The letter was in response to one from J.C.P. who was with "Old Littleton mostly in our ancient haunts at Northwold" (as J.C.P. had described his plans to Llewelyn in a letter from Patchin Place, 19 April 1929). T.F.P. writes movingly and in surprising detail:

I have often dreamed that I was at Northwold again. But I don't expect that I shall ever get

there. [I expect] that the little pond where the water lilies and the frogs used to be is filled up. I almost feel as if Northwold is buried like a corpse and the house filled up like the pond with earth. I remember the Horse flies. But I should like to have smelt the pig sty where we used to get those little pink worms.

(T.F.P. to J.C.P., 7 Aug. 1929)

After nearly two and a half years as a farming pupil in the friendly haven of Rendham, why should the nineteen year old Theodore have moved so far north (relatively speaking) into a different county? For one thing, there were those strong family connections in Norfolk; and it is likely that he had determined or been persuaded to set up as a farmer there. Of course, it would be necessary to know more about local farming practice and conditions, before he could begin to investigate the availability and cost of farms in the area. He was, in any case, still rather young to begin farming for himself, given that he was not from a farming family. So it made sense to attach himself once more to an established farmer in an area not too far removed from the familiar childhood terrain of his grandparents' former Northwold home, or from the parish of his uncle Cowper Johnson in Yaxham. And there were other relatives now in Norwich, among them his beloved Aunts, Dora and Etta.

Warham was, in a number of ways, a happy choice of location, especially for a prospective farmer. It lay close to the heart of that area which had gained so much from the beneficent efforts of the agricultural pioneer, 'Coke of Norfolk'. He had urged upon his tenants the virtues of marling the light soil, the use of the Norfolk four-course rotation system (pioneered by 'Turnip' Townsend of Raynham earlier in the eighteenth century), and the folding of sheep on arable land—all efforts to increase fertility and productivity. Moreover, he was the kind of enlightened landlord who saw the advantage of giving his tenants long leases, often up to twenty one years. His descendant, the Earl of Leicester, was Lord of the Manor and sole landowner in Warham St Mary (an area of 2,067 acres); he was also the princi-

pal landowner in the contiguous parish of Warham All Saints (1,121 acres).

The twin parishes had a combined population of 340 in 1891, rather larger than Redham even a decade later, but not so different in character. There was a post-office, a bakery and a wheelwright in Warham All Saints, and of course, a pub, the Three Horse Shoes, whose landlord was Henry Ramm. The blacksmith, Isaac Tuck, lived in Warham St Mary, as did the Reverend Charles Tilton Digby, long-time Rector of Warham All Saints. A memorial to his forty-nine years of service (1874-1923) is to be found in the modest hill-top church, and he himself donated the ornate alabaster reredos which graces the altar. However, the Rector is important in this account not for his pastoral accomplishments but for his connection with the Powys family. He was a contemporary and schoolfellow of Theodore's maternal uncle, Cowper Johnson. They both attended Tittleshall School (later Clapham School) then run by a Mr Sayer. The young Digby's father, the Rev. Hon. Kenelm Digby was then Rector of Tittleshall, and a Canon of Norwich Cathedral, contemporary with Canon F. Patteson. The family was, incidentally, related to the Digbys of Sherborne Castle, Dorset.

Cowper Johnson's father, William Cowper Johnson, was Rector of Yaxham, only about ten miles or so south-east of Tittleshall; so contact between the two families, once established, would not have been difficult to maintain. And in both families there were seven children; but while all were boys in the Digby household, Cowper was the only boy in the Johnson home. Cowper first went to Tittleshall School in 1856, when he was twelve, and was later joined by his cousins, Henry and Hamilton Barham Johnson, who thereby also became part of the circle of friends. Many of the Norfolk families took their holidays in Cromer, and in 1857 the Johnsons and their friends, the Digbys, were at the resort, according to the diary of Mrs J. Johnson. For later years there is evidence of continuing contact among the families. In 1868,

for example, the Rev. William Cowper Johnson preached for the Rev. Kenelm Digby at Tittleshall, and in 1887 Mrs Barham Johnson “heard good Norfolk stories” from Charles Digby, by then well established as Rector in Warham.

Clearly then it must have been her brother who suggested to Theodore’s mother that Warham would be a suitable place for her son to finish his farm training. The village was not far from Yaxham and the Rector was an old school friend, known also to the Barham Johnsons of Welbourne. What could be better, Cowper may have argued, than to have such a man to watch out for the spiritual as well as the physical welfare of Theodore. Mary must have been much reassured. At the same time, she may have begun to envisage a possible future for her apparently wayward son. Perhaps he had disappointed his father by being disqualified academically from pursuing the priesthood; but were he to establish himself as a farmer in Norfolk, might he not make a

good life for himself and help strengthen the ties with her side of the family? In the absence of any testimony from Mrs Powys herself, this vision of a future long past must remain mere speculation. Yet it does provide a plausible explanation for the fact that each of Theodore’s decisive moves into and around East Anglia—to Eaton House, to Rendham and to Warham—was at the initiative (and this may be just the right word for it) of Mary Powys. She would seem to have been particularly close to Theodore (the testimony of Llewelyn about their being in “tragic communion” may be recalled here; it is all the more convincing because it bears the taint of fraternal jealousy) and might therefore have been more than ordinarily anxious to see *this* son set up in the world. As best one can judge, mother and son showed marked temperamental affinities: both took life very seriously and both inclined to a Cowperian melancholy. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that Mrs Powys should be unusually attentive to



Church Farm, Warham, Wells, Norfolk.

her son's welfare. Certainly, none of her other sons was so privileged. Later, when Willie, the youngest son, decided that he wished to be a farmer, he was sent for his training to nearby Abbey Farm in Montacute. Could it be that his parents regretted allowing Theodore to stray so far from home at so tender an age, and determined not to repeat this 'mistake'? If so, it is ironic that Willie, after a mere five years farming for himself at Witcombe, just north of Montacute, found himself a life-long haven far more remote than any East Anglian farm, in East Africa. Here he became the successful sheep-farmer that his elder brother had yearned to be a generation before.

Theodore's new home in Warham was Church Farm, the property of Edward Nelson (1848-1924). There was a long-standing relationship between the Johnson and Nelson families that no doubt accounts for Theodore being where he was: the Reverend John Nelson (1793-1867) had been a pupil of Dr John Nelson's school in Winter-ton in 1824-25. It was from the Reverend Nelson's paternal uncle that Edward Nelson, the farmer, descended; so it was quite fitting that in 1894 T.F.P. should come under the tutelage of this member of the Nelson family. Edward Nelson was forty-six at the time of Theodore's arrival. He was well-established, and had been farming there at least since 1883, as *Kelly's Directory* for that year shows. He and his wife, Lucy (1858-1934) had one son, Edward Russell (1891-1917), destined to be killed in action in Njimbwe, East Africa on 3 February 1917, at the age of twenty-six.

It seems appropriate, at this point, to indicate how we can be sure that T.F.P. went to Church Farm rather than one of the others in the village. To begin with, ownership and/or tenancy was established for all the farms in the village for the relevant period. The only name at all connected with the Powys family was "Nelson". There is an interesting anecdote about a Mr Nelson in the same 7 x 9 black notebook (in the Bissell Collection) that T.F.P. had used for poems

while in school at Eaton House, and later for notes and farming accounts. A few of the entries are clearly rough drafts of those that appear in T.F.P.'s 1892 diary, and refer to his first days in Rendham. Others are dated and refer to his own farming affairs at Sweffling (of which more later). The Nelson reference occurs immediately after the last Rendham entry, and could easily be misinterpreted as part of it. Indeed, Pouillard (1978, p. 55), the only other scholar who seems to have examined the notebook, makes just this mistaken assumption. He takes Mr Nelson to be the "uncle-by-marriage" ("beau-pere") of Louis Wilkinson with whom T.F.P. began his farming apprenticeship in Suffolk, and incorrectly has him beginning this phase in 1893 rather than in 1892. In fact, as I have shown elsewhere (*PR*, 19, p. 14), Arthur McDougall was the man in question; and the name "Nelson" appears nowhere in the electoral rolls or other records for Rendham or surrounding parishes. Nor could he even have been McDougall's farm bailiff; that post was held by James Ellis at least until 1896, and then by John Row. Only with the establishment of these facts did it become clear that the T.F.P.—Nelson connection had to be a Norfolk one, not a Suffolk one. The anecdote itself describes in the sketchiest of terms the confrontation resulting from Nelson's decision to install "barb wire"; it tells how "the wire scratches everything" and "two individuals swore to rid the community of the pest." This is perhaps T.F.P.'s earliest attempt to record an incident which might later be transformed into fictional form; it is certainly also the only piece of his own work he illustrated himself, albeit crudely.

Church House Farm lies directly opposite the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Warham St Mary, at a bend in the road, and on the south side of it. Behind the house and barns, the fields slope gently upward; the land is "of rich loamy nature, producing excellent crops of wheat, oats, and barley", according to *Kelly's Directory of Norfolk*, 1896. The house itself, like the church across

the road, is of flint construction, and faces away from the road onto an enclosed yard and the fields beyond. A line of wooden-shuttered horse-stalls (now occupied by cattle) is the only reminder of the stalwart horses which drew the plough in T.F.P.'s day. The barn, with its red pantiled roof looks deceptively modern from the outside; but inside, the rough-hewn timbers of the high beams provide impressive testimony of its great age. It was in this building, almost certainly, that the nineteen year old Theodore helped to crush mangolds in the hand-operated mangold crusher. Some forty years later, he still remembered the experience, and recalled it vividly for Theodora, his adopted daughter. At about seven or so in the morning, he would go out to a load of cold and frost-encrusted mangolds; they hurt his hands to touch and, in the mangold crusher, sounded like pebbles on a beach as the waves sucked them in and out. The mangolds were used as fodder for the sheep and cattle.

For some strange reason, T.F.P. never learned to milk, in spite, apparently, of a strong desire to do so. Perhaps he was too nervous in his approach to the cows; the animals would detect that, and make things difficult. He did learn to plough, but never, he said, achieved more than "passable ploughmanship". However, he acquired a life-long admiration for a truly expert ploughman, and loved to see a good team in action. Theodora recalls being taken to witness a field in Mappowder being ploughed by just such a professional ploughman with his two dapple-grey Shires. "Remember this, Susie," T.F.P. advised solemnly, "You won't see this sight any more in a year or two" (*PR*, 9, p. 70). This anecdote illustrates nicely how irrevocably changed T.F.P. was by his farming experience. There is no indication here of bitterness, only of forgivable nostalgia. T.F.P.'s farming past has been indelibly etched upon his memory.

Were it not for the existence of a few letters from T.F.P. to his sister Gertrude (now in the HRC, Texas), it might not ever have been known that he spent a year in

Warham. Alas, the letters are not very revealing about his day to day activities on the farm; they are valuable rather for giving us his location (on note-paper with the printed heading "Warham,/Wells, Norfolk") and for fixing, at least approximately, the time-span of his stay in Warham. The earliest letter is dated "August the 8/1894", the second "Feb the 17th 1895"; and the last, "19th of May/1895", announces his plan to visit Montacute for about three weeks, beginning on 24 June. He must then have returned to Warham to help with the harvest before heading for his own newly-acquired farm in Sweffling. His move to Sweffling had already been more or less settled by the time of his second letter, for in that he talks of having Gertrude visit him for a week at the end of October or November, and of wanting her to be his first visitor.

There exists but one other item of evidence pertinent to T.F.P.'s time in Norfolk: an unpublished short story, "Charlie". This 3000 word story, written in 1913, was one of a group that Frances Wilkinson had typed and tried in vain, for the best part of two years, to get taken by a magazine in America. Although it conforms to a well-established Theodorean pattern in its ending, suicide by drowning, it is atypical in being an old-fashioned frame story and in being transparently autobiographical in its main character. Charlie Blackburn is described as "one of those castaways thrown out by the upper classes" because he "could not pass his exams as a boy". A man of forty, with a reddish moustache and hair already grey, he loved long walks. His father had been a well-to-do clergyman who had so many children that none of them was left much of a legacy. Charlie lived with a farmer in "a little village near the sea in Norfolk" who, so the narrator observes, "must have made a good thing out of him for he did the work of a labourer" in spite of the fact that most of his income "was handed over to the farmer . . . to pay for his lodging". There is an edge to this comment that raises the suspicion that T.F.P. may



Rendham Church, Suffolk.

just have been remembering his own treatment on the Nelson farm. And while we must not forget that it *is* fiction, the story does offer credible details of the very activities in which the real-life Theodore would have engaged. There are references to “Autumn evenings in a snug Inn”, to playing cards with a neighbouring farmer, invitations to tennis, haymaking, and to walking in the salt-marshes. These last, T.F.P. evokes with particular vividness: “the curious yellow marshes with their mud creeks and wooden bridges”, the sandhills, and the wild, strange cry of the redshanks overhead. The claim that Charlie attended church twice on Sunday might seem piously implausible to the T.F.P. most readers know. But in fact his own 1892 diary reveals that while he was at Rendham he often attended church twice on a Sunday; so there is no reason why the practice should not have been continued in Warham. One minor detail of T.F.P.’s description suggests how well he recalled the Church of St Mary’s. In the story we are told that “Charlie always sat in one of the old high-backed pews”; in fact, the nave is still filled with just the kind of high box-pews that T.F.P. described. The

story makes no mention, however, of the enormous three-decker pulpit with projecting reading stands, a canopy, and a flight of eight steps.

Warham is only two miles from Wells and the sea. Along the coast here stretch miles of flat, wind-swept salt-marshes, barren to behold, it is true, but a haven for wild-fowl in bewildering variety: ducks, widgeon, wild geese, curlew, snipe, partridge, terns and stately blue herons. Today, much of the area is part of a nature reserve; in T.F.P.’s day it was largely open for shooting. And here T.F.P. continued to engage in another activity that must surprise those who know his regard for the sanctity of all life in later years—shooting. J.C.P. records how “in conspiracy with Theodore . . . I bought a revolver” (*Autobiography*, p. 164) at a time when T.F.P. had “gone as a pupil in farming, to a village in that same country”. T.F.P.’s own first experience of shooting seems, in fact, to have been gained in Rendham, and he appears to have assumed the unlikely role of adviser to his elder brother in the matter of firearms, if we accept J.C.P.’s account. The gun itself was to be for J.C.P.’s protection against the intrusion

of College rowdies into his room. However, the purchase of the weapon took place while both boys were at Montacute during the summer before J.C.P. went up to Cambridge, that is, in 1891. But T.F.P. did not begin his farm-training in Rendham until March, 1892; so he would have been as innocent of firearms as J.C.P. at the time. Still, in J.C.P.'s account, we have the earliest reference to any interest in weapons on the part of T.F.P. And soon after his arrival in Rendham, he was given the opportunity to use a gun himself. In his diary for Thursday, 10 March 1892, T.F.P. records off-handedly that "I shot two or three small birds in the morning". So by the time he arrived in Warham some two years later, he would have been an experienced marksman, and no doubt, eager to test his skills on the abundance of wild fowl in the coastal area. His earliest surviving letter from Warham confirms that "I spent all yesterday afternoon in a creak [sic] close to the sea on the saltmarshes waiting for duck or wimbrell but only shot one redshank". He also indulged in some rabbit-shooting among the sand-hills by the coast, where rabbits in their thousands scampered. In retrospect, T.F.P. regretted this youthful enthusiasm for shooting, though his love for nature and wild-life remained with him the rest of his life.

One detects, for instance, an apologetic note in "Charlie". The narrator comments that he never could understand Charlie's liking for following the hounds, and tries to excuse it or explain it away by adding "He never got near the 'kill' . . . he thought that a hunt was a harmless game, like a paper-chase, for he certainly never saw anything killed". Significant, too, is the anecdote Theodora Scutt remembers her adoptive father recounting about his time in East Anglia. Out on a shooting party, he brought down a snipe, but did not kill it clean, so that when he approached "it looked up at me . . . with a look of human reproach", he said. He never shot another bird, and in telling the story.—characteristically for the mature T.F.P.—expressed regret rather than pride

in his achievement. Given the evidence that he sometimes went hunting with his foreman, Nunn, in Sweffling, this anecdote must refer to T.F.P.'s later Suffolk years, though the location is given as Norfolk. In any case, when T.F.P.'s son, Dicky, was old enough to want a gun, T.F.P. was very much against it, so much had his attitude changed. But *his* view on guns did not prevail with the next generation; for there survives a photograph, sent by T.F.P. to Mrs Stracey, the boys' godmother, of Dicky and Francis proudly posing with their rifles before them.

T.F.P.'s love of nature did not, of course, begin in East Anglia; it was an important inheritance from his father. J.C.P. tells in *Autobiography* how "every phenomenon he [the father] referred to, whether animate or inanimate, became a sacrosanct thing, a privileged object" (p. 51); of how he would return home from walks with a bunch of wild-flowers, and of his pride in his "formidable" collection of birds' eggs. As a child, T.F.P. never seems to have manifested particular interest in the world of nature in the public way that John and Littleton did, each of whom became a collector. It was John who followed his father in collecting birds' eggs—though he intimates that it was a pursuit born of filial piety—while Littleton concentrated on butterflies and fossils. But if Theodore resolutely collected nothing, as J.C.P. asserts, he was nonetheless indelibly marked as his father's son. For, in his maturity, it was Theodore who would return from his walk with a button-hole of wild flowers, and who treated every aspect of nature as if it were indeed sacrosanct. His habit of tapping his favourite oak (a habit he may have copied from his Rendham mentor, Arthur McDougall), of moving errant worms from his path, or of throwing a pebble on a pond—gestures of acknowledgement to other sentient beings—provide direct testimony of his reverence for nature. His reformed attitude to birds is evidenced in a number of ways—he really liked the cuckoo (no doubt in its role as harbinger of spring), used to feed jackdaws in Mappow-

der, and became extremely angry when a heron was shot by someone in the village during the war. And, inevitably, one recalls T.F.P.'s fondness for birds and bird imagery in his stories and novels. There is the Nellie bird (*Diomedea spadicea*) in *Mockery Gap*, the death-dealing cormorant and the foolish guillemot in *Innocent Birds*, the Holy Dove sent to stir things up in "The Dove and The Eagle", not to mention the diplomatic crow in "The Coat and The Crow" who manages to persuade the coat that the seeds in Mr Facey's field are really "the crumbs of the Holy Sacrament" there to be "religiously consumed" by a thousand waiting crows. Among characters of note are Parson Sparrow, Luke Bird, a St Francis-like character who preaches to the animals, and the Reverend James Duck, the Rector of Goat Green. But most widespread of all are incidental images in which we see how thoroughly T.F.P. has assimilated his youthful experience as a hunter. For example, in "The Dewpond", we encounter

the Reverend John Gasser "stepping the ground like a sportsman looking for a *jack-snipe*" (*Bottle's Path*—1946, p. 209); in "Abraham Men" Mr Pring, the roadmender, has "the troubled expression of a *plover* that would lead a child away from its nest" (p. 241), while Mrs Dunell "waddled about her front room like a *duck* on unsafe ice" (p. 244). These are not just the incidental images of a gifted writer, but the observations of a keen-eyed countryman.

Return to Suffolk

"Whatever inspiration I had came from Nature and from one or two other writers."

(T.F.P. in *John O'London's Weekly*)

"A young man believes in himself, an old man has found himself out."

(T.F.P. in *This is Thyself*)

There has been very little substantive information about T.F.P.'s years as a farmer. For example, Louis Wilkinson asserted that "when he was about twenty-



White House Farm, Sweffling, Suffolk.

four [i.e. 1899], his father bought a farm for him at Sweffling, near Rendham" (*Theodore*, p. 10). Graves, usually quite precise about dates one of the strengths of his book), is uncharacteristically vague about almost all matters pertaining to the farming years. In the headnotes to Chapter 2 (1885-1894), he writes: "apprenticed to a farmer, 1891-3, then to his own farm at Sweffling in Suffolk"; in the body of the chapter, he asserts: "Theodore was capable, and, despite being only seventeen, he managed his labourers with authority" (p. 32). In fact, Louis Wilkinson and Graves are both mistaken. T.F.P. did not begin his "apprenticeship" until 1 March 1892, and remained at Rendham until 1894, when he moved to Warham, Norfolk for a year. So it was not until October, 1895, when he was a few months shy of twenty, that he eventually took up residence at White House Farm, his own master at last. For nearly three years he had prepared himself conscientiously for this moment of independence, and his moving vision of the life he planned, a pastoral idyll no less, shines through his retrospective account in *This is Thyself* of the harsh reality he in fact encountered:

I wanted to love my home, to work with my hands in the fields, to use the work people kindly, and to settle with my books into a quiet seclusion.

(*PR*, 20, p. 16)

It was from the first, an impossible and curiously Wordsworthian dream of "Man free, Man working for himself, with choice / Of time, and place, and object." In his youthful desire to succeed he must have persuaded himself that he would not suffer as had his mentor, Arthur McDougall, who "found farming a continual drain upon his capital, and . . . was forced to make burrows into his capital like a rabbit every time he had a bad harvest, which was almost every year" (*PR*, 20, p. 10). Yet the odds were heavily stacked against the young farmer; for he had chosen to begin farming at an extraordinarily inauspicious time in farming history—in the middle of that long

period between 1870 and 1914 which agricultural economists term "The Great Depression". Prices for cereals, livestock, and land fell dramatically. An estate purchased in 1874 for £4,000 was sold for less than £900 in 1897; another property acquired in 1870 at £45 an acre went for a mere £16 an acre in 1897. Within this period of forty years and more, there were two acute phases, both associated with severe drought: the 1870s and the first half of the 1890s. The year Theodore began his apprenticeship in Rendham, 1892, was a drought year, as was 1893; and T.F.P.'s first two years at Sweffling, 1895 and 1896, were also drought years. Even wet years brought their problems, notably liver fluke (sheep rot) which had reached epidemic proportions in 1879-81, and which was in part a function of poor drainage.

Such heavy clay soils as were found on T.F.P.'s low-lying land ("a country of poor heavy land" he calls it) were often too expensive to cultivate profitably. Perry (1974) provides a useful summary of the situation:

It cannot be doubted that more farmers failed in some areas than others—in *Suffolk* than in *Somerset*, for example,—but it is more important to recall that *more farmers than usual failed* in nearly every locality (p. 33; my italics).

A careful reading of *This is Thyself* will yield clues which confirm the testimony of these facts in more graphic terms: the inroads into "Mr Elsley's" capital, the uncut hedges, the "dingy, poverty-stricken cottages", and the despairing labourers driven to suicide.

For a time in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, George Crabbe was curate in charge of the adjoining parishes of Sweffling and Great Glemham for the incumbent, the Reverend Richard Turner of Great Yarmouth (see *The Life*, p. 133). Initially he lived in Parham, but on 17 October 1796 he moved into Great Glemham Hall (just south of Sweffling), as a tenant of Dudley North, the Whig M.P. In the mid-nineteenth century, Sweffling also became known in a

modest way as the home of Jonathan Smyth, who, with his brother James of Peasenhall, developed the Suffolk corn-drill, which featured adjustable coulter and other technical innovations. One of his descendants (a son or grandson) was still listed in Kelly's 1896 directory as "drill manufacturer"

It is little wonder then that T.F.P.'s own sojourn in Sweffling drew him to a writer who shared not only something of his own melancholy disposition but who had walked the self-same country paths. T.F.P. purchased his copy of *The Poetical Works of George Crabbe* (1888) in 1901, his final year in Sweffling, and wrote on the endpaper, as though from his own experience in the village: "When all the finer / Passions cease . . . / Tis then we rightly / learn to live." In an unpublished essay (1925) on his development as a writer (at the HRC, Texas), T.F.P. acknowledges his reading of Crabbe: "I was better prepared than I supposed myself to be for the task I set myself—to write a country novel. I knew Crabbe very well, his *Tales of the Hall*, *The Borough*, etc . . ."

Sweffling is a village in the valley of the Alde, three miles west from Saxmundham. According to Skeat (1913), the name records a settlement of the sons of Sweftel or Swaefel, a name not otherwise known. There appears to have been a Roman outpost in the area; a dig in 1909 turned up some Roman pottery, and two years earlier a well-preserved bronze head was found in the river Alde. The soil is rather mixed: sand, clay, and subsoil. When T.F.P. arrived in 1895, most of the 1,350 acres were owned by the Duke of Hamilton (who died that year), by Colonel A. Bloomfield, by Arthur F. McDougall (T.F.P.'s mentor in Rendham), and by the trustees of the late Miss Shuldham. The population had been declining since the mid-nineteenth century; in 1845 it stood at 308 (*Lewis's Topographical Dictionary* 1845), but by 1891 it had shrunk to 282 (*White's Directory*, 1891), and by the time T.F.P. left in 1901, it was down to 271 (*Kelly's Directory*, 1904). The church of St

Mary, a fourteenth century foundation, stands on a slight rise and is the focal point of the village. From 1890 until 1898 the rector was the Reverend Holmes Buxton, also vicar of Bruisyard. He was succeeded by the Reverend George Clennel Rivett-Carnac (1898-1913). There was a pub, The White Horse (proprietor Robert Elvin), two mills (wind and steam), a smithy (James Knights, blacksmith), and a grocery cum sub-Post-office (Oliver Newsom).

T.F.P. never bought his farm, as Louis Wilkinson claims; like most farmers, he was a tenant. His landlord was Colonel Alfred Bloomfield, J.P. (d. 1915), who lived in The Grove, Great Glemham, "a house of considerable antiquity" (*White's Directory*, 1891) about a half mile south of White House Farm. T.F.P. did socialize with Colonel Bloomfield from time to time, on the evidence of a letter from Gertrude to her mother in which she writes "Tonight—dinner at Bloomfields" (12 October 1897). Bloomfield must also be the inspiration for the "Colonel Alfred" in T.F.P.'s unpublished story "Jane".

White House Farm is in low-lying land about 1/6 mile west of the river Alde. T.F.P. succeeded Thomas Burrows as tenant, and paid £376. 16s. 2d. for his lease under the Suffolk Farm Covenants system (see the *Inventory and Valuations of Farm Covenants*, 30 September 1895. Bissell Collection). Under the Suffolk system, it should be noted, the incoming tenant was disadvantaged, because he had to pay all costs, including labour, for the cultivation of the root-crops, even if the value of the crops had sunk beneath production costs (as could easily happen in a depressed economy). Under the more progressive Norfolk system, the incoming tenant only had to pay the value of the crops as fodder. It does not appear that T.F.P. kept any detailed systematic accounts, but few farmers did in those days. However, we are fortunate that some evidence survives from which it is possible to reconstruct a good deal about the economics of T.F.P.'s farming operation. In the original draft of *This is Thyself*, he wrote "I

hired a farm *and my father advanced the money to stock it.*" The italic portion he deleted in the final version, but we herein have confirmation of what J.C.P. said in his *Autobiography* about his brother "acquiring, with my father's help, a small farm of his own at Sweffling in Suffolk" (p. 189). T.F.P. employed five, and occasionally six, farm labourers: Fred Nunn (foreman), John Sherwood, Ben and Bill Pond, Bill Tie and John Hall. Both Nunn and Sherwood are mentioned in T.F.P.'s Rendham diary of 1892; so it is likely that they were taken on, with Arthur McDougall's blessing, as experienced hands who could help the fledgling farmer.

In 1841, when the tithe maps were drawn, White House Farm, originally part of the Manor of Sweffling, was owned by one John Smith. He died in 1847, leaving his 152 acres of land to his two sons, Samuel and Wingfield. The property was conveyed to Colonel Bloomfield in 1872 from the estate of a relative (father?), the Reverend E. Bloomfield, who must have acquired it from the Smith family. At some point, two fields were sold, so that by T.F.P.'s day the farm was no more than 120 acres. With the aid of the 1841 tithe map and T.F.P.'s crop planting records, it has been possible to determine many of the relevant facts about the operation of White House Farm. There were eleven arable fields, comprising 107 acres, a hay meadow (Barn Meadow) of about three acres, an orchard, the house and barns, etc. On average, T.F.P. would sow eight of the eleven fields, or some two thirds of his arable land—a conventional enough pattern (see Table 1). For the two years for which data are available, he sowed only wheat, barley, beans and peas, alternating wheat and barley as the largest crop. Elsewhere there are references to buying turnip seed, cow grass, and chemical fertiliser or "manure" (super phosphate?). He also raised sheep and cattle, evidence that he was following the arable-livestock system prevalent in East Anglia.

T.F.P. kept a payroll record of sorts for some eight weeks in his first year (18

October 1895—6 December 1895), which shows a weekly payroll total average of around £3. Nunn was paid 15/- per week, and the others between 10/- and 12/-. These rates are well below the 1895 national average of around 13 shillings, but they are comparable to the rates in Dorset in the early 1890s; so it does not seem that T.F.P. was overpaying his farmhands. He also provides a synopsis of his total outlays for his first year of operations (11 October 1895—11 October 1896): Implements = £200. 8. 9; Livestock = £554. 11. 6; Labour & Covenants = £526. 12. 6; Furniture = £35. 7. 6. In all, it seems, out of the £2000 advanced by his father, he spent £1602. Unfortunately, there are no comparably detailed figures listed anywhere for T.F.P.'s income. However, there are some figures available in T.F.P.'s black notebook which appear to show his crop and livestock income for 1896. His wheat paid only £48, his barley £98, and his beans & peas £60—a total of £206. He also earned £155 for cows and lambs; so total income was £361. Against these earnings, he paid out some £315: £200 for labour, £85 in rent, and £30 for a loss on ewes. He would seem, then, to have survived the year with a slim £46 profit; in fact, he records, without providing specifics, an "actual loss" of £80. Nonetheless, in September 1897, just two years after he began, he actually leased a second property, Gull Farm, from the estate of the Duke of Hamilton. For this smaller farm he paid £235. 9. 6. It is reasonable to assume that at this point T.F.P. was not operating at a loss, and may even have been doing moderately well—well enough at least to justify cautious expansion with the remainder of his father's advance. Corn prices had bottomed out, and T.F.P. must have felt experienced enough to run a larger farming operation. Ironically, the apparently sensible decision to expand may have contributed to T.F.P.'s ultimate "failure". In his contribution to *The Victoria History of the County of Suffolk* (1907), Herman Biddell outlines a likely scenario:

The small holder, who has no bank reserve, and has all his available savings invested in tenant's capital, is the first to go under when the wave of bad seasons and low prices sweeps over the land. Many such have succumbed in this manner in Suffolk during the last twenty five years. (Vol. 2, p. 390)

Perry (1974) cites from documents that make the same point in a slightly different way: "Worst off was the group too high in the social scale to use their own labour, too low to possess more than a little capital" (p. 102). T.F.P. certainly matched the profile of such undercapitalised individuals, though there is no evidence that he was actually losing money. The marginality of his operation, and his vulnerability, rather than any catastrophic failure, no doubt contributed substantially to his decision to leave farming—but other more personal factors were probably decisive. However, embedded in his story, "When Thou Wast Naked", is the proverb 'one farm do make, but two do mar a man' (*Bottle's Path*, p. 68); so here he may be giving belated recognition to what must in retrospect have seemed a decisive mistake.

Just over a year before he began farming for himself, T.F.P. gave serious consideration to the kind of farm operation he would run. It was 10 August 1894, and he was newly arrived in Warham, when he sat down and penned "Rules of the Liberty Farm—145 acres". This extraordinary document reveals T.F.P.'s vision of a system that combined strict discipline with a generous profit-sharing scheme. The farm labourers would be guaranteed employment for the year, providing they swore "to work honestly and well to the best of their abilities". However, an individual could be dismissed at a week's notice, if he "misbehaves himself or shirks his work or in any way disobeys". The "shareholders" or labourers would collect their shares in October or November (after harvest), would have at any time "a perfect right to look into all accounts of the farm", and would be entitled to participate in a public vote on "any difficulty" faced by the farmer. No doubt, this is what T.F.P. meant when he

said in *This is Thyself* that he intended "to use the work people kindly". There is no evidence that he ever tried to implement this scheme born of youthful idealism. Had he done so, he might have provoked a revolution, and become immortalized as a great agricultural reformer. Yet traces of the compassionate farmer in him can be detected in such characters as Farmer Anton of "Soppit's Sabbath", who provokes local ire because "he forgot to lower wages same as all the others, and didn't charge Nellie for milk".

T.F.P. was himself on good terms with his men, especially John Sherwood and Fred Nunn, his foreman. From the first, in Rendham, he "made friends with the men and worked with them nearly every day" (p. 11). But the testimony of *This is Thyself* points up an ambivalence in T.F.P.'s attitude towards the farm labourers. On the one hand, "their quaint clothes and rustic speech made them seem to me like pictures"; on the other hand, upon closer acquaintance, they proved uncomfortably human in their failings, since "greed and jealousy and hatred lived in them" (p. 17). And T.F.P. evidently found it more difficult in reality to give orders than he had envisaged in "Rules of the Liberty Farm". "The most ignoble task is to compel the labourer to work" (p. 19), he writes with obvious distaste. He claims that he was therefore "forced to hire a foreman to protect me from the other wolves; and the foreman took his blood price" (pp. 19-20). Now the appointment of a foreman would have been perfectly normal procedure, and is referred to as such in "Rules of Liberty Farm". So T.F.P.'s overly dramatic explanation does not ring quite true here. Clearly, he found it more effective and less offensive to his sensibilities to put someone else in charge of the day-to-day giving of orders. But the statement itself must be read in the context of that sense of disillusionment that permeates the whole of *This is Thyself*. It cannot be read as a specific indictment of Fred Nunn, whom he had obviously selected from among McDougall's men and his foreman

when he first moved to Sweffling. Fortunately, there are still extant a few letters which lend credence to my interpretation of the situation. From some of T.F.P.'s casual remarks to Gertrude in a series of letters in 1896, it appears that the Nunnns were actually living in White House Farm for a period, with Mrs Nunn acting as housekeeper. After T.F.P. had given up farming in 1901, Nunn took over as tenant at White House Farm, and another man, King, at Gull Farm. From Nunn's letters, it is clear that he was doing his very best to get decent prices for T.F.P.'s unsold crops, and was, in effect, acting as his agent. Although the letters are primarily concerned with crop yields, buyers and prices, one can discern both respect and affection in them too. One letter of 10 January [1902] (for which the original spelling and punctuation are given) reads in part:

You must have felt very lonely when you were by yourself. I should have like to have had a Chat with you then but I am very please.to tell you I have saved one pound for my journey. I am saveing my tobaco money so I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you.

Another letter (n.d. but circa October 1901), from Mrs Nunn to Gertrude, soon after the sale of livestock, machinery, and household goods, is happily domestic in detail:

It seem so sad to see the horses and cows go away because they had a good home . . . I bought the red chair I could not let anyone els have it as it remind me of you as it did look quite nice after you put the new stuff round it . . . we do miss Mr Powys very much . . . I hope he is comfortable settle in his new home . . . I have lost all my cats but three too black ones are left which you were so fond of . . .

There seems then to be no substance at all to Sylvia Townsend Warner's belief (quoted in Graves, p. 49 from a letter to Alyse Gregory, 22 June 1967) that T.F.P. had suffered "the mortification of being cheated by a bad bailiff". T.F.P. never employed a bailiff (in spite of Louis Wilkinson's equally mistaken claim that "he, like my uncle, employed a bailiff"), and T.F.P. obviously maintained

warm relations with Nunn,—enough to invite him down to Dorset on at least one occasion.

Among his few comments about T.F.P.'s farming days, Wilkinson reports: "he told me then that it [the farm] had just kept him and that he just didn't sell it at a loss" (*Theodore*, p. 10). The first part of this statement accords with the available evidence; the second part, the matter of selling at a loss, is another matter. The White House Farm valuation was sold to Colonel Bloomfield for £251. 3s. 6d.; that is for some £125 less than T.F.P. had paid six years earlier. Gull Farm, a little more favourably situated, went for £256. 19s. 0d., some £20 more than originally paid. That the White House valuation was sold to T.F.P.'s landlord is itself something of an indicator of the hard times. It may be that no new tenant could be found; or perhaps rents had sunk so low that the landlord found it more economical to hire Nunn to run the farm for him. Garrard, the Estate Agent who handled the transaction, anticipates T.F.P.'s reaction in a letter of 16 October 1901: "I am afraid, looking at what you paid on entry, you will be rather disappointed with this amount, but you had a very small quantity of hay and your fallows work out rather low on this farm . . ." The observation about the hay and fallows was more than just a polite excuse; Nunn made much the same point in one of his letters to T.F.P. In a second letter, giving T.F.P. the news about the Gull Farm valuation, Garrard usefully puts T.F.P.'s experience in a wider perspective: "I can assure you valuers never had a more unsatisfactory year to face under Suffolk covenants both for buyers and sellers; in one valuation out of ten we can hardly realise the amount paid on entry or anything like it . . . I am afraid your experience of Suffolk farming has not been over successful. I hope your next venture may be more so".

To those who knew him in later years in Dorset, T.F.P.'s "failure" as a farmer must have seemed inevitable. How, after all, could the retiring and bookish individual they knew, ever have thought to succeed?

But the fact is, there was once another Theodore, almost a different kind of man, whose shadow we may discern in fleeting glimpses into the unrealized past. He had not yet acquired the almost pathological aversion to travel which marks his maturity; and so we find him travelling to Southwold (June 1896) to Bungay (with Littleton, 9 September 1897), and planning “excursions to various eastern coast places for short periods” in Summer 1897 (letter to Gertrude, June 1896). Nor had he fully come to terms with his own impetus towards solitude and silence. It is true that in going to Sweffling he sought “a quiet seclusion”, but still craved the affection of family and friends, as is evident from a letter to Gertrude, asking her to keep house for him: “you see after all with all my boasting about liking to be by myself I do get most awfully lonely at times” (5 May 1895). More surprising is the fact that he joined a local Tennis Club, which met once a week “on other people’s lawns” (T.F.P. to G.P., 16 May 1896), and that he enjoyed shooting with Fred Nunn, his foreman—even blasting away at a flock of curlew on one outing (see *PR*, 4, p. 9). His social life was inevitably limited, given the demands of the farm and his relative isolation from people of his own class. However, he received visitors almost from the beginning of his stay in Sweffling; John was perhaps the first, and reported that “Theodore’s farm is splendid and his house quite picturesque” (J.C.P. to G.P., 21 Oct. 1895). And when Gertrude arrived in October 1897, the two of them were invited to dinner by Colonel Bloomfield and his wife (G.P. to M.P., 12 October 1897). Nor was Theodore’s life entirely devoid of romantic interludes. Sweffling was only seven miles from Aldeburgh, where he had attended Eaton House school, and where he had come to know a number of Louis Wilkinson’s cousins, both male and female. Wilkinson says that T.F.P. fell in love with two of his cousins “in quick succession”. One of them was almost certainly Louie Ferrand, whose family lived close to Eaton House. Nearly fifty years later, in a letter to Wilkinson (24

December 1947), T.F.P.’s memories of her were still strong:

I should think I do remember Louie. Would she allow me to kiss her now? She was a splendid creature. I galloped my pony to Saxmundham to catch her up and never did. And if I had, she would have only mocked—I remember a warm straw stack /alas /—nothing,—nothing! The last time I saw Louie was seeing you two together on the platform at Ipswich.

At a time when he felt “the earth was slipping away from me”, T.F.P. even asked a local girl to marry him. But this seems to have been more an attempt to integrate himself into the community than a love-affair: for, as he admits in *This is Thyself*, “she was one that I hardly knew at all” (p. 19), and turned him down.

Other attempts to integrate himself into the community were far more practical and successful—albeit no less surprising to those who are aware only of his later distaste for community involvement. Notably, T.F.P. became actively involved in the affairs of the parish in 1896, when he was elected to the Library Committee, the role of which was to investigate the formation of a library under the Public Libraries Act. But then on 17 April 1897, he was elected to the Parish Council itself, and made treasurer to boot; from 1898 to 1899 he also served as clerk and overseer. He was diligent in attending meetings (all five in 1897-8, for example), and remained on the Council until 14 March 1901, when he resigned, no doubt in anticipation of leaving his farm. Throughout the Sweffling Parish Council Minute Book for this period, “Mr Powys” crops up with great regularity, proposing and seconding motions of all sorts: “that everyone should employ an able body [sic] man when possible” (17 April 1897), “that the Clerk write to the Charity Commissioners” (15 October 1897), “that the Clerk be ordered to get the Public Libraries Act” (27 January 1898) and so on. Serving along with him were Robert Woodard and John Sherwood, two of his own men, who were, the record

suggests, staunch supporters, and John Row, his neighbour at Dernford Hall Farm, whose memory is enshrined in the protagonist of *Mark Only*. At the time, T.F.P. must have observed that Sherwood had problems with writing, because, years later, he invokes his name in a letter to J.C.P. (18 August 1926): "I haven't written a letter even for a fortnight, so, like John Sherwood who worked for me at Sweffling, I can hardly hold a pen". Trivial as it is, this recollection, like the vivid memory of Louie Ferrand, suggests that many of T.F.P.'s youthful experiences in East Anglia were not forgotten. Clearly, there *were* bad times; the problem is that the few published reports of T.F.P.'s farming days give the misleading impression that there were *only* bad times. T.F.P. himself knew better, we learn from a note scribbled in pencil on the free endpaper of his black notebook: "my life is full of weary days, yet good things have not kept aloof". Even the darkness that permeates *This is Thyself* occasionally gives way to



Theodore Powys, c. 1899.

moments of nostalgia for "those old days", and for "the golden wheat straw and the sun that shone in March" (p. 16).

The years in East Anglia must be reckoned as much a search for the self as an attempt to earn a living from the land. T.F.P. invested far more than money in his farm; his vision of himself was at stake. He wanted to be a sheep farmer in part because it provided, in his eyes, an alternative pastoral role, a way in which he might salvage something of his parents' unfulfillable dreams of the priesthood. It is no coincidence that in *The Soliloquy of a Hermit* he characterises himself as a priest, and claims that Religion is the only subject he knows anything about. So his early failure as a sheep farmer (the problems he had with his rams in his first year and the subsequent decision to get rid of his flock altogether) had a symbolic significance that far outweighed any economic losses. The decision to abandon farming altogether could not then have been an easy one. Although he would escape "the dismal fields and the days of worry", he would also have to relinquish some of those dreams which give meaning to life.

Fortunately, T.F.P. had discovered in his programme of reading and self-education a source of solace—a philosophy of life that helped draw him away from the fields. The moment of discovery is recorded for us in the manuscript essay (HRC, Texas) already cited. Writing sometime in 1925 (*Innocent Birds* is mentioned as not yet published), T.F.P. says:

A day or two ago I read again an essay of William Hazlitt's that I remembered very well reading with extraordinary interest nearly 30 years ago. I was then young but no means free for I was become involved in a pursuit, agriculture; that was tiresome to[o], at least the crude manners and habits of it. The time was harvest. I took out a paper book with daisies upon the cover, Bohn's cheap series, now extinct I expect, into my little orchard all lovely now and apples at a ripe appearance, and hearing the loaded wain of corn pass along the lane to the stackyard I read the essay 'On living to one self'. I read then (Haz. 123).

I felt that Hazlitt was right and that I would imitate him. I gave up business and I gave up farm[ing] that had led me to consort with all of my kind.

Hazlitt's essay, written at Winterslow Hut, 1821, advocates a conscious retreat into "a world of contemplation, and not of action", it warns of "the repeated disappointments and vain regrets" that await those who "go in search of realities". This seems to have had an extraordinary impact upon T.F.P. and provided, in effect, a virtual blue-print for the rest of his life. Of course, he could not act upon Hazlitt's advice immediately; for, in his words, he "was by no means free". If we allow some latitude in T.F.P.'s estimate of reading the essay "nearly 30 years ago", we can assign it to 1896-8; so it would be at least three years before he could put into action what Hazlitt advocated. "What I mean by living to one's-self" Hazlitt wrote, "is living in the world, as in it, not of it: it is as if no one knew there was such a person, and you wished no one to know it: it is to be a silent spectator of the mighty scene of things, not an object of curiosity in it".

East Anglia in T.F.P.'s work

Had T.F.P. followed Hazlitt's essay in every detail, he never would have become a writer; for Hazlitt portrayed the man who lived wisely to himself as relishing an author's style "without thinking of turning author". But T.F.P. in fact began writing while he was still in Sweffling. Louis Wilkinson saw "a few short pieces" in dialogue form, on his first visit there, in the summer of 1900, after he had left Radley and was waiting to go up to Pembroke College, Oxford. None of these first efforts appear to have survived, and there remains only a single sonnet, presumably the work of T.F.P., incongruously lodged among farm accounts and other mundane matters. However, some nine years of East Anglian farm experience had left an indelible mark upon the would-be writer. So, although East Anglia was supplanted by Dorset in the topography of his imagination, it was never

forgotten. Reviewing his qualifications for writing *Mr Tasker's Gods*, T.F.P. once said: "I knew the ways of the land, village customs, and the right time to plant and to sow, and I knew my Bible". No, he had not forgotten the land he left behind.

There are, for example, a few Suffolk references in the novels and the short stories that can be linked to real-life places or people. Responding to Elizabeth's Myer's praise of his work, T.F.P. volunteers the following: "The story, the short one you liked in 'Bottle's Path' was nearly a true one. I heard the unhappy woman crying in Deadman lane [sic] near Sweffling in Suffolk" (T.F.P. to E.M., 1 March 1946). The story itself is not identified in the letter, but it must be "A Suet Pudding". Did we not know from this letter and from T.F.P.'s diary that there was a lane by this name, we might have been forgiven for assuming that it was another Bunyan allusion (c.f. *Pilgrim's Progress*). Of course, knowledge of the Suffolk locale adds nothing to our appreciation of the story: rather it provides rare evidence that T.F.P. did in fact draw specifically upon incidents from this phase of his life. There are but two other cases where T.F.P. acknowledges the use of Suffolk material in his work. John Row, T.F.P.'s neighbour and fellow council member in Sweffling, appears as the persecuted ploughman, "John Roe", of *Mark Only*, and also features in "The Two Thieves", and "A Strong Girl". And there is a letter in which T.F.P. complains about Louis Wilkinson's assumption that the two singularly unengaging clergymen in a suppressed episode of *Mr Tasker's Gods* are modelled after the Rev. Charles Powys:

"What a dog old Louis is to be sure, because he must needs make fun of his mother he thinks everyone else does it. When, I should like to know, did father ever eat a pickled onion? When did he ever need to be woken up to attend holy communion? I chose for my type two Suffolk clergymen that I saw once stepping round the corner of a street—near the Butcher's shop at Saxmundham . . ."

(T.F.P. to J.C.P., 15 October 1916)

However, even without verification of this sort, we would have to recognise that T.F.P.'s fiction commands a range of knowledge about the rural world that derives not from mere observation (as in Dorset) but from working the land itself (as in East Anglia). Farming is the backdrop against which many of his little dramas are performed. So his stories are full of everyday details about working bailiffs ("The Red Petticoat"), hiring fairs ("What Lack I Yet?"), sheep hurdles, rent audits ("The Unbidden Guest"), ploughing matches, ringed pigs ("Sevens"), carting dung ("A Box of Sweets"), the value of proper drainage ("Squire Pooley"), new ways of fattening stock ("Circe Truggin"), the difference between mustard and charlock ("Found Wanting"), and the helpful ways of rooks in pecking maggots out of the backs of sheep ("The Baked Mole"). One can also find some specific, albeit incidental, references to East Anglia in the short fiction, where it perhaps suggests some sort of Housman-like "land of lost content". Miss Straw is the daughter of a Suffolk Squire ("Captain Patch"); Ann Fell "expects to find a house with a high-pitched roof, and people as simple and as talkative as those she had left behind" when she journeys from Suffolk to Maidenbridge to be a teacher ("Sweet Suffolk Owl"); Mr Hayhoe decides John Death must be from a Suffolk family (*Unclay*); Paradise is said to be "like Norwich Cathedral" by Jane Nutbeam "who, as a child, had once stayed in the Close and played hide and seek in the cloisters" ("Like Paradise"); and Farmer Anton is rumoured to have "gone to Norfolk" ("Soppit's Sabbath").

Far more interesting and important are a group of stories which, though not set in East Anglia, are centrally concerned with farming and contain protagonists who, unsurprisingly enough, share many of T.F.P.'s particular obsessions. First, we need to recognise that two kinds of farmer inhabit the pages of Powys: the good, poor, farmer and the bad, rich, farmer. Sometimes, the poor man becomes rich; in

which case he usually ends up committing suicide. Sometimes he is pre-occupied with books, and sometimes with God; in either case, his farm will fail. "The Left Leg" offers a paradigm example. James Gillet is the poor man who "had lost all his interest in the soil, because he had found a more terrible idea, God" (p. 14); he "sought in the ecstasy of prayer for the meaning of life" (p. 5). After hearing the voice of God while in the fields hoeing mangel, "he never drove a straight furrow again" (p. 15), and his farm began to fail. Farmer Mew is Gillet's avaricious and evil counterpart, whose "habit of life was to crush all" and for whom "living was a matter of continual getting" (p. 5). Inevitably, Gillet is ruined by Mew, whose cows eat his hay and whose sheep are one night driven in to eat his young corn. But Mew, "the giant of Madder", is not really to blame; for he is more than a man, he is an elemental force who "drew all things, the grass, fields, houses, sweet cows, and women, into himself" (p. 18). And Gillet, caring nothing for worldly prosperity, experiences the numinous:

Grave mould was not plain mould to Gillet now. He saw all Madder afire with the Spirit. Life and death, the creatures, even ants under a stone all burning. The queer presence within had opened his eyes. He saw every blade of grass, every leaf, every movement of the wind, every little red worm, as possessed of God. (*The Left Leg*, p. 47)

The religious experience of the "good" farmer is not always represented in such transcendental terms. Humour often finds a place in the account. "When Thou Wast Naked", for example, features Mr Priddle, "an ordinary man, a little inclined to sadness, perhaps", who forgets the cattle he has just bought at auction for £58 in his excitement at buying a "great family Bible", for a shilling, and has to return for them. The cattle are to stock the "moderate-sized farm" he has just rented or "hired" (the very term T.F.P. uses in *This is Thyself* with reference to White House Farm). However, he becomes preoccupied with the Bible, and

comes to see the world through it; he “found it so much to his taste, that he could hardly bear to be away from such a book. He delighted in the stories and the language that was sometimes like an old wolf howling in a dark forest . . .” (“When Thou Wast Naked”, in *Bottle’s Path*, pp. 42-3). His farm prospers in spite of him, and because of World War One; so, happily, and unlike T.F.P.’s real-life experience, he can sell for £40 cows that he bought for £14. But after four years he gives up farming and retires to Little Dodder on the proceeds of the sale, because his son “of a sensitive nature grew ill through the smell of farmyard manure” (p. 43). There Mr Priddle would venture “out alone into the fields, where he would be sure to see some of the scenes and some of the people that moved in the pages of his great book” (p. 44). Two figures in the sunset are transformed into Moses and Jehovah; Mr Shattock’s large horsepond becomes the Sea of Joppa; and a lost boy, asking directions to the church, is recognised as the young Jesus and shrewdly referred instead to the Inn, “where the most learned clergy were always to be found”. Mr Priddle’s wife is tolerant of such eccentricity, and can readily translate his biblical references into English equivalents. She explains at one point: “When he says ‘Egypt,’ he really means the Maidenbridge workhouse” (p. 66). In this touching eccentric behaviour of Mr Priddle, we observe T.F.P.’s fictional *alter ego* doing what he himself so often does in his fiction: re-viewing, even re-constituting, the world he inhabits in terms of his own idiosyncratic, biblically inspired, vision of it.

There are stories, of course, in which religious fervour does not overwhelm or supplant love of the land; indeed, at times the land itself is deemed holy. Thus, for Mr Tiffin, in “Found Wanting”, “his land was his Holy Bible” (*The White Paternoster*, p. 124). And yet Mr Tiffin, a widower, simultaneously thinks of his land in more earthly terms; he “loved his fields as though each of them was a kind matron by whom he had had a large number of children” (p. 122). He

is not, therefore, easily to be wooed away from them and into marriage by the conniving Mrs Wood, his new housekeeper, and her daughter, Lily. When he first meets them, he thinks of each as a field; Mrs Wood was “a little like a nine-acre field of his” (p. 127), and Lily, “a field of lovely flax flowers”. The two women nearly succeed in persuading the guileless Mr Tiffin of Lily’s suitability as a wife on the basis of her apparently encyclopedic knowledge of farming—until he discovers that the tid-bits of farming lore with which he is tempted come directly from his own copy of Johnson’s *Book of the Farm*. Lily is finally “found wanting” when she fails a crucial test; she identifies barley as oats, and wheat as barley.

In “They Were My Fields”, and “The Key of the Field”, T.F.P. offers two versions of the same basic scenario: a dispossessed tenant farmer yearns to return to the fields he tended so lovingly. But where the first story is more or less realistic in form, the second comes very close to allegory. John Osborn, the landless farmer of “They Were My Fields” returns compulsively to walk the fields that had once been his until forbidden by a magistrate to enter them again. Then, confined to his cottage and garden, he gazes for hours at a time towards the distant farm, repeating the same phrase: “They were my fields”. He is also guilt-ridden over his neglect of one small field, God’s Close, which had never been tilled. But when he is given a telescope, he is able to see that the new tenant, George Rodden, is preparing to plough this very field, and so he can die happily. His last words bring us back to the theme of the farmer being wedded to the land: “George Rodden be a good husband!” (*Captain Patch*, p. 269).

Uncle Tiddy, of “The Key of the Field” is “a good husbandman”, too, and the first tenant of “twelve acres of the richest pasture” that belong to Squire Jar of Madder Hall. But through the scheming of the envious Trott family, the field is taken from him and given to them. Uncle Tiddy is left to gaze sadly through the high palings that enclose the field, and to ask: “Will the

iron gate be locked against me for ever?" Squire Jar is manifestly a landowning version of the itinerant and god-like Tinker Jar; so we cannot be surprised that Uncle Tiddy's virtue is recognised in the end, and that he is given the Squire's own golden key. En route to the field, Mr Jar talks with him of the crops, recalls Uncle Tiddy's good hay [a nice piece of wish-fulfillment!], and promises: "You have been my tenant for a season: you will now be my guest for ever" (p. 25).

We are no longer surprised to find an author putting himself or some version of himself into his own works. Chaucer may have been the first of our English writers to do it, and he eschewed all disguise. T.F.P. does it in many of his stories. We have already seen him as Mr Priddle in "When Thou Wast Naked", but he is also, among other characters, Mr Pitcher, "a poor poet of Madder" in "The Dove and the Eagle", Mr Pymore, the miller of "The Hill and the Book", John Pie of "Christ in a Cupboard", and James Pinnock of "What Lack I Yet?" Here, however, we will focus briefly upon his frequent appearance as Shepherd Poose, whose name I have elsewhere identified as a Suffolk version of Powys. There are at least nine published stories in which Shepherd Poose appears, and in some of these he is as fleeting a figure as Mr Jar. But in two related stores, "A Pretty Babe" and "Thy Beautiful Flock" (a biblical title from Jer. 13. 20), Shepherd Poose plays a major role. In both cases; Shepherd Poose, the employee of Mr Oliver of Norman Grange, is utterly dedicated to his flock of prize-winning, pure-bred Dorset ewes; yet the sheep keep dying. "The Pretty Babe" also features the miraculous intervention, on Christmas Eve, of the Christ-child, who tends the sheep when Shepherd Poose is lured into drinking too much by his disgruntled predecessor, and who even restores a dead lamb to life. No such saviour, alas, ever came to the aid of T.F.P. in his farming days. As Gertrude, who had reason to know, told the story: "Almost every day one

of the labourers on the farm would come to him and say 'Another sheep has died.'" (Mark Holloway, "With T. F. Powys at Mappowder", in Humfrey, 1980)

When T.F.P. finally settled in East Chaldon, then, he was drawn not only by the tranquility of this little village but by the resemblance of the surrounding hills to the "delectable mountains" of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He alludes to this perception in two places: in the autobiographical fragment in which he describes the influence of Hazlitt's essay, and in the long unpublished, first-person story, "Cottage Shadows". By moving to Lenton / Chaldon, Francis Wingrave, the protagonist, like T.F.P. in real life, "fancied that he had reached those same delectable mountains whereon the thoughtful and pious shepherds fed their flocks". The conception of self-as-shepherd clearly remained strong with T.F.P., in spite of his disappointment on the farm. In his copy of *The Apocryphal New Testament*, for example, he marked passages he deemed particularly appropriate to his brothers and to himself. Against a self-accusatory passage in "The Shepherd of Hermas", he wrote his initials; the crucial sentence reads: "You, who being weakened through your worldly affairs, gave yourself up to sloth." And in his later years, T.F.P. would occasionally quote from Matthew Arnold's "Bacchanalia" a few lines that somehow capture the bitter-sweet nature of his youthful experience:

Shepherd, what ails thee?
Shepherd, why mute?
Forth with thy joyous song
Forth with thy lute.

And so we have come full circle; the shepherd has returned, if not to his flock, at least to a place reminiscent of safely fictional pastoral haunts, where he could relive and reshape in fiction the life he had left behind, and from where, moreover, he could hope, like Christian, to see the gates of the Celestial City.

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COLGATE Colgate University Powys Collection. Includes letters from T.F.P. to L.W., and a few from L.W. to T.F.P.

JOHNSON Collection of Mary Barham Johnson. Includes many letters from maternal side of T.F.P.'s family.

NORFOLK Norfolk County Records Office, Norwich: Electoral rolls for Warham; early county directories.

SUFFOLK Suffolk County Records Office, Ipswich: Electoral rolls for Rendham and Sweffling; Sweffling Parish Council Records; coroner's inquests; large-scale ordnance survey maps; tithe maps.

TEXAS Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Powys Collection: manuscripts and letters. Includes ms. of "This is Thyself", and 1892 diary.

White House Farm: The Fields (Table 1)

1896			1897		
8 acres	Wheat	Seven Acres	8 acres	Beans	Seven Acres
7 acres	Wheat	Brick Kiln Field	7 acres	Beans	Brick Kiln Field
8 acres	Beans	The Five Acres	7 acres	Wheat	[The] Five Acres
8 acres	Barley	Kiln(s)hill*	5 acres	Beans & Peas	Pisty Brook
5 acres	Barley	<i>Pisty Brook</i>	13 acres	Wheat	Barn Field
13 acres	Barley & Peas	Barn Field	12 acres	Wheat	*Oak Hedgerow
14 acres	Barley	The Walk*	9 acres	Barley	*Eight Acres
6 acres	Barley	Cottage Field*	12 acres	Barley	*Cart Shed Field
[68]		[8 fields]	[73]		[8 fields]

Crop production for 1896, 1897 seasons

Barley	33 + 21 = 54 (38%)
Wheat	15 + 32 = 47 (33%)
Beans	14 + 18 = 32 (23%)
Peas	6 + 2 = 8 (6%)

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Charles Lock

Weymouth Sands and the Matter of Representation: Live Dogs, Stuffed Animals and Unsealed Stones

John Cowper Powys to his brother Theodore, 15 November 1932:

I have now before me the hard task of re-writing from the very start my Weymouth Romance; for I'd made it too big too long, & since Glastonbury won't sell I *must* write shorter. So I've *got* to make the foundation smaller . . . for this foundation (begun when I was of proud look and high stomach thinking to myself that Glastonbury wd. win the Nobel Prize) was huge—the biggest foundation since Romulus & Remus jumped over the foundations of Rome; and I must get all the stones nearer the Centre now.¹

Six days later, to his brother Llewelyn:

I am starting re-writing my Weymouth Book from the very beginning. I had got too large a foundation with too many characters not sufficiently intertwined, and I am cutting some half a dozen of them out. Out they go, poor wraiths of Limbo, but I may yet save a few of them, but made less emphatic and important—we shall see. But my new first chapter is much better—and, if you please, to show what a laborious craftsman I grow, this is actually my *third first* chapter—but I have kept the first sentence of all unchanged that I wrote on Father's birthday (Candlemas Day, isn't it?—last February 2nd) with his own quill pen . . .²

Together these two passages invite us to take *Weymouth Sands* as we find it, and not to indulge in excuses, special pleading and speculation on the might-have-beens of different editors, different publishers, a juster libel law and a healthier economy. *Weymouth Sands* is a book carefully written and re-written, by an author aware that in earlier versions some of the characters were “not sufficiently intertwined”. If the novel is felt to contain disjunctions and lacunae,

we must allow that the author wanted it that way.

Powys certainly anticipated the critical objections, and even outlined the compromise for which most critics have been willing to settle:

But the characters are very satisfactory, only the plot is weak and not very convincing. But why should an exciting book . . . not be able to dispense with the teasing necessity of a Plot?³

Powys's objection to “plot” may be located in a comparison of the two above-cited passages from his letters. To one brother Powys has to re-arrange the stones of his foundation: to another he has to exclude extraneous characters. In the novelist's structuring imagination stones and characters are interchangeable. Proust spoke with high approval of Hardy's “stone-mason's geometry”: *The Well-Beloved*, Proust's favourite among Hardy's novels, is read in the course of *Weymouth Sands* (473)⁴ and this is the merest instance of Powys's fascination with people and landscape, people and stone, characters *as* stone. In *Weymouth Sands* the stones may be animate, but they are no less enduring for that. Nobody in this novel dies.

If our experience in reading *Weymouth Sands* is unsatisfying, or at least unusual, it is because we find relations between characters to be spatial rather than temporal, open to arrangement and configuration and juxtaposition but hardly available to development and resolution. Each chapter has extraordinary independence as a unit—a block—and the order in which the fifteen chapters are presented to the reader cannot be explained by plot or story. (Numerology may not be all-explaining, but it is worth noting that fifteen is not a good number for

geometry or building; it is however factored by three and five, to be found in Trigonon House, the sunbeam Trivia,⁵ and Daisy's doll Quinquetta.) Thinking of each chapter as a block we can see that fifteen blocks cannot be arranged into a larger block. As sixteen would make a double-cube (and is a favourite in Henry James's geometry of the house of fiction) we are left one short, and that is how it should be.

The Depression can here be invoked, not as excuse but as circumstance: wishing to write an enormously long book Powys is constrained to write one of less than six hundred pages. Bound by finitude and fixity of length Powys resorts to the sense of endlessness and incompleteness. In the resistance to plot an alternative strategy is fragmentation, but *Weymouth Sands* is not a fragment: in the opinion of many readers, it simply lacks something. The novel's treasured and retained first sentence, stubbornly unrevised since 2 February 1932, is about the relation of parts to whole:

The Sea lost nothing of the swallowing identity of its great outer mass of waters in the emphatic, individual character of each particular wave.

We should note first the word "waters", following so closely on the title's "Sands": two uncountable substances on which idiomatic usage has bestowed the plural, enacting divisibility and counting. Then we remark the oddity of the construction. Normally we think of waves as losing their identity in the sea, of the smaller being taken up by, subsumed within the larger. Here, where as the second sentence tells us "Each wave . . . was an epitome of the whole body of the sea", it is the larger, the whole, whose identity is threatened by the epitomizing particularization of the smaller—and so it is with this novel and its chapters.

It is hard to grasp the identity of the whole when that whole is boundless and infinite as the sea, and equally hard when the sea is infinitely epitomized in each transient wave. The phrase "swallowing identity" encapsulates the problem in its own ambiguity: is the

sea characterized by its action of swallowing, or is the sea's identity constantly being swallowed—as the sea swallows each wave that is its epitome? The ambiguity can be resolved only if one makes a distinction between the sea and its identity—and this distinction will be crucial for our acceptance of the novel. For, according to the first reading, the sea is a cornucopia in reverse, ingesting all that comes to it and from it; and according to the second reading it is because the sea is a cornucopia—for ever emitting waves that are distinct from itself—that its identity is threatened. The use of the term "cornucopia" here is advised, for there is little question that Powys, in this period of astonishing proliferation, compares himself to Rabelais in the latter's assurance to the reader: "As much as you draw out at the top, I will pour in at the bung . . . C'est un vray Cornucopie de joyeuseté et raillerie".] As soon as we know what the Cornucopia contains—and therefore what it is—it ceases to be a cornucopia and becomes merely a large container. That is why "swallowing identity" is such an exact and exacting phrase, for it is the identity of what is never completed or finalized or wholly revealed—the identity, let us say, of no more than fifteen-sixteenths. Plot, demanding resolution and closure, insists that a novel be identical with itself and with the entirety of itself. A text that refuses to coincide with itself, that fails to make a point (the point of reference and interpretation), is labelled by its plotting denigrators a shaggy dog story. Terence Cave's *The Cornucopian Text* has given a serious label to the writings of Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Sterne and many others.⁷

Powys's objection to plot is an objection to the conventional representation of time: when time is admitted within a scheme of representation we are to understand that when the representation comes to an end, runs out of words and pages, the time represented will be completed and quantified, and the supply will have run dry. This objection is evident in the writings of such of Powys's exemplars as Rabelais, Sterne and

Cervantes. That is why it is so important for the great Cornucopian texts that their termination not be imposed by the author within the scheme of representation, but only by that—death, or some other non-literary, non-representational exigency—which imposes termination on the author. Powys uses the Depression and the gross demands of the book-trade as an alternative to his own death: the book is this long and no longer not because of any intention of the author but because of non-literary circumstances beyond—like death—his own control. (The serene pathos of Powys's declining years may be due to his outlasting of his longest texts: how magical *Porius* would seem if Powys had not outlived its non-completion.)

Contrary to the allegations of many critics, that in *Weymouth Sands* Powys never pursues the narrative possibilities of his themes—neither the affairs of love, nor of vengeance, nor of politics—he clearly has to exercise much restraint to keep all narrative possibilities in a merely potential state.⁸ It is not inadvertent that in six hundred pages so little of consequence happens, for consequences have a way of leading to conclusions. All that happens is inconsequential, and this is especially obvious in the most memorable episodes: Perdita on Larry's bed, Magnus and Curly on Maiden Castle, Cattistock's "heroism" in the storm, Sylvanus and Marret at Tup's Fold. Few books have fewer consummations.

This should not suggest frigidity or even sterility, for erotic energy is enormously, urgently present throughout the book. What we find rather is a way of representing the erotic, the passionate, the sexual, apart from time and without temporal consequence or fulfilment. Desire is instrumental in the conceptualizing of time, for duration is the interval between fulfilments. Instead of despising Magnus and other characters for their patience and passivity we should admire Powys's representation of desire independent of duration. In the novel's claustrophobic atmosphere—in designed

contrast to the openness of the represented space of Weymouth—there is no release either narrative or erotic. Erotic desire is thus represented as a perpetual condition, that on which humanity finds its notions of temporality, rather than as a temporary aspect which offers escape from time. To escape from time it is necessary only to escape from desire—and if desire is represented there is no need to represent time also. Time may be our illusion that desire is temporary.

Duration is not represented in *Weymouth Sands*; dates and seasons are. Roughly in the ratio of fifteen : sixteen the span of represented dates (rather than the "length of time") falls short of one year by covering January to November 23rd. Missing is the month of the birth of the Absolute from which all would be consequential (including the very structure of our chronology), which birth is itself consequential on the twenty-first of November, "the day devoted in the calendar to the presentation of the Virgin" (502). As Marret is a diminutive of Mary, and as the narrator does not specify "in the Temple" this provides an analogue for Marret's presence to Sylvanus at Tup's Fold. But as the virgin remains a virgin and there is no virgin birth the analogue is without consequence, a mere coincidence of dates, and the more arbitrary and troubling for the unusual specification of this date. The alternation of seasons allows the reader to see Weymouth at different times of the year and the characters to engage in seasonal activities: it does not give us a sense of change, development or growth, nor an awareness that eleven months have gone by between the first and last chapters.

The representation of duration has been eschewed: what of the representation of character? According to familiar conventions of the growth and development of characters in literature, our expectations of *Weymouth Sands* are unfulfilled. In a way reminiscent of *A Glastonbury Romance* the reader becomes interested in a number of characters in the early chapters, only to discover that the interest will never be re-paid,

or paid. But whereas in *A Glastonbury Romance* each character is in a separate, autonomous narrative of his own devising and volition, the characters in *Weymouth Sands* are outside, without narratives. Magnus deliberately removes himself from a potential story when he claims that it is too cold for him to wait for Perdita. The Jobber takes his place in waiting, and throughout the book he waits, although for much of the book he is oblivious of waiting, and thinking only of taking revenge on Cattistock—a potential story that is snuffed out when Cattistock does not marry Hortensia, which non-marriage itself dashes further, independent narrative expectations. And when things do happen, readers are not shown the mechanics of cause and effect. Richard Gaul is suddenly found to be close to Peg Frampton (468), but there has been no mediating or explicatory narrative. Sylvanus ends up in Hell's Museum: the reader has been given warning of the likelihood of this eventuality, but he is denied the narrative process.

Characters are in one place, in particular relations with each other. Then we find them in other places, other relationships. It is our novelistic expectations that insist on filling the gaps, on imposing causality and consequence where there are only gaps. We can read this book as many times as we please and not discover, or come closer to discovering, why Cattistock does not marry Hortensia, why Magnus has no suspicions of Curly and Sippy, why Skald behaves as he does, why Sylvanus is as he is. To ask why, to read as if that were the right question, is to find *Weymouth Sands* stupidly recalcitrant and unsatisfactory.

Instead, we should attend to the arbitrariness of relationships, to the sheer wilful freakishness of proximities, sympathies and identifications. We will find them to be as coherent and explicable in life as in a puppet-show:

It is extraordinary what satisfaction Magnus derived, all the rest of the performance—which he felt no inclination to leave—by identifying the official [Sippy Ballard] with Punch. When the Ghost groaned and gib-

bered at the wretch, Magnus felt exactly like the Ghost; he felt he *was* the Ghost. And as for the moment when the Hangman came on the stage he felt such a close identification of himself with this indispensable official that his fingers twitched as Punch dodged the merited rope. (459)

The Punch-and-Judy show has been introduced to the reader on the second page of the novel, through the consciousness of Magnus:

'Curly told me it went on in the winter,' he thought. 'I told her I was sure it stopped. But now I know I've *often* heard it—all through the winter!' (18)

By association the Punch-and-Judy show is part of "an eternal classical childhood, happy and free, in some divine limbo of unassailable play-time." (457) But the stage, observed, is "coffin-shaped", and far from belonging to a carnivalesque limbo out of time, the show goes on, all through the winter.

In this book in which duration is not represented, the puppet-show endures, always in the background, marking the seasons, a constant and enduring point of reference. Here the inversions of temporality become vertiginous. Representations have their own conventions of temporality: a novel's time-scheme is independent of the time taken to read it; a painting or a sculpture is possessed of atemporality, unaffected by the years of its existence or the minutes and hours of our observation. These instances of the "plastic arts" are conventionally located in museums, spaces protected from temporality, from the change and decay of time and climate. If the puppet-show is, in defiance of convention, the one place which occupies and contains "real time", it is matched by the popular name of the lunatic asylum, Hell's Museum—a museum in which Sylvanus, among others, must work out his destiny, live the narrative that the book denies him.

These paradoxes are contained by the puppet-show within the novel, the representation of representation. When repre-

sentation is thus squared, or framed, all oppositions—static/dynamic, temporal/atemporal, plastic/organic, figure/ground, text/non-text—become indistinct, their terms interchangeable. And we can see the puppet-show as the novel, the puppet-master as Powys, re-writing the novel, getting “all the stones nearer the centre”: the characters will be more convincing as puppets the less we expect them to pretend to be real people.

Confusion between puppets and people is the cause of outrage to Daisy Lily when asked by Rodney Loder, “in that particular tone of a grown-up person addressing a child which is always so teasing, the apparently harmless words: ‘How is Quinquetta?’” (190) Daisy is seventeen, and Rodney has blundered in speaking with condescension. Daisy has grown up, to the point of understanding the difference between animate and inanimate, and she is embarrassed to be reminded of her former innocence of that distinction. But in this book growing up does not stop at seventeen, and wisdom is to be attained by obliterating that distinction. This serves as an allegory of our reading of *Weymouth Sands*. At first we expect people in novels to be of the same order as people in life—an order in which it is reasonable to ask “How many children . . . ?” and indulge in extra-textual speculation. Then we lose (aged about seventeen) our readerly innocence and get easily embarrassed when reminded of referentiality, that we once knew no difference between books and life, text and being, discourse and presence.

Truly mature readers, however, learn that in representations people are objectified and objects personified, and that the secure, fixed boundary between the animate and the inanimate, a boundary established by a positivist education of identity, objectivity and finitude—a boundary whose establishment is the very end and purpose of that education—has been dissolved. The sensitive reader will be concerned, with Sylvanus, that having bestowed a kiss on the handle of the garden fork, “the dung heap might feel

neglected”. (520) In the real world, of course, Sylvanus would be a psychotic—one for whom all things are animate—but within the world of the text Sylvanus is kin to the reader for whom all words are animated by referentiality, whether to people, things, or substances, or to representations of people or of things or of substances. “Words, those animated idolons”, (438) writes the narrator: in the face of words our civilization bestows and enforces a licenced psychosis.

Little can be made of Richard Gaul’s *Philosophy of Representation* as far as its content is divulged to us; it suffices that this “book within a book”—like Urquhart’s history of Dorset in *Wolf Solent*, or Dud No-man’s novel in *Maiden Castle*—be taken as an index to the book that contains it. To become aware of representation as such (by framing or squaring) is to cease to look innocently upon that which is represented. Representation evokes cunning questions of point-of-view, perspective, angle, scale, and—emphatically in *Weymouth Sands*—the material by, in, on, through or with which the representation is made or carried.

The book’s opening paragraph, sufficiently interesting in itself, is at the opening of next paragraph shockingly undercut or “de-materialized”:

Such at any rate was the impression that Magnus Muir—tutor in Latin to backward boys—received from the waves on Weymouth Beach. (17)

“Such at any rate” diverts the reader’s attention away from the outer world, the external reality, to the inwardness of Magnus’s consciousness—to that on which an “impression” has been made. This is followed by a further reversal in the third paragraph:

Lean, bony and rugged, with hollow cheeks and high cheekbones, the consciousness that looked out from his grey eyes assumed an *expression* [italics added] that would have been very difficult for the cleverest onlooker to analyse or define. (17)

The impression of the sea on Magnus’s mind has itself become an expression making an

impression on another onlooker's consciousness. There is no consciousness receptive to an impression that is not itself material and external, an expression creating an impression on another consciousness, in endless recursion. The oppositions hereby modified, if not negated, are those between subject and object, and between mind and body. There is no original pure exteriority, nor an original *carte blanche*, as is confirmed by Larry Zed's seaweed collection:

The specimens were so arranged that only one lay upon each page, with a blank page opposite to it; and the result of this was that each of these blank pages bore a deeply indented imprint or natural tracing of this same sea-growth. (174)

This detail destroys other oppositions, those between the organic and the cognitive, between the determined and the contingent. A "natural tracing" can be applied to both the way in which the seaweed is imprinted on the page, and the way in which Magnus receives "at any rate" an impression of the sea.

A doll or a puppet—fetish, totem—is for Powys the anomaly that can undo the binary oppositions by which scientific education insists that we live in and understand the world. For every child knows the attribution of animation to a stuffed shape, and yet few children are disappointed when it is demonstrated that there is nothing inside. An adult, resistant to childish superstition, must sometimes be strenuously alert to the non-animation of stuffing: in a puppet-show it is the near-impossibility of detachment, of denying animation, that drives an audience to hide its embarrassment in laughter. The boundaries that separate body from mind, outside from inside, are made vulnerable by dolls and puppets:

If we were permitted by the Holy Office of the Exact Sciences to dally with so unprovable a fantasy it were a nice point to speculate as to exactly *when*, in the life of an object adored by a fetish-worshipper, this sacrosanct inanimate becomes animate. At what point does

the idol, the stone, the block of wood, the doll, gather to itself its living identity, and become—as its worshipper certainly feels it *does* become—something more than the inert substance which is all that reason sees in it? (198)

If the puppet-master is thus analogous to the author, it is made clear that the puppet-master is no all-powerful Absolute—"such omnipresence need not imply superiority" (197)—but himself a part of that which he presents, conditioned by his own representations. As in the cornucopian text the author must submit to the limit of death in order to conclude without concluding, so the puppet-master, Mr Jones, is limited by his daughter and assistant, Marret, over whom he has less than complete control. Jerry Cobbold, the clown, "endowed by providence with a detachment from ordinary passions that amounted to a monstrous perversity", is unsure of his attitude to Peg Frampton, and his uncertainty is described thus:

His eye upon Peg was now like the eye of a manager of marionettes who is a little uncertain what wire to pull to prevent the Cinderella-puppet from leaving the stage with the Don Juan-puppet. (234)

To demonstrate to a child that a puppet or doll has no inside may resemble vivisection, and it is within Powys's treatment of the phenomenon of representation that vivisection has its proper place. Many readers have found everything to do with Hell's Museum, Dr Bush and Murphy extraneous to the plot, and certainly Hell's Museum has little to do with what little plot there is. Extraneity is a measure of distance, and between representation and vivisection there is hardly a distance at all.

In modern times representation has two quite distinct meanings, according to substance and to semblance: I can say that I am represented by a politician, and that I am represented by a photograph. The latter, by semblance, is mimetic, reflexive and metaphorical: the correspondence must be one-to-one. The former, by substance, is

metonymic and synecdochic, the one representing the many. Representation by substance insists that the representative be one of that which is represented: representation by semblance must insist that the substance of representation—e.g. photographic paper—is entirely different from what is represented—e.g. human flesh. Criminal misrepresentation—whether by means of passport, driving licence or identity card—is seldom a matter of distortion, of *bad* representation, but rather of confusing deliberately the two modes of representation.

The philosophical argument against vivisection is that it justifies itself by precisely such a deliberate confusion. The infliction of pain is justified in two ways: first, the one on whom pain is inflicted is not like us, and second, pain inflicted on a few will alleviate the sufferings of many. The former is at best a weak justification, even when hedged with modifications concerning rights, sentience, etc. But the real weakness of the vivisectionist case is to be found in the confusion of modes of representation: animals are not like us as they do not resemble us; and the suffering of a few animals alleviates the pain of many humans. Peter Singer is succinct:

either the animal is not like us, in which case there is no reason for performing the experiment; or else the animal is like us, in which case we ought not to perform an experiment on the animal which would be considered outrageous if performed on one of us.⁹

Singer's argument, based on either "like" or "not like", challenges the conventional division of representation into "semblance" or "substance". We assume that, as its purpose is often identification, mimetic representation demands a close likeness, whereas the other form of representation—synecdochic and, electorally, "constitutional"—has nothing to do with likeness: an M.P. looks like few if any of his constituents, and represents them all equally. Such tidiness can be disturbed by the observation that "likeness" need not be so circumscribed: outside the extraordinarily elabor-

ated cultural semiotics of modern representation and identification, it would be obvious that I look more like another human being than I look like a small piece of paper or any other material conveyor of my "likeness". Even if we elaborate on the distinction and argue that representation is always substitution, either by a thing which bears my likeness or by another person who stands for me, there will be no place for animals, except in the outmoded, pre-scientific form of sacrifice.

The modern schema of representation, developed since the late 16th century, is a triumph of humanism whose fundamental opposition is between human and non-human. An animal is neither a human nor a thing: vivisection treats a dog as a "thing" where rights are concerned, and as "human-like" anatomically, physiologically, medically. In *Weymouth Sands* Powys does not tell us much about vivisection, beyond a general rant against it. He has presented his characters in terms of puppets, playing on the human tendency to animate the inanimate; playing on the philosophical inadequacy of distinction between human and non-human, between animate and inanimate, Powys also presents his characters in terms of animals.

At Hell's Museum, on a visit, Magnus "began to feel like an animal" (119), but he has looked like one since the book's third paragraph described "the consciousness that looked out from his grey eyes" (17); Perdita has "nervous hare-like eyes" (46), and Peg Frampton "glanced sideways out of her hollow eye-sockets" (234). The eyes of an animal are expressive precisely because we do not ask: "I wonder what it's thinking?" That question follows a possible divergence, through human cunning, between expression and intention, between looks and words. Of an animal the expression is all that we know. And it is characteristic of *Weymouth Sands* that its humans are described largely in terms of expression, of that which is visible to an onlooker, and hardly at all in terms of consciousness and introspection. Eyes are the deepest inner-

most that can be shown—the threshold of inner and outer—and the narrator seldom presumes to investigate what lies beyond the eyes. Thereby humans are represented to us as if they were animals—live or stuffed—of whose inner thoughts and feelings it is an irrelevance to ask. And in these terms the oddity of the appearance is more worthy of attention than almost anything one could suppose of, for example, Mrs Cobbold's inner life:

what gave her face its extraordinary character was the extreme pallor of her cheeks, upon which, when she cast down her eyes, her long, dark eyelashes seemed to rest, like the eyelashes of a doll upon a countenance of colourless wax. (53)

The reader is inhibited from further enquiry not only by the inherent fascination of such a surface, but also by the respect we would accord to animals—the pursuit of inwardness is analogous only to vivisection—and by the apprehension with which we would preserve a stuffed animal from exposure as merely that. Powys hardly needs to explicate the anima in animal.

The author of *The Philosophy of Representation* is a young man who, as his ‘landlady Mrs Monkton would express it, ‘answered to the name of Richard Gaul’ ’. (96) In the present context that idiom makes trained animals of us all. A name, so personal, so bound up with identity, is here reduced to a stimulus that will provoke a reaction—which is what a name is for an animal. Gaul of course suggests France, and Powys may be thinking of the standard derivation of that name from ‘stranger’, for Gaul is an estranged observer for most of the book. But Powys is certainly thinking of Rabelais's derivation of Gaul from the Greek ‘gala’ (milk) ‘because they are naturally white as milk . . . and have for their sign and symbol the flower that is whiter than any other, the lily’.¹⁰ Endorsing the allusion to Rabelais, we note the recurrence of the theme of whiteness, together with ‘Double-Flower’, Daisy Lily, and her mother Hortensia (Garden) Lily, as well as,

in *Wolf Solent*, the ‘‘moon-white’’ Selina Gault.

Gaul's name suggests the strangeness of whiteness (Melville is always near to Powys). White is the colour from which all other colours come, and into which all colours dissolve. It is also the ‘‘blank’’ on which representations can be inscribed, as in Larry Zed's seaweed book. Powys further associates whiteness with two substances, stone (geologically primal) and bone (humanly, anatomically primal), from or on which all other substances derive or depend. The reflexivity of whiteness gives it, independently of any particular substance, an intense visibility and substantiality. Throughout *Weymouth Sands* white the all-colour is contrasted with grey, the non-colour, which dematerializes almost any substance of which it is the attribute:

The sea was calm, this Saturday morning, but it lay under a low, sad, cloudy sky, neutral and grey as itself. Richard derived . . . a peaceful and soothing pleasure from the faint contrast between the greyness below the horizon-line and the greyness above it. Both these expanses were reduced to the lowest possible level of emphasis to which any material phenomenon *could* be reduced without actually becoming invisible. (97)

A little later the white-named philosopher of representation muses thus:

It now struck him that in the greyness of those two expanses of un-solid matter, visible from his window, a greyness so neutral and unassuming as to hover on the edge of nonentity, there dwelt the essential mystery of beauty. (99)

Greyness being the means of dematerialization, of the transition from matter to what is beyond or within (the mental, the psychic, the spiritual, the transcendent) it is hardly surprising that many eyes in this book are grey.

In contrast to grey, with its intimations of the inward or the transcendent, whiteness, or blankness, or pallor, is the re-affirmation of substance, of the materiality of matter, the fleshliness of flesh. Jobber speaks to

Larry Zed of Cattistock's impending marriage to the Lily-white Hortensia:

there are two days betwixt Monday and Thursday, when he be thinking to set his teeth in that white skin. (200)

The same sentiment in the narrator's words: "unless the Dog was to flesh his teeth undisturbed in that woman's whiteness . . ." (218) And when, by his unexplained refusal to marry her, Hortensia has become his "nothing-girl", Cattistock dreams of this figment as "whiter than the sheets she lay between". (440)

Whiteness, associated so often with flesh, as well as bone and stone, is kin to light, present in the names of Hortensia, Lily's sister Lucinda and of the abortionist Lucius Girodel. Lucius's home, scene of fleshly revelleries, is Sark House, the house of flesh—even the Charnel Island? In this house flesh is celebrated in a way that brings people to the level of animals, as when Peg thinks of Curly:

"And what is she now, I should like to know? *Mr Ballard's bitch*—that's what *you* are, white face!" (236)

After leaving Sark House Peg says to herself, "I smell like a corpse", for a sarcophagus is intended for the eating of flesh; and when she then visits Witchit the fish-monger's "she became conscious that below his smiling chatter she was no more to him than a piece of fish that he would give to his cat . . ." (240) Both fish for the eating and the sarcophagus that eats are usually white, reminders of the mortal flesh. Sark House is a place of ambivalence: on the one hand humans are reduced to the level of beasts, but on the other hand, all the foul bestial talk, of "the Dog and his bitch" (236) and other animal namings, should remind us that animals deserve to be treated as humans. Between Sark House and Hell's Museum is an equivalence of experimentation and exploitation, of treating humans as animals, and animals as less than human.

Whiteness gives emphasis to the flesh, and it is also the attribute of primordial matter,

the ground of substance. While greyness renders sea and sky almost invisible and without substance, whiteness confers visibility and presence on the Dorset cliffs; and their promontories are named for their whiteness:

the noble line of cliffs . . . stretched away in a south-easterly direction, past the majestic promontory of the White Nose, till it ended with St Alban's Head. (160-61)

Stone as stone is white, but stone as the conveyor of representation, or even of significance, tends to be grey or indeterminate in colour. The important stones—significant to the reader: the pebble in Jobber's pocket, the one with seaweed attached that he throws into the sea—are of unspecified colour. The Chesil Beach is described, rather oddly, as a "gigantic rope of transparent stones, agates and carnelians". (340) Agates are semi-pellucid, and carnelians are named for their flesh-colour. While the cliffs of England stand, whitely and enduringly, Portland is always changing its shape as the stone is quarried and removed, and the Chesil Beach is constantly in motion as the pebbles are swept up, sifted and sorted—and sand mediates between the solidity of cliff and the liquidity of water.

Oolite, a stone frequently mentioned,¹¹ combines etymologically (though not geologically) egg and stone, making recurrent and ubiquitous the instance of the conjunction of the organic and the inorganic in the "fragment of slippery seaweed, whose roots clung tenaciously with their whitish tendrils to a small round pebble". (48) This organic-inorganic compound is further described as a "composite waif, half-animate and half inanimate". And the stone which the Jobber carries in his pocket is a microcosm of Portland, being in similar ratio to the island as a wave is to the sea:

Those blocks of Portland stone, over there by the quarry, became an enlarged replica of the beach-pebble in his pocket . . . (258)

Of the same pebble the Jobber later says: "All Chesil Beach is behind that stone."

(363) Synecdochically, microcosmically, the pebble represents the island and the beach, the larger masses of stone; but, revealing its half-animate, half-inanimate being, the single stone can also be not materially a part of something larger but the material ground of representation of something quite different. Here is the double of the Jobber's pebble:

[Magnus Muir's] eyes . . . wandered off to a large, oblong Chesil Beach pebble . . . upon which had been painted by his mother, nearly half a century ago, a picture of the Great Eastern, the ship that had laid the Atlantic cable. (533-34)

When that which creates an impression receives an impression, we see repeated the movement of consciousness, of animation, from impression to expression in the book's opening paragraphs. In so far as a thing is visible and substantial it is inanimate: in so far as it recedes and dematerializes that it may become the carrier of an image, it acquires, or has conferred upon it, animation.

A further instance of this doubleness of matter evident in images—as we have seen it in dolls and animals—is to be found at the Portland inn, the Sea-Serpent. The Jobber has to hold its sign-board at a particular angle, and at great discomfort to himself, to catch the light in order that Sue Gadget can see whether the depicted serpent has opened its eyes on this night of the storm:

the Jobber . . . continued obstinately holding the sign-board for her supposed enjoyment—though to him it had become by this time no more than a square of obscurely painted wood . . . (258)

Thus, emphatically, the materiality of the signifier is restored—as old Mrs Muir's pebble is interesting to us for its substantial likeness *to* the Jobber's pebble, not for its likeness or semblance *of* the Great Eastern. Like the “natural tracing” of the seaweed, the animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, are held in suspension, in tense harmony, in the great Brancusi-like sculpture on Portland: naturally formed—

“in the slow process of aeons of time this stone had been carved into a tremendous torso of love”—it makes an impression “neither base, nor gross, nor bestial; but god-like, cosmogonic, life-creating” (353), because its stoniness is not occluded by what it represents.

This “stone Idol” (353) is but one of many instances in *Weymouth Sands* of persons/animals/things having a status between or combining the animate and the inanimate, or being in a confusion of animal, vegetable and mineral. We have already heard Daisy Lily described by Peg as “Double-Flower”, and in Dog Cattistock we have two animals and live stock; to these we can add the Jobber's first name, Adam (earth), and Sylvanus (tree). In Perdita we have an allusion to *The Winter's Tale*, whose last act's transformation of Hermione is inevitably present. When Curly Wix runs off with Cattistock, Magnus feels numbed because:

he did not realize that what he thought was numbness was really the turning into stone of a *woman-shell*, of a certain lovely tortuous conch of circles, a certain Ammonite with divine curves! (546)

One who turns to stone makes another numb. There is a great deal of petrification in the hearts of those abandoned by the beloved, and much symbolic dropping of stones into water (212, 544)—notably Jerry Cobbold's projection of suicide by metamorphosis into the Jobber's pebble, which is thus transformed from a potential instrument of murder into a dead person:

‘Down pebble! Down soul of Jerry! Down to the bottom of the world! I'll smile . . . and smile . . . and smile—and be a pebble!’ (560)

Jerry Cobbold has the sanity of cynicism, and the reader is hardly expected to take this as a recommendation.

In this, however, as in most of Powys's novels, there are few recommendations. In all this book's modulations from stone to vegetable to human to animal, none is presented as more worthy than another.

Indeed, it is in representation that we recognize our dependence on everything else that either bears our image or takes our place. What matters, what has value, is not the inward, essential condition but the outward aspect—and the attribution by another of animation to that aspect. For animation is never possessed or inherent but always conferred from without by another. Every aspect is therefore twofold or double-natured: as it is in itself and as it is when looked at. When animated the human face is a double of itself, even a double virtually coincidental with itself, just as “Weymouth” is overlaid with “a strange phantasmal Weymouth”, or as the sea is always distinct from its identity, or as:

Round and about Quinquetta’s palpable form there must have extended . . . an impalpable emanation, which was a second, or more etherealized, Quinquetta. (199)

This attribution is what occurs to each of the town’s landmarks through the familiar glances of its residents. When Perdita first arrives in Weymouth she and Skald and Trot pass the Jubilee Clock which means a great deal to the two men but, as the primrose to Wordsworth’s Peter Bell, “was just a clock to the girl from Guernsey”. (46) Much later Skald and Perdita make explicit their thoughts on that first meeting, and Skald acknowledges that in isolation each thing is without any quality other than itself: “That old church-spire is nothing in itself”. (342) It is of course vital that we attend to the narrator’s insistence that nothing in Weymouth is very old, hardly two hundred years old: there is nothing of the mystery of antiquity that we find in *A Glastonbury Romance* or *Maiden Castle*.¹² The quality of Weymouth’s things and landmarks is not inherent, nor the product of accumulating time, and has no existence independent of observers. And those observers do not have to be human, or even animate:

‘I know the spire isn’t anything particular . . . and it’s not old either of course . . . and I know the old Nothe isn’t anything . . . but when things have-been in sight of each other for

many years . . . you feel as if they were *connected* in some way . . . as if they were . . . *making* something . . .’ (342-43)

What “things . . . in sight of each other” make is a mutually interanimated gathering—a representation, or scape, of land or town or sea.

The Clock looks at the Spire, and the Spire returns the gaze: each confers animation on the other. Then an observer sees both forming a townscape full of animation and association. The observer himself, like Magnus Muir at the novel’s opening, then becomes part of the townscape for another onlooker, whose place could be taken by the reader, and so the recursion goes on. Imaged by the seaweed that makes an impression on a blank page, each landscape contains a point of observation, is composed of such points, as each viewpoint composes another’s landscape.

In his study of Rabelais Bakhtin characterizes carnival as the space without footlights, a space in which all are actors, none spectators. *Weymouth Sands* is constructed on a similar model: there is an unending sequence of stages, each separated from the others by proscenium arches, these arches being, as it were, reversible. On *Weymouth Sands* we, readers, look at a crowd looking at a Punch-and-Judy show, and the puppet-master looks out at the audience. As Perdita observes to the Jobber on Portland, as they look over the bay to Weymouth and she thinks of Muir admiring his view of Portland.

‘It’s quaint to think of *his* landscape being your home and *your* landscape being his home.’ (343)

Quaint, yet obvious, and yet not obvious, for the same positivist education that establishes distinctions and boundaries between its selected antinomies also insists on an immutable difference between the viewer and the viewed, the subject and the object. Without it, there would be no point of reference, and no scale. It is the frame within the frame, representation within represent-

ation, that optically and logically confounds scale, perspective and point-of-view—that, fundamentally, disrupts the privilege of objectivity. We are able now to refer to the “frame-within-frame” as an example of fractal geometry, which threatens subversion of Cartesian co-ordinates, both geometrical and philosophical.

Landscapes are composed by viewers, not necessarily animate except by virtue of making the composition, and so also are faces. We hear much of Jerry Cobbold’s mask, and we should recall that the root meaning of “person” is “mask”. A human being no more has an inherent face than a building is more than a building. A face is what an onlooker bestows on a patch of flesh, thus creating a person. Dr Brush, barely animate in his scientific mania, is frequently described as having a “neutral, de-personalized ticket-collector’s face” (434) until, sitting by candlelight with Cattistock, Brush experiences a transformation that is manifested by the effect of candlelight; in other words, the inner transformation is brought about by an external lighting effect:

That miraculous projection of human personality that we call by such names as countenance, visage, face, features, physiognomy, lineaments, was now . . . thickened out and solidified so it no longer resembled an apparition. It did not, however, become all at once itself, as Cattistock’s face did. Something about the inbred character of Dr Brush, something in his inmost soul . . . seemed to retard his physiognomy in the re-taking of its human shape. Thus thickened out and solidified . . . but not yet quite humanized, Dr Brush’s face arrived at resembling the faces of the most revolting epoch of human decomposition, when, if we saw our dead beneath their trim coffin-lids, we would quickly be converted to cremation. (435-36)

Decomposition is figured as an intermediary stage, in a process not of decay but of regeneration. It is the condition of a face as it is being called, by another, into its humanity. The clean and stony look, of complete inhumanity, is consequent on Brush’s withholding of animation from animals. We are

left to wonder whether Brush will suffer relapse even deeper into his scientific objectivity, and withhold animation even from his human patients:

“Shall I never do it? Never do it?” he said to himself. And what he meant by “do it” was to grow as impersonal in his relations with Sylvanus as he had compelled himself to be over his dogs.¹³ (532)

Impersonality, like detachment, is a virtue for scientists striving for objectivity. The horror latent in Cartesianism is that the (entirely reasonable) denial of subjectivity to “an object” entails the de-personalization of the (reasonable) “subject” or observer.

To be onlooker and only onlooker is to measure and finalize, to receive impressions without participating in the expression that gives to representation a vertiginous recursion, to the text a cornucopian endlessness, and that keeps life in a state of flux—that is, alive. In his later study of Rabelais, a book much concerned with the pre-scientific mind and imagination, Powys writes of “the world we have *objectified into reality* by some mysterious primal disobedience”.¹⁴ Complete objectivity denies all value and significance to the *body* of the observer, the very matter that can itself be an expression, make an impression on others. To unpack Sylvanus’s talismanic phrase, such an observer presumes to be all caput, no anus. The brilliance of the phrase “Caput-anus” is that it breaks down not only the mind-body divide but also the boundaries between bodies: it includes more than the single individual. The surplus it includes is excrement—what we might label ‘internalised otherness’ or even ‘alimentary alterity’—that which most blatantly tells us of our body’s participation in the flux of matter.

To recognize one’s participation in the flux of things is to realize the imposture of detached and separable subjects and objects, and the fallacy of stable representations. In Sylvanus’s vision—whose clarity is inaccessible if we expect conventional, objective representation—the dung-heap

deserves to be treated as if it were animate, because it is what we were. As a face decomposes over a geological "epoch", so stone contains organisms and will be contained by them. Representation, understood materially, exposes the interdependence of all forms of matter, of all that is. This is the nub of Panurge's speech in praise of lenders and debtors:¹⁵ money is representation that does not obscure its materiality (silver, paper, plastic); and currency is but a synonym for flux. Powys understands Pantagruelism in these terms, as the support of "Physis, or 'Nature-working-through-Man'" in its struggle against "Anti-Physis or 'Man-working-against-Nature'".¹⁶ Representation *through* nature includes the materiality of whatever carries the representation; representation *against* nature renders invisible that which conveys the representation.

As the anus is to the caput—sign of flux and limitlessness and materiality—so Jobber's pebble is to *The Philosophy of Representation*, the pages of whose manuscript scatter in the breeze like Sybil's leaves (541, 567), until the pebble is used as a paperweight, resting on the white paper to which Hortensia Lily has been compared, on those sheets than which the woman is whiter. (423, 440) What the estranged, detached Gaul has failed to understand is that paper is a material substance, that what is inscribed on whiteness, as well as the whiteness itself, is also a representation, and that there can be no *Philosophy of Representation* that cannot itself be represented, and that must be represented in all its materiality if we are to avoid the finality of objectivity.

In letters written during the composition and re-writing of *Weymouth Sands* Powys makes an equation between characters and stones. We have already noted the presence of Hermione, which leads back to Pygmalion, Deucalion, and the vision of Ezekiel. Powys may have also in mind Panurge's rebuke to Pantagruel:

As for your grand builders up of dead stones, there is nothing written about them in my book of life. I build up live stones only, by which I mean men.¹⁷

The later explanation, that it is testicles which "were the very stones with which Deucalion and Pyrrha restored the race of men",¹⁸ is not meant to be reductive and, if taken in conjunction with the "cosmogonic" sculpture on Portland Bill, only compounds the fusion of flesh and stone, the inseparability of organic and inorganic, the interdependence of all being in all representation. All these concerns are glossed by Yves Bonnefoy, whose life's work has been virtually a meditation on *The Winter's Tale*. One man's psychosis is another's sheer illumination:

L'ange, qui est la terre,
Va dans chaque buisson et paraître et brûler.
Je suis cet autel vide, et ce gouffre, et ces
arches
Et toi-même peut-être, et le doute: mais
l'aube
Et le rayonnement de pierres descellées.

The angel, who is earth,
Inhabits every bush, appearing, burning.
I am this empty altar, this pit, these arches,
And you yourself perhaps, and doubt: but
dawn,
Too, and the radiance of unsealed stones.¹⁹

NOTES

¹Belinda Humfrey, ed., *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972, p. 335.

²John Cowper Powys, *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, London: Village Press, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 150-51.

³*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴All page numbers refer to *Weymouth Sands*, London: Macdonald, 1963. This text is occasionally emended by comparison with New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934, and with the "version" of *Weymouth Sands* first published in U.K. as *Jobber Skald*.

⁵The sunbeam "Trivia" is a detail lifted from Powys's life: see Frederick Davies, ed., *The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1930*, London: Greymitre Press, 1987, p. 47.

⁶Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book Three, Prologue.

⁷Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance*, Oxford, 1979.

⁸On the notion of "narrative potential" see Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'*, Stanford, 1987, and my review-article thereon, "Tolstoy or Tolstoy?", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (summer, 1988).

⁹Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals*, London, 1977, p. 61.

¹⁰Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book One, Chapter Ten.

¹¹Oolite is much more prominent in *Jobber Skald*: in order to disguise place-names the following substitutions were made: Weston = Ool; Franchise Road = Oolicombe Road; Sandsfoot Castle = Oolicombe Castle; Underbarn Path = Oolicombe Path. See Margaret Moran, "The Vision and Revision of John Cowper Powys's *Weymouth Sands*", *Powys Review*, No. 11, (1982/83), p. 26.

¹²In a brief essay on *Weymouth Sands*, printed

some three months before the book's publication and entitled "Remembrances", Powys wrote:

Weymouth is not really—as towns in Wessex go—an old town; and one of the things that have put me on my mettle in writing this book is the challenge offered by a comparatively un-historic past. For I wanted to see how far a church that was only Early Victorian and houses, forts, and bridges that were only Eighteenth-Century . . . could lend themselves . . . to these subtle interpenetrations, psychic, chemic, vital, that pass backwards and forwards between human beings and their environment. (*The Modern Thinker*, November 1933; reprinted in *The Powys Review*, No. 11, (1982/83), pp. 16-17.

¹³This is the single most severe and perplexing discrepancy between the various texts of *Weymouth Sands*, yet it is unremarked by either Margaret Moran, *op. cit.*, or Dante Thomas, *John Cowper Powys: A Bibliography*, New York, 1975, pp. 48-52, 82-83.

Where Macdonald 1963 and Simon and Schuster 1934 both have "over the end of his experiments on dogs", the Bodley Head 1935 *Jobber Skald* has "over his dogs". According to both sense and tense (for his experiments are hardly renounced yet) the *Jobber Skald* text appears to have introduced a genuine correction, and is here to be preferred.

¹⁴John Cowper Powys, *Rabelais*, London, 1948, p. 337.

¹⁵Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book Three, Chapters Three and Four.

¹⁶John Cowper Powys, *Rabelais*, p. 310.

¹⁷Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book Three, Chapter Six.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Book Three, Chapter Eight.

¹⁹Yves Bonnefoy, *Poems 1959-1975*, tr. Richard Pevear, New York, 1985, pp. 58-59.



N W R / 4



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Penny Smith

Works Without Names: John Cowper Powys's Early, Unpublished Fiction (Part 2)

Powys's early interest in pornography is well-documented in his *Autobiography*;¹ it was a form of escapism he found hard to resist and under its influence domesticity disappeared and Brighton was miraculously transformed into: "Babylon by the sea, without the costumes and without the hanging gardens but with all the vice".

This description comes from an early manuscript held at the University of Texas,² in which the Powys-hero, Philip Warton, gives up his journalist's job in London and comes to Sussex in order to write poetry. Philip has severed family ties by arguing with his sole relative, and has broken with the Church by announcing his agnosticism at Oxford: with the promise of a rent-free cottage from Squire Antony Bigod he seems to be free of all responsibilities. But there are still shackles to be shed if he is to be a true companion to the Squire's artist son, Hugh, a "young sculptor of exceptional talents" (i); so shed them he does. Where the story begins with a great-coated Philip feeling "crushed, weighed down" by a stifling and unnaturally oppressive midsummer, it finishes with a Philip who "breathed ethers . . . trod upon air" (viii). Not now a shambling figure on the Downs, but the member of a company riotously disporting itself in the Squire's Hall, Philip finally stands:

stock still in the middle of the room, absolutely naked, his head thrown back his arms stretched out and his eyes shining with an almost supernatural light as one who was mad from joy. (viii)

This was, after all, the 'gutter-crazy' Nineties, when cultivated vice—as long as it didn't go dangerously public, à la Wilde—was the fashion among many young men who aspired to be artists. Decadence was not

only fashionable indulgence, however; it did have its serious side as a reaction against the hypocrisy and narrow moral boundaries of the Victorians. "In a decaying monarchical and aristocratic society," Pierre Jean Jouve asserts in *Mozart's Don Juan*, the "libertine free-thinker and the revolutionary are pursuing the same end: to destroy existing society and strike off the last fetters of mankind."³

The Decadent artist was a potential subversive, and Powys's early, unpublished fiction is most definitely on the side of subversion: religion is challenged;⁴ conventional morality questioned; when it comes to politics the Powys-hero is on the side of the Boers and the Boxers against British imperialism.⁵

In the A, B and C texts, which formed the group concentrated on in the first part of this article, the Powys-hero is Welsh, highly conscious of being the member of an oppressed minority, an alien on the fringes of the English middle class. In this second group of texts—D, E, and short sections of manuscript all held at the National Library of Wales,⁶ along with Philip Warton's adventures, which are to be found at the University of Texas—the Powys-hero is a different sort of outsider, a sexual pariah. Where the A—C texts can be seen as an exploration of Powys's outer life, a young man's entanglement in an engagement which brings with it a narrowing of possibilities, the closing-in of convention and society, Powys's early sexual fiction delves into an inner fantasy world: "a crazy rigmarole of imaginative monstrosities" (*Autobiography*, 314) where there are no limits or boundaries.

Here everything is permissible, anything possible. Thus Philip Warton's withdrawal

to the peace and quiet of the Sussex countryside leads to the form of liberation offered by the Squire's orgy. Our young poet stands before us feeling "strong clear sane and passionate", and as he does so the ageing Squire flings a fourteen-year-old girl on the floor and plucks "with brutality and cruel violence the flower he had so long toyed with" (viii). The "shrieks of poor Annette" conveniently change "to sobs and the sobs to something that resembled laughter" while John Francis Taxater and Mr de Woztnak amuse themselves with children selected from a group of "seven beautiful little boys and seven beautiful little girls". "Stark naked" the children perform a wild dance; "like madmen" the men tear off their clothes. The artistic Hugh watches his father rape Annette whilst himself caressing his two young male cousins; on the sidelines Christopher Touzeler enjoys the antics of the others, leers at the little girls' legs and quivering thighs and "occasionally . . . anointed his member with ointment from a little box" (viii).

There is more than a touch of satire in this; Powys is sending up not only himself but a whole genre. However behind the bawdy humour and the urge to "let . . . go to the extreme limit" (*Autobiography*, 314), there is something else, the desire that his characters experience physical pleasure which, "however obtained . . . strikes out boldly at the root of all the traditions customs conventions and moralities of society" (viii).

"Pornography", writes Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians*, "exists in order to violate in fantasy that which has been tabooed."⁷ Powys's fantasy world purposefully flaunts all the taboos, and although by today's standards its descriptions and language might not rate as 'pornographic', the fact that the objects of its interest are children still possesses the power to shock. This is not the Powys we know or expect: the sexual themes in his later published works certainly include explorations of the 'abnormal', but as Belinda Humfrey argues in her Introduction to *Essays on John*

Cowper Powys, overall his novels probably provide "the fullest and most emotionally entrancing descriptions of 'normal' heterosexual relationships in twentieth century literature."⁸ I agree, but where this is true of the mature novels, the complex emotional and sexual relationships of *Wolf Solent* (1929) and *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), the earlier, unpublished fictions reflect a limited sexual imagination, a repressed, even fearful response that can be traced through much of nineteenth century literature and society.

Discussing the poets of this period, William Empson observes that for the majority an idealized world of childhood provided "a limited and perverted world", a mixture of incest and the nursery, from which to sap inspiration. Swinburne, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats: for "all of these men an imposed excitement, a sense of uncaused warmth, achievement, gratification, a sense of hugging to oneself a private dream-world, is the main interest and material."⁹ In his study of Dickens, John Carey goes further, identifying in the Victorian male's attitude towards his wife a desire to achieve a continuum of childhood. The ideal Victorian woman was dependent, innocent, pure—in short, childlike. Dickens's Little Dorrit is even child-sized; at twenty-two she looks half her age, and although this is an extreme, Carey argues that most of Dickens's heroines display the timidity, the breathlessness and alarm at sex guaranteed to arouse the average nineteenth-century husband: "Marrying a child is pleasureable; but marrying a frightened child is more so."¹⁰

Child pornography—an extension of the desirability of the childlike bride—was extremely prevalent and popular in the last century¹¹ and Powys was certainly familiar with examples of it.¹² He was also, we should remember, writing not only against a background of Victorian sexuality, but also at a time of great personal anxiety and mental turmoil. The texts discussed in the first part of this article seem to have been written in the years after Powys and his wife

moved to Burpham in 1902. Those in this second group, however, were probably written prior to this, in the years between 1896 and 1902, when the young couple still lived at Court House near Offham in Sussex.¹³ During this period Powys says he came near "to insanity . . . I gave complete rein to so many manias and aberrations that those who knew me best must often have wondered how far in the direction of a really unbalanced mind I was destined to go." (*Autobiography*, 216). The symptoms he describes are of an obsessional neurosis: the constant hand-washing, the aversion to certain fabrics, the disfiguring of the beautiful with images of the hideous (*Autobiography*, 221-23). And along with all of this, and possibly behind it, there was a fear and loathing, not of the feminine per se—"life became . . . grey and sinister and weird, as if under an eclipse of the sun, when the feminine principle was expurgated" (*Autobiography*, 221)—but of adult female sexuality:

A gulf of femininity opened beneath my feet. It made me shudder with a singular revulsion . . . The thing went so far that I became panic-stricken lest I myself should develop feminine breasts, breasts with nipples . . .

.....
But what was worst of all to me was the idea of the reproductive sexual processes.

(*Autobiography*, 222, 223).

Carey says that women "adult enough to present a threat to man, have a certain horror for Dickens",¹⁴ and this statement applies equally to Powys in his late twenties and early thirties. In his early fiction women are perceived as a threat to the male self, which is in constant danger of being taken over, swallowed up. "I began to feel," he remembers in his *Autobiography*, "as if there were no longer any real solidity left in Nature, as if, whichever way I turned, the firm substance of the earth would 'go in'." (223)

* * *

In one short section of manuscript, Philip Davenant (here the young Squire of Godbarrow) exhibits fears and phobias which

reflect Powys's own and result in strange fits, during which he falls to the ground in a state of semi-consciousness, terrifying his tenants and his mother.¹⁵ Elsewhere in the second group of texts, however, the Powys-hero escapes madness by finding an outlet for his emotions in encounters with very young girls, representatives of the non-threatening aspects of the feminine.

This tendency is constantly present throughout all the early texts; thus, in A1, Owen Glendower's highly conventional and inappropriate fiancée, Elspeth Runnymede, is sharply contrasted with her young sister Ray, an attractive, adventurous child undoubtedly better suited to the temperament of her older sister's poet. The A1 text breaks off before we have a chance to witness a meeting between the two, and I think that part of the reason Powys did not persevere past the fourth chapter was because the novel was already leading in a direction he was trying to break away from: the A, B and C texts were to be attempts at a conventional novel rather than escapist sexual fantasy.

In A2 and B, Ray's role is taken over by the young *Lacrima Colonna*. At sixteen *Lacrima* is of a relatively respectable age, although Hugh Bigod does not miss the opportunity to observe that she is "very nearly a little girl" (B, ix). *Lacrima* is fascinated by everything she hears about Hugh's friend, Owen Glendower, and is especially intrigued when told he is a "nympholept". Today we are familiar with the term from *Lolita*, Nabokov's classic study of a man who loves 'nymphets'—"I would have the reader see 'nine' and 'fourteen' as the boundaries"—but finds himself trapped in a society "which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve."¹⁶ *Lacrima*, however, has not come across this word before and has to ask for a definition—though the answer she receives is not what we would at first expect. A nympholept, it appears, is not a man obsessed with *Lolita*'s sisters, those elusive, soul-shattering daemons, but is a man in love with "'the powers of Nature'". (A2) This is not explained further in the A or B

texts; in *D*, however, we are told that the Powys-hero, Philip Davenant, desires the young Ray Runnymede (who appears to be aged at about ten or twelve) "less for herself than as a door or gate through which he might enter into the recesses of Nature".

D is the strangest, and in some ways the most interesting, of all the early texts. There are no orgiastic revels in this work, none of the more bizarre incidents that make up some of the shorter pieces where the Powys-heroes and company, "the Elect Phaloids", accompany the "Marquis of Sard" and the King of Suffolk in their adventures: celebrate lewd pagan rites; survive near-lynchings led by Dissenting Ministers. And it is precisely because of the absence of such scenes that *D* is disturbing. Philip Warton's adventures under the tutelage of Squire Bigod are not only outrageous but also amusing: the humour which will be one of the strengths of Powys's major novels can be traced back to these early experiments. But *D* is devoid of any element of the comic, there is no caricature here and although as a piece of writing the end result is an embarrassing, mawkish mixture of the sexual and sentimental, it also represents a serious attempt to explore what it is that makes a man a poet, a lover of nature, and a lover of little girls.

Like the other Powys-heroes, Philip Davenant comes to the countryside to find himself as a poet, a quest which finally succumbs to his passion for Ray: "a sexless, unclassified being, a bright spirit fluttering" through the Sussex fields and woods. Ray represents "everything that was sunny, Pagan, irresponsible" and Philip believes his feelings for her are the same as Wordsworth's toward very young girlhood, a harmonizing with "the mystical Nature worship he practised".¹⁷ On this level the relationship is an innocent idealization, a celebration of the spontaneous and natural. But the young man's poetic desire "to grow more and more wedded to the inanimate world of grass and stones" is not only metaphorical. His response to nature is essential-

ly erotic, an "ecstatic losing of himself",¹⁸ and in Ray he believes he has found the:

something that would bind him still closer to Nature—Something whose loveliness was in a sense transparent, letting through mysterious light and cool shadows—

.....
He knew that for him Ray embodied the most exquisite revelations, the deepest reticences of natural things—

Union with Ray, this inarticulate, almost sexless being, would be a blending of Philip's adult self with the elemental. And it would also be an expression of "the darker, crueller, side of Nature". Philip meets the child in the woods and asks if she minds him accompanying her with "the strange half-sick excitement of a lover". Together they walk through open spaces thick with anaemones and cuckoo-flowers and primroses, Ray concentrating on her search for collectible insects while her adult companion is much more aware of how:

Something in the Spring seemed to bring out the passionate savagery, the rending, tearing, biting instincts of the unregenerate children of the woods . . . A lust for cruelty blent itself with the lust for pleasure.

Philip yearns for the "old Pagan days" when he could simply have followed his instincts; despite these desires, however, Ray seems to be in no real danger: "He had lived so long and so persistently according to the eye that he had begun to connect all pleasures, all experiences, with the eye alone". But Ray's father senses that this young man's interest in his daughter is a threat, and he forbids Philip any further contact with the little girl.

The sustained text breaks off at this point: *D* is the only one of the early texts to have a conclusion, but the story-line is itself disjointed, constantly jumping back and forth, and some sections have either been lost or were never written. At this crucial point there is a break, and we next find Philip anguished at having lost Ray, who has been sent to live with her uncle:

Why had he ever touched those little hands, that wavering hair? He thought of Hugh Bigod's impetuous advice to him to live out his nature and take the risk—

.....
Men of his disposition, he knew very well, were regarded both as madmen and profligates—No child was safe, so parents thought, for one moment within three miles of such a monster—He was like the Ogre of the old fairy tales.

Philip, apparently, has acted, and although this scene is missing, another short section of manuscript gives us a good idea of what has actually happened. In this it is not the Powys-hero but Hugh Bigod whose thoughts we share as he walks through the woods to meet Ray. Caution and reason have been usurped by lust, "the simple animal desire of seizing between his arms the white yielding flesh of a young girl." The senses, which are to be gratified completely, have taken over, and fantasy merges into nightmare. Even the landscape has been awakened into grinning, leering complicity, a Nietzschean forest of vice:

. . . the trees wore . . . a strange hilarity . . . Grey toad stools and crimson fungi, ferns that drooped and nodded, ivy that trailed over the damp moss, seemed all of them to leer up at him, as much as to say 'now at last you are one of us—now O indeed you are a child of nature—'.¹⁹

Throughout the early fiction the build-up to sexually significant scenes always involves a distortion of the senses, so that these passages take on an air of the hallucinatory and surreal. Windows become knowing, winking eyes; clouds take on gibbering, wizard faces. In another short section of manuscript Philip and Ray stretch out next to each other in the long grass and the intensity of Philip's emotions makes it impossible for him to distinguish between the earth beneath him and the child next to him: "He hardly knew whether the grass he clutched between his fingers was grass or hair . . . earth or flesh." Red fires dance before his eyes; the green insect the little girl is studying becomes a weird, burning sun.

Then Cousin Taxater's kindly face appears above them, "like an angel of God", and sense of perspective and reality is miraculously restored.²⁰

But Taxater does not emerge from the woods to waylay Hugh as he hurries to meet Ray, and in this episode the child herself is transformed. As she waits "to give herself up to him" in "the Fairy Glade", Ray is an eager, consenting party, no longer the innocent with grass-stained knees and an interest only in brightly-coloured beetles. She listens for the footsteps of her lover and remembers their first kiss, weaving for herself at the same time a garland of flowers with which to decorate her brown curls. From this point she is no longer the passive, unaware object of desire and in the D text she now directs the action. Her uncle is cruel to her—a turn of events which conveniently allows Powys to cast his hero as a potential rescuer rather than abuser—and the young poet receives a letter announcing that she is running away and will meet him that night. The consummation of his relationship with Ray has put Philip beyond the pale; he has stepped into another world altogether and as he feverishly sets off to meet her he travels across a landscape where things appear increasingly distorted and unreal, the Downs themselves taking on the form of "a great wave—the end of the world—beyond which if you climbed to the top there was nothing to see but empty space".

This, then, is the extreme limit; there is nowhere one can go from here. Philip is aware that he could pick up his young love and carry her off to London; but there is no point to this for what he realises, and Ray does not, is that their love is inevitably doomed:

He could marry indeed in after years a woman called Ray Runnymede, but the child he loved would be gone for ever . . . Better, o far better, that she were dead—This strange woman, the Ray of the future, tortured his imagination.

There is no answer to this, and they both die: in her attempt to get back to Philip, Ray drowns in a pond—Powys's first death by

drowning—and as a result Philip commits suicide by taking poison.

* * *

Carey finds in Dickens an erotic paternalism: the heroine's childlike sexlessness is what makes her desirable. In Powys's early texts, however, the children become willing, knowing participants—and are thus no longer children except in body and, even more importantly, social role. In one section of only a few pages, Anthony Grave, a dealer in Decadent prints and books, is in great distress because the young girl he is in love with has just celebrated her sixteenth birthday, and is thus lost to him: "the child in her is dead . . . buried . . . alive in the horrible body of a woman!"²¹ Obviously the girl has not changed physically overnight, but in Victorian terms she has stepped out of childhood: from the schoolroom onto the dance floor, her hair up, her hems down, suddenly she is a young woman, the defender of hearth and home.

In Powys's later fiction he will be a champion of women, but in all these early texts women are brutally portrayed and lampooned as stupid, ignorant, suffocating.²² The homosexual Hugh Bigod (the scene with Ray is the only one in which he shows any interest in a girl or woman) hates everything female: "I feel a sense of incongruity every time I take my hat off to a woman in the street. It makes me feel ridiculous, as though I had degraded my dignity." (B, ix).²³ Throughout the texts Hugh constantly asserts that "the beauty of boys is incomparably superior to the beauty of women", but the Powys-hero can only go half-way in agreement: "of women perhaps . . . but not of young girls". (C) Powys's fantasy world is a world of sexually and emotionally mature girl-children: it is a celebration not of the absence of the feminine, but the absence of *women*.

Dr. O'Driscoll's womenfolk leave the house one morning and the whole atmosphere changes, the doctor himself experiencing:

that peculiar removal of restraint which comes to a man when, the self-constituted guardians of virtue having departed, every chair and table and every vase and picture, every wall and ceiling seems to call out with an articulate voice—It is safe now—everything is safe now—let us take our pleasure.²⁴

The threat has gone, it is safe to play. Nabokov's Humbert Humbert would spend a lifetime frolicking on the golden shores of preadolescence, "an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea."²⁵ Powys's early heroes attempt to inhabit the same never-never land, but like Humbert they too eventually discover that this world has its own dangers. Philip Davenant goes too far and dies as the result. Philip Warton is also aware that he is under threat, and as he moves across the Downs towards Squire Bigod's Hall, he is filled with "a sense of Danger":

He felt as though the least movement would precipitate him into some hidden abyss—Not only so, but with that rapid grasp of the imagination which is said to be the last consolation or the last horror of the Drowning, every event in the last few weeks, every wish and dream that those events had brought with them, now [] before him (Texas, i).

It is as if he is dying, drowning; however Philip finishes up not dead but fully alive, "exalted and upheld by a sudden excess of physical beatitude" (viii). On his arrival at the Squire's he feels "as though to escape some unknown enemy it would be necessary to turn and go straight back whence he had come" (i). But he defeats the urge to run and as a result does achieve some form of emancipation. Naked, his head thrown back and his arms outstretched—at Squire Bigod's orgy Philip will suggest both the ordeal of crucifixion and the promise of new life:

. . . it seemed that hitherto he had never lived—None of his old college debauches had brought him the True abandonment—He had been over-burdened in those days with theories and ideas—But now in this strange eccentric company he felt for the first time a

curious sympathy for man as man—A deep overwhelming sympathy with the elemental passions (viii).

Philip plunges into the darkest depths of self and survives; as does Powys.

* * *

An awareness of Powys's 'nameless works' allows a greater insight into the published novels. "Are there implied sexual aberrations here?" John Brebner asks in the face of Maurice Quincunx's interest in the little girl, Dolores, in *Wood and Stone*.²⁶ We can confirm that there are, and that Lacrima's supposed liberation is cruelly undercut by her future husband's feelings toward the child. Lacrima's heart might be over-brimming with happiness, but the suggestion is that this happiness is the result of a delusion: Quincunx is persuaded to leave with Lacrima largely because of Dolores, and we know that his fantasies include Lacrima dying and leaving him and Dolores "quite alone".²⁷

Rodmoor's Brand Renshaw is a development of Powys's plans for his hero in the E text:²⁸ various chapter outlines portray Philip Bleddyn developing into a dangerous, Byronic figure who ruthlessly seduces Lacrima and breaks Elspeth's heart by debauching her little sister, Ray. *Wolf Solent*, Powys's first major work, frequently looks back to the early unpublished fiction, particularly to Philip Warton's adventures. Squire Urquhart is based on Squire Bigod, and pornography resurfaces in Mr Malakite's book-shop. Before he gets to the orgy Philip befriends Ray Runnymede, the daughter of a local farmer, and

this Ray displays a wholesome "freedom and boyish courage" (Texas, viii) that will later develop into the "almost boyish freedom" of Gerda,²⁹ who will roam the countryside with an egg-collecting younger brother and change the course of the Powys-hero's life with a letter sent in a childish hand.

Against the background of Powys's early experiments we can trace his development both as a man and a writer. Carey begins his chapter on "Dickens and Sex" by pointing out that "Dickens and sex is an unpromising subject. It is generally agreed that the biggest gap in his achievement consists in his failure to portray even once, with any kind of fullness or understanding, a normal sexual relationship".³⁰ Powys and sex, however, is never an unpromising subject, for where Dickens and others faltered Powys went on: his 'unpublishable' works are not studies in perversion but immaturity.

Maturity came late to Powys, and we can see from his early writing that the battle for it was a lengthy and frequently painful one. He would eventually conclude in *Dostoevsky* (1947), "that the reality of common human experience is something neurotic and perverted and queer and weird!"³¹ Powys, however, succeeded in turning neuroticism into insight, a limited and narrow understanding of sex into a wide and tolerant compassion. And it is these qualities of insight and compassion which are the hallmarks of his mature works, novels which offer sophisticated analyses of adult human sexuality, and a subtle sexual imagining which, in George Steiner's words, advances "beyond Dostoevsky and Proust".³²

NOTES

¹ *Autobiography*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934; rpt. London: Macdonald, 1967, pp. 254-56; 396-97.

² An untitled novel commencing: "How Philip Warton came to Godbarrow", in Notebooks 1897-1900, MS. Hanley Collection. Humanities Research Center, University of Texas. This ms is unpaginated and roman numerals within my text refer to chapter numbers. For the sake of convenience I will refer to

this work as the Texas text or ms; it should be noted, however, that this is not the only piece of Powys's early fiction in the Hanley Collection.

³ *Mozart's Don Juan*, tr. Eric Earnshaw Smith from 1st French edn of 1942, London: Vincent Stuart, 1957, p. 49.

⁴ In the *Autobiography* Powys says that while living at Burpham he thought about becoming a Catholic (pp. 330-31). Throughout the early texts there is a

great deal of discussion about Catholicism vs. Protestantism; there is, however, no sense of any real religious feeling in any of this, and in a few pages of ms the first-person narrator describes Cousin Taxater as a Catholic but explains: "When I use the word Catholic let it be understood I mean no more than that Cousin Taxater attended Mass and experienced profound pleasure in the sight of the altar, the smell of the incense and the uplifting of the Element in the hands of the priest" (Section beginning: "My Cousin Taxater was a Catholic"). In the B text a Catholic church crouches over Nuradale like an incubus or vampire (ix), and Owen Glendower believes that Wales will act as the crucible for a "Religion of the Future", once it has thrown off "the burden of Nonconformity" (iv). All short sections of ms are located under "Works Without Names", Department of Manuscripts and Records, National Library of Wales.

⁵Section beginning: "The weather continuing no less hot our friends O'Driscoll and de Woztnak . . ."

⁶These letters do not necessarily suggest the order of composition. The mss are unpaginated and roman numerals within my text refer to chapter numbers which appear in some, though not all, of the mss. I have standardised the spelling and, occasionally, inserted necessary punctuation.

For two published short stories which fit in with this group of texts see: "The Hamadryad and the Demon" in *The Powys Newsletter*, No. 2, 1971 [pp. 1-12], and "Romer Mowl (The Incubus)" in *Romer Mowl and Other Stories*, St Peter Port, Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1974, pp. 7-16.

⁷*The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*, 2nd ed., London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966, p. 245.

⁸Introduction, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972, p. 24.

⁹*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn., Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961, pp. 39, 40.

¹⁰*The Violent Effigy, A Study of Dickens's Imagination*, London: Faber and Faber, 1973, p. 167.

¹¹See Ronald Pearsall, "The Cult of the Little Girl", *The Worm in the Bud, The World of Victorian Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969, pp. 430-46.

¹²In a letter dated 15 May 1908 (*Letters of J. C. Powys to His Brother Llewelyn*, ed. M. Elwin, London: Village Press, 1975, Vol. 1, p. 45), Powys says he has bought a copy of *Pearl. The Pearl* (1879-80), subtitled "A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading", and published under the Society of Vice imprint, is one of the best-known of nineteenth-century pornographic magazines and versions of it are still available in paperback today. Its stories tend to feature young girls.

¹³The *Autobiography* describes Court House as being "just under Mount Harry, and not far from Ditchling Beacon. On this inland side of these steep

downs there lies that lovely track of wooded and pastoral country known as the Weald". (p. 291) The D, E, and Texas texts feature Mount Simon, the Godbarrow or Ditchling Beacon, and the Sussex Weald.

¹⁴*The Violent Effigy*, p. 159.

¹⁵Section beginning: "The man whose eccentric climbing of the Downs and whose discovery of the Roman camp we have just described . . ." Here Philip is an early version of *Ducdame's* Rook Ashover; his mother is very anxious that her son marry and produce an heir, or the family name will die out.

¹⁶Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Paris: Olympia Press, 1955, pp. 15-16, 17. In the *Autobiography* Powys talks about his early Burpham years and says: "To be the nympholept, or 'sylpholept' I then was, seemed to be so absolutely inevitable that it never crossed the threshold of my consciousness . . . that I could struggle against it. The mere sound of the syllable 'girl', as I have already hinted . . . opened such a Paradise to me that everything else in life became negligible". (p. 358)

¹⁷In the *Autobiography* Powys says: "When I write my essay about my great master Wordsworth I shall show how his cerebral mystical passion for young women is intimately bound up with his abnormally sensual sensitiveness to the elements" (p. 275).

¹⁸In a section of ms beginning: "Bleddyn lay down on his face and smelt the grass—" Philip is overwhelmed by the "indescribable musky odour" of grass and crushed thyme. His prone position becomes "an actual caress" and "the deep breaths he had been drawing from the bosom of the virgin soil" turns "into a passionate pressure of his lips". In the C text we are told that Philip Glendower's passions are so involved with the inanimate and nature that it is "easy for him to draw back at any time in his lovemaking" to Elspeth. Jeremy Hooker has pointed out that the self's ability "to sink down into the evolutionary matrix" is an important part of the philosophy of Powys's published novels. The "transference to animate or inanimate nature of erotic feeling" makes, he argues, the hero's descent into the matrix a kind of incestuous embrace. The "human embraces the non-human, thus creating a composite self that is already in the unutterable dimension". *John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973, pp. 25, 26, 40.

¹⁹Section beginning: "Hugh Bigod followed a path that led to the place of meeting . . ."

²⁰Section beginning: "Ray walked with a quick step . . ."

²¹Section beginning: "Among these ordinary human types, however . . ."

²²The most savage and prolonged attack on women appears in the Texas ms's sixth chapter, "Which Introduces the Reader to the Ladies' Intellectual Discussion Society". The description of the women present begins with Mrs Swinkby Swinks, "breasts bigger than the udders of an ordinary cow", and gets progressively worse.

²³Hugh Bigod is the most interesting of the Powys-hero's friends. He appears to be based on Powys's

brother-in-law, Thomas Henry Lyon, and Powys's depiction of him suggests that his feelings about Thomas Henry were extremely mixed. Unlike the other male friends, Hugh changes between texts; at times he is talented and fascinating, at others merely pretentious. He is always, however, disquieting, and often potentially dangerous. In D, Philip Davenant loves only two other people apart from Ray: his mother and Hugh. Many years later in his diary Powys notes a dream in which he saw "the malignant and Voltairean countenance of HARRY LYON . . . 'twas like the appearance of Mephistopheles to Faust". *The Diary of John Cowper Powys*, 1930, ed. Frederick Davies, London: Greymitre Books, 1987, pp. 42-3.

²⁴Section beginning: "On this occasion his reverie was interrupted by the appearance of Elspeth Runnymede".

²⁵*Lolita*, p. 16.

²⁶*The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels*, London: Macdonald, 1973, p. 6.

²⁷*Wood and Stone: A Romance*, New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1915; rpt. London: Village Press, 1974, p. 701.

²⁸I have not discussed E in depth because it is the most fragmentary of the texts. Unlike A—D it is not contained in an exercise book and its pages have yet to be sorted and bound.

²⁹*Wolf Solent*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929, Vol I, p. 140; London: Macdonald, 1929, p. 101.

³⁰*The Violent Effigy*, p. 154.

³¹*Dostoevsky*, London: John Lane, 1948, p. 45.

³²"Eros and Idiom", *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 126.

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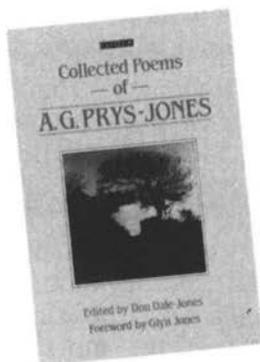
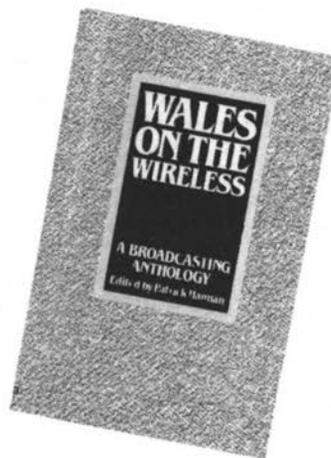
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H. W. Fawcner

Owen Glendower: Love at the Margins of Being

Set at the beginning of the fifteenth century, *Owen Glendower*¹ is from the outset charged with theological and philosophical dispute, so that we become aware of the fact that not only individual fates hang in the balance of narrative destiny, but also the precarious lives of philosophies and cosmological visions. Historical action becomes a field of dynamic tension in which these two extremes are negotiated: the private and the philosophic, the intimate and the abstract, the human and the divine. Love, in this context, is a crucial happening, for it heightens the intensity of the electric forces that maintain the conflict between the various extremes.

To begin with, love operates in a quite conventional way in the novel. Being a "romance", the literary work needs its share of conventionally erotic intrigue and mystery. The hero, Prince Owen's young secretary Rhisiart, falls in love with Tegolin, the illegitimate daughter of the powerfully magnetic Lowri Ferch Ffraid, Mistress of Dinas Brân castle; and Owen's own parallel feelings for Tegolin create much of the erotic tension that we normally expect from the romantic novel. Yet like most Powys heroes, Rhisiart is simultaneously aroused by an entire spectrum of enchanting females, so that love from the outset emerges as something complex, conflictual, and enigmatic. Moreover, the attachment to Tegolin, simple as it first may seem, is in fact itself charged with contradiction and paradox.

What deflects Rhisiart's love from the "normal" is its radical engagement with negativity. The entire erotic nexus created by this interimplication of love and negativity is thought of in terms of "the insect". The notion of this erotic "insect" comes to

the foreground of our attention when Rhisiart considers the power over him exerted by Tegolin's mother, Lowri. Her sado-masochistic temperament awakens a "deadly nerve" in him, an "insect" of lust (260-61). The "insect" is an expression of a "particular lust drugged with cruelty" (261), an "evil desire" (262). The "wicked aspect" of this "insect-lust" (276) is not simply an odd feature in its total makeup but on the contrary that special and unique property that constitutes its active centre. It is foregrounded also in Rhisiart's fevered and lustful engagements with Luned, a simple lady-in-waiting with a superbly moulded body. In the preparatory stages of his imaginative desire for her, Rhisiart thinks of himself as a snake with "glittering scales" twisting cruelly round every curve of Luned's struggling body (288). His satisfaction will culminate when he manages to bring her to the point of absolute fear and submission (*ibid.*). The snake-imagery is sustained in the descriptions of Rhisiart's hypnotic observation of a sadistic love-making between Lowri and her shackled husband Simon, the Hog of Chirk (327-36): she descends on the body of her victim/lover like a "mesmerized serpent", quivering and twisting (335).

This type of erotic suggestion would sink to the level of "Italianate" romance, as expressed for instance in the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, had John Cowper Powys been a writer of ordinary genius or calibre; instead, though, the motif of the "insect" is used to open a very delicate ontological and theo-philosophical problematic. Sexual dialectic commands a key position in this problematic, so that the more pressure Powys puts on orthodox sexual 'relationships', the more pressure we find building

up inside the onto-theological dimension of the novel's philosophic vision.

In this case of the "insect", we see that the affirmation of its power goes hand in hand with heightened consciousness: the hero grows to become "praeternaturally alert" (328). As so often in Powys, such a state involves an intensification of the powers of self-consciousness. This supplementary lucidity, operative also in Prince Owen himself, permits the hero to analyse minute displacements in his erotic disposition. He notes, for instance, that the "insect" disengages his "heart" and his "soul"; its type of lust works exclusively through "his brain" (261). Since "his will" too is mastered by the "insect" (262), the entire (theological and philosophical) problem of free will and individual identity is broached. In fact, as I shall soon argue, Powys uses the theme of love to introduce an unusual conception of negativity, and this negativity functions systematically as a lever that displaces our ordinary (Platonic and theological) conception of reality. Through certain types of love we depart from reality, and what we find—on the "other side"—is a different reality, or what I shall be calling Non-Being.

II

In all his literary works, Powys takes pains to clarify the difference between ordinary states and extraordinary states, normal situations and exceptional situations.² Each of these spheres produces its own world-picture: its own cosmology, philosophy, reality, *truth*. Generally speaking, Powys tends to waver and hesitate between these two realities, one prosaic and the other poetic, one commonsensical and the other paradoxical. Geographical, cultural, and racial tensions are often permitted to reflect such hesitancy, so that in *Owen Glendower* the English obviously stand closer to ordinary logic, while the Welsh spirit suggests a Celtic appeal to imaginative reaches with a curious logic of their own. The huge comet that passes over Wales in February 1402 comes to reinforce the sense

of displacement from the ordinary to the extraordinary (471). Significantly, it interferes with the normal, dialectical relation between the sexes. "Unusual magnetic disturbances" in the "invisible wash" of the comet's wake produce a "tension" that "divide[s] the men from the women" (480). Such an exceptional sex-antagonism culminates after the battle of Bryn Glas, where the grotesque mutilations of English corpses are produced not so much by "Welsh women upon English men as" by "*all women . . . upon all men*" (556).

This gross polarization—women against men—might look like a crude artistic formula; in point of fact, though, Powys is deliberately putting pressure on a sentimental and vulgar idealization of woman that has structured much Western thinking, especially in the imaginative field of the romantic and erotic. The orthodox paradigm forwards woman as an ideal *telos*, a romantic terminus; once reached, she will open the era of sovereign bliss, and at the end of his quest the hero will be happy to abandon his independent identity. He will simply melt into his target and goal, dissolve into the finality of his project. John Cowper Powys violently rejects such a conception—but his genius expresses itself through the fact that his negation of that sentimental romanticism makes the lovers *more* romantic, makes the romantic adventure *more* of an adventure and *more* of a romance.

But why, let us first ask, does Powys find it necessary to negate woman as static ideal and absorbing *telos*? Because such an idealization of woman suggests woman as the emblem of Being, and Powys considers that the most exciting and interesting aspects of reality take place "outside" Being. Hence the woman that *he* tends to idealize is a woman, precisely, who negates Being—who is an emblem, rather, of Non-Being.

The possible woman of Powys's ideal, Powys's ideally possible woman, is not possible within what Being identifies as possible. She is only possible "inside" Non-Being. She 'exists', in other words, outside Being, or on its margin. Because of this, she

is, ontologically speaking, always somehow 'vanishing', always on the point of disappearing out of view or out of reach. Thought itself has difficulties touching her. Art, or the literary imagination, pressed to a certain level of concentrated vision, can make a slightly more dramatic approach.

Because the normal idealization of woman—as an emblem of Being—constitutes a threat for the Powys hero (who yearns for delicious engagements with 'Non-Being'), he tends to generate an apotropaic supermasculinity, at least provisionally. We can perceive this behaviour in Rhisiart's conquest of Luned.

The ecstasy he was enjoying was shot through, like radiant parti-coloured silk, with the flickerings of his savage imagination.

Unlike the desire of some lads whose wantonness might have led them into 'making love' to a maid with whose personality they weren't in love, Rhisiart's feelings were mental rather than physical. His caresses were electric and intense rather than violent and gross . . . What he felt most definitely was a thrilling wonder at the pure mystery of feminine response . . . [His] feelings, as they increased, seemed to grow more and more *general*. It was no longer the conscious personality of [Luned] that he held in his arms. They were not Luned's breasts any more that came to life under his touch. They were the breasts of girlhood in the abstract. And as he contemplated those distant points of light through the narrow aperture beyond her head they ceased to be what human custom called *stars*. (302-03)

This erotic thought is typical of the Powys hero. The emphasis is on lust rather than sentiment; yet, curiously, this lust in itself is sensually cerebral rather than sensually physical. The emotions are as it were bypassed, so that ecstasy negotiates a pure dialogue between flesh and brain, matter and enjoyment. An emotional content is in a sense still preserved, indeed taken to an extraordinary peak of arousal; yet the standard set of human 'emotions' is not itself the source and energy of the emotive movement. We notice, also, the characteristic use of italics. This usage in Powys may errone-

ously be interpreted in terms of stylistic slackness: we normally look down upon an artist who cannot manage without such 'artificial' supplements. Yet Powysian discourse is strictly speaking impossible without italics, for each italicized unit tends to function as an ontological marker rather than as a mere rhetorical device suggestive of emphasis. It is indeed precisely by drawing attention to individual linguistic units in this way that Powys manages to suggest that the narrator's commentary operates on an ontological and philosophical level, above and beyond psychological realism and 'character analysis'. In the current passage, for instance, our attention is drawn to the philosophical tension between particularity and generality as well as to the way in which that tension in its turn is related to the tension between meaning and nonmeaning, naming and namelessness, language and thought, the linguistic process of identification ("*stars*") and the special states of human experience that provisionally surpass that process of firm identification.

A close reading of the current passage quickly yields a strange contradiction. First we are told that this special type of love is unlike the callously objectifying love that is indifferent to "personality"; then in the next paragraph we are informed that Luned's "personality" was precisely what disappeared in the act of erotic abstraction and masculine generalization. This contradiction can be found everywhere in Powys's fiction, turning "personality" into one of the most tricky issues for criticism to clarify in this writer. Yet it is clear in this passage that the opposition between personality and nonpersonality is made difficult by the fact that the negation of "personality" can take two quite different forms. The coarse "lads" (302) simply want sex, never bothering about personality in the first place. Hence their 'nonpersonality' exists below the personal level—on an animal level beneath the person. With the Powys hero who negates personality things are quite different. He, already, knows personality—and is fascinated by it; but he permits himself to

slip into moods of erotic excitation where a new level of reality is attained, and in the ontological 'New World' opened by that sovereign reality, the word and category "personality" is simply no longer operative, relevant, or meaningful. Notice how *meaning* vanishes: "Rhisiart had arrived at that point in masculine sensation where a girl's words mean no more than the beating of the wings of a moth" (301).

At the uppermost level of ecstatic arousal—where "personality" dissolves—Being itself melts away. Hence Non-Being comes into view. In this sphere of Non-Being, solid entities obviously do not count; if they are at all visible or actual, they are in the process of vanishing rather than being.

To suggest the ontological actuality of this force of Non-Being, Powys puts the hero in a position where his ongoing erotic ecstasy has Nothingness for its field of visual background. As Rhisiart passionately engages with Luned's physical charms, a thin aperture in the massive castle wall gives him a glimpse of the night sky: empty space, Nothingness. Indeed, the arrow-slit in the castle wall becomes a visionary perspective that negotiates the opposed worlds of Being and Non-Being, inside and outside (306). At the end of the ecstasy, the hero recognizes that his soul has "voyaged into space" through that aperture (*ibid.*).

Ecstatic love, then, has for its ontological correlative "a gulf of blue-black space" in which the stars have "receded" (but not completely vanished); the "curious satisfaction" of the erotic moment comes from simultaneously observing that Nothingness (that "gulf") and pressing against the girl's softness (302). As the instability and insubstantiality of Non-Being begin to supersede the stability and solidity of Being, the fixed stars themselves are solicited by the ecstatic momentum. They become "shivering points in the ether" in the "rocking" motion of their conjoint "ecstasy" (303). This stellar oscillation begins at the exact moment when the unit "*stars*" no longer signifies, no longer produces its stable lexical meaning (*ibid.*).

This use of astronomical units as ontological markers is conspicuous also at a much later stage in the novel. On an especially dramatic night, dominated by a full moon, Prince Owen gradually realizes that the whiteness of the moon is an ontological tint rather than a material one: the moon is not a unit of Being that happens to be white, but a unit of Nothingness as such. Hence the whiteness does not express the colour of a 'thing' so much as the presence of Nothingness itself. The moon, quite clearly, is transformed into an emblem of Non-Being. Again, a thin aperture in the castle wall negotiates the two spheres:

Moving his head, not without difficulty, for the masonry of the aperture grated against both sides of his skull, he gazed straight into that round orb of mystical whiteness. No, it *wasn't* whiteness! It was something for which there is no name. What he really felt was that there had been bored a greatly luminous hole in the swimming ether, a hole that resembled a hole in space; and that through this hole . . . it was possible to pass beyond space into whatever lay on the other side! (644-45)

As always, the "other side" denotes no ordinary Platonic or theological overworld, for such an orthodox overworld suggests a transcendent power governing *this* world (Being) rather than otherness/Nothingness/Non-Being. Thus the moon of this passage is not referred to in terms of Eternity/God/Being; instead, she is called "the great Whore of Eternity" (645). The moonlight is pagan rather than Christian, affecting the "arctic blood" of a goosander just as much as the Prince of Wales (646). The white swoon toward Nothingness is created (in both organisms) physically rather than spiritually, carrying them "from love" rather than towards it (*ibid.*).

III

The femininity of this white orb (the moon as "Whore of Eternity") can be compared with Luned's "twin orbs"—that is, her magnificent breasts (294). They are "irresistibly drawing" the male toward them, like that moon drawing Owen's head out of the

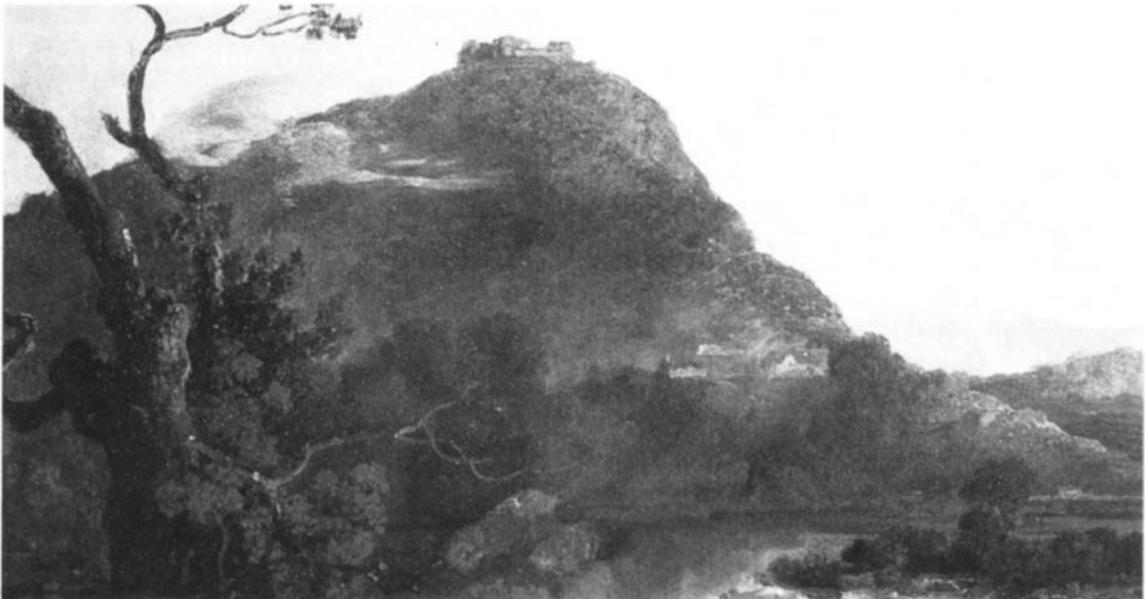
narrow castle window (*ibid.*); but whereas the lunar orb was an emblem of liberating Non-Being, the female “orbs” of Luned are emblems of Being and restriction.

It is now that we begin to apprehend the sly erotic strategy of the Powys hero in an ontological context. In so far as woman excites him into an erotic intuition of Non-Being, he affirms love; but in so far as woman binds him more tightly into the stable circle of Being itself, he rejects love. Woman, indeed, is a threat to the Powys male, inasmuch as she eventually comes to suggest the burden and gravity of Being itself. Woman can suddenly loom as “a colossal feminine entity:” “the twin orbs of her vast bosom bulking larger and larger upon him, as if in some superhuman vitality of maternity, they were irresistibly drawing him towards them! . . . He felt as if some secret core of free egoism and masculine profanity was in danger of being submerged and lost in this super-feminine place” (294). In this situation of ontological panic, “irresponsible conquest” and “unscrupulous love-making” become “his only defence” (*ibid.*).

The cultivation of an aggressively “mas-

culine” erotic stance and the “fear of committing [oneself] to *any* woman’s love” (297) are thus not empty gestures that simply reflect the egocentricity of a lecherous male; instead, such impulses need to be seen in an ontological context—a context where the overarching project of *evading Being* necessitates also an evasion of woman in so far as she is a purveyor of Being. Rhisiart feels that “though his ‘insect-lust’ . . . had a cruel and wicked aspect, it was also connected with the preservation . . . of his independent identity against forces that were fain to swamp it and swallow it” (276).

Being, as the presence and weight of its own self-presence and self-memory, threatens the free male with its gravity, matter, substance, and cubic solidity. On the one hand, the erotic engagement with woman has the ecstatic force to alleviate the burden of Being. Rhisiart “suddenly felt *physically light*, as if no material obstacle could resist him” (335). In that event, “the primordial femininity of original *matter*” can be viewed as being “ravished by the energy of [masculine] light” (303). But this crude opposition between woman/earth and man/light (which anthropologically speak-



Dinas Brân: taken from a painting by Richard Wilson.

ing is old as the hills) is displaced in Powys's work by the equivocation that I have already drawn attention to in woman: she has not only the tendency to affirm the gravity of Being but also to affirm the "lightness" (and indeed "light") of Non-Being. It is above all woman who can make man "light as a feather" (336).

What matters, in any event, is not so much the sexual issue as such, but the motif of lightness versus gravity and its ontological correlative: Non-Being versus Being. As an ontological rather than geophysical locus, Dinas Brân castle becomes a site that determines its imaginative appeal in terms of nongravity and Non-Being. Dinas Brân is *free from the burden of Being*. This freedom is suggested by references to "the vast air-spaces" around the castle (297); somehow, the ancient fortress has disconnected the moorings of Being, giving us the feeling that,

this whole great mass of half-ruined masonry were isolated from the rest of the world and were growing more isolated every moment!

It was as if Dinas Brân were really in some extraordinary manner not as solidly *material* as other places . . . [Rhiart] felt just then that Dinas Brân had become like an enormous meteorite without any planetary gravitation. (275)

As I have already suggested, the passing comet—as an emblem of the exceptional, piercing the circle and spheres of Being with the wild trajectory of its extreme ellipsis—betokens the activity of Non-Being. The comet, by travelling in and out of our universe, comes to represent a force that provisionally brings Being in touch with Non-Being. The comet, after visiting Being, returns to its home in the margin of Being. According to the gravity/lightness paradigm that I have been forwarding, it is thus only logical that the activity and presence of the comet should be inscribed in terms of nongravity: there is felt over Wales "a sprinkling of scarce-visible cosmic ashes, ashes imponderable in any earthly balance, and thinned out by their descent through space" (407).

IV

The massive theological and philosophical dialogue in *Owen Glendower* creates a special level of theory. Here the problematic opened by ecstatic love is displayed in terms of metaphysical contradiction and conflict. As I have already suggested, the Powys hero fears woman inasmuch as she represents Being. In so far as she *is what she is*, she is not a gateway to Non-Being and ecstatic joy, but on the contrary something locking the male in Being as such. The "heart" is the "organ" "he so especially dread[s] in women" (320), because the heart suggests the weight and solidity of a centre, the self-presence of what is merely present. The female breast poses a similar threat. In the ecstatic moment it stands for the ecstatic evasion of Being, but as soon as that moment is over, the breast instead looms as the very negation of that journey into Non-Being. "Yes," cries Rhiart, "he had used those softly-panting breasts for his impersonal pleasure. Now it was their turn; and *they* would be more personal" (306).

What turns the breast into a threat, as emblem of Being, is its merely palpable nature. After the ecstatic lovemaking, the breast merely *is*. Its palable presence is nothing but its own weight and being. Because, a moment ago, it has seemed to utterly negate such mere "being" as such mere "self-presence", it comes to negotiate the tension between the two ontological spheres (Being and Non-Being).

From the ordinary, nonstatic viewpoint, the magnificent largeness of Luned's breasts simply indicates the largeness of Being: the mighty presence of a world absolutely present to itself in and through the absolute self-presence of its objects. But from the ecstatic viewpoint, the magnitude and amplexity of the breasts suggest the tumescent quality of supreme ecstasy itself: the feeling, in ecstasy, that the self itself is expanding. In such ecstatic expansion, Powys makes us feel that the walls of Being itself are transgressed—so that the spirit invades the open zones of Non-Being that lie on the "other side", in Being's "beyond".

As Rhisiart makes love to Luned, his eyes still fixed through the castle wall on those twinkling northern constellations, the entire universe seems to magnify its presence, so that the stars too seem “to be growing larger and larger” (304). As we sense Being slipping circularly over the edge of its own margin—into Non-Being—Powys brings in crucial astronomical and cosmological considerations that help to structure the entire novel in terms of intellectual-metaphysical content.

Playing more and more on Luned’s nerves, as she increases her erotic response, Rhisiart begins to feel that the “enormous” stars are “projecting” the “glittering spray” of his desire into “ever-widening circles” of astronomical nothingness (304). He is suddenly reminded of scientific “heresies” heard during his academic years at Oxford—of a man “at Padua who denied that the earth was the centre of the universe” (ibid.). This *challenge of the centre*, I submit, is directly and explicitly associated with an ontological challenge—a *decentering* of Being. The solicitation of the earth as the centre of the astronomical universe parallels (and reflects) the solicitation of Being as the centre of its own absolute presence. Being/God/centre/presence is shaken by the vague intimation of something “outside” its mastery. The tension of this problematic can be assessed in the paragraph that immediately follows the stellar rapture:

‘Does God . . . hold infinite space to his heart as I am holding this girl?’ And all the while, as he kept wondering how far this ecstasy of his could stretch without breaking, those glittering stars in that blue-black gulf grew larger and brighter . . . He was one of them! He could feel the vast hollows of ether about him, wafting breath after breath of dark, delicious, primordial coolness against his burning face. (305-05)

We notice here the tension between the inward (Being) and the outward (Non-Being), between holding and stretching, possession and vanishing, self-presence and nonself-presence. On the one hand, there is

a centric motion: the male holding the female as God holds the universe. From that viewpoint, the universe (“infinite space”) is Being’s presence to itself, God’s “hold” on himself, as himself. On the other hand, there is an infinite stretching, and this stretching is in fact indistinguishable from “infinite space” itself. Space is felt to be infinite, precisely, by going on stretching itself out forever. From this viewpoint, the ecstatic extension of reality/space/Being is of a piece with an affirmation of those “vast hollows” (Non-Being) that seem to negate reality/space/Being.

Holding is no longer holding, but also stretching. Being is no longer Being, but also Non-Being. Possession is no longer possession, but also nonpossession. Space is no longer space, but also nothingness. Retention is no longer retention, but also loss. Presence is no longer presence, but also vanishing. The absolute centering of man is indistinguishable from his absolute decentering. This decentering of man (with the anguish of abandoning the earth as cosmic nucleus) is moreover also a *self*-decentering: man is not only the passive spectator of his own vanishing but, as in the case of Rhisiart’s ecstatic lovemaking, the active agent of his own loss of Being. Man cannot only observe and lament his tragic fall from the centre; he can also take joy in the affirmation of the margin, exult in his magnificent leap into nothingness and risk.

V

The importance of theological debate in *Owen Glendower* needs to be seen in the light of Powys’s tendency to reject ecstasy as a mere “expression” of God/Being. Ecstasy affirms Non-Being rather than Being; and even if God is remotely active and instrumental in ecstasy too, its reality as such is distinctly nontheological. We can perceive the dividing line between the two ideological positions when Rhisiart tries to explain a momentary experience of absolute Non-Being to his friend Walter Brut, a Lollard preacher. Being and time had given way to Non-Being and timelessness; but when Rhis-

hart states that the “timeless” was a feeling of everyone being “puppets” in an odd “masque”, without any strict locus, the preacher completely misconstrues this information: “We’re all puppets of the great Predestinating Will . . . Of course . . . you felt that our Lord—”. But Rhisiart intervenes violently and “crossly”: “I felt *nothing* about our Lord!” (659). When the preacher continues to discuss the experience in terms of “religious truth” (660), Rhisiart once more frowns: “This *wasn’t* in the least what he meant . . . it had more to do with bards than with priests; . . . bards more like Merlin and Taliesin” than like the standard poets of the realm (ibid.).

The ecstatic affirmations of Non-Being, I am arguing, negate Being as substance, presence, and substantial self-presence. We saw how empty space, marked as such by the northern stars, formed the background of the hero’s erotic assault on Luned. The stars were ontological markers, pointing to the vacuity of their locus: empty space and Nothingness. Non-Being suggests non-substance. Conversely, substance suggests Being. Therefore, on a quite different, non-ecstatic, and starless night (366), Rhisiart feels that the nocturnal ceiling no longer operates as a manifestation of Non-Being. “How black and mysterious those patches looked—just as if space were a palpable substance rather than a hollow negation of all substance” (367).

This passage is important, for it suggests the Powysian opposition between space (Non-Being) and substance (Being) that we have been discussing. It helps us understand how much of Powys’s own thinking goes into Thomas Fitz-Alan’s rejection of the “tedious and stupid” ontology of his chaplain. According to this preacher, “all men are [ontologically] equal in the eyes of God, and have souls of the same Substance” (370). But Fitz-Alan feels that individual men may affirm different substances—and it is indeed the “completely different stuff” separating soul from soul and race from race that provides the historical novel with its poignant clash between the English and the

Welsh (ibid.). No “racism” is strictly speaking operative here; it is not the question of ascertaining the superiority of one particular race over another (371). Rather, it is a question of being able to perceive that individual races and individual men acquire their perdurable *identity* by including a particular ontological attitude in their general cultural and spiritual makeup (ibid.).

It might be said, in this context, that John Cowper Powys is positing Wales as an ontological locus more actively engaged than England with Non-Being. If, in other words, there is an “ontological difference” between Wales and England (according to the fictively medieval parameters of the historical narrative), the Welsh nation suggests Non-Being, and the English suggests Being. The “secret” of Wales is its “*mythology of escape*” (889). Because, through its myths and bards, Wales always already promotes this escape through, in, and as literature/poetry/romance, the artistic momentum of the currently “Welsh” romance (*Owen Glendower*) programmatically and externally promulgates a formula that from the outset is internally enkerneled as its innermost condition of possibility.

VI

The fugitive and evasive “ontology” of Wales expresses itself also in oblivion: a flight from the memory of Being. In order to *be*, Being has to remember that it *is*; hence Non-Being gets promoted by forms of “forgetting”. Such forgetting marks points of strategic “absence” in Being, so that Non-Being itself can be felt as a zone of marginality, twilight, and hesitancy. The magnificent ending of *Owen Glendower*, featured as also the wistful ending of Prince Owen himself, is empowered in terms of this very twilight and ontological forgetting. Things vanish: but not, as it were, to just disappear, but to bring forth that sphere of ontological suggestion where disappearance as such *is*—where absence itself emerges as a land to be inherited, and where the passing into oblivion is an ascent rather than a descent. This “oblivion” that Rhisiart feels so keenly

toward the end of his career (902) is for Prince Owen nothing but the Welsh “escape into Annwn, into . . . the world *outside the world*” (916-17). This other world (Non-Being) is not a theological or platonic overworld, for man is somehow “there” from “the beginning” (916). Man, in other words, does not have to wait for Paradise in order to attain Non-Being; rather, Non-Being is from the outset structurally internal to Being, as an “outside” mysteriously accessible on the inside for certain beings at certain moments. *Owen Glendower* is the story of such beings and the history of such moments.³

Being, as that which remembers itself,⁴ finalizes itself metaphysically and ideologically in Absolute Knowledge. Non-Being, by contrast, as that which forgets Being (and possibly itself too), finalizes itself in absolute unknowledge. This is the “divine *Nescience*” that Sir John Oldcastle speaks of⁵ (777)—the “nescience” that constantly solicits language and its reassuring procedures of naming (818), the unknowledge that in the final analysis always keeps us “absolutely ignorant of what the other [is] thinking” (836), and the spiralling “I don’t know” that reverberates as *Nis gwn, Nis gwn* in the echo chamber opened by the novel’s last page (938).

As absence and forgetfulness, Non-Being manifests itself *in* Being in terms of “exceptions”, or oddities. Certain eccentric items are momentarily glimpsed at the centre of Being, in a reality to which they strictly speaking do not belong. The above-mentioned comet (480) is itself one such “exception”, crossing the centric order of things with its own ex-centric will to power. The comet indeed illustrates, on a macrocosmic scale, what various minute objects illustrate on a microcosmic scale. Like the tiny group of vegetation-parasites clinging to a primrose stalk held by Owen’s daughter Catharine (503), the minuscule stalk of a rock-plant examined by Father Pascentius seems to belong to Non-Being rather than Being (466), since it is hard to think of any God who could master and

memorize the pockets and crannies of reality in which such inconspicuous objects are discovered. The Powys hero tends to *rescue* such objects: but in order to preserve them in Non-Being rather than to make them available for Being. It is as if the discovery of such an object itself is the act of divine creation—so that the sense of wonder and awe comes from the enormous absence and oblivion in which the object has been dwelling. Such objects can hardly be viewed as integral to Being and (its) Philosophy; therefore Aristotle, as a foremost father of the Western philosophy of Being, is dismissed as “*the Philosopher*”—as one who could claim most objects of reality for Being, but not all. Father Pascentius must recognize the actuality “of entities so minute and negligible that even *the Philosopher*, as Saint Thomas calls Aristotle, could not include them in *his Summa*” (ibid.). When the Powys novel ‘sinks’ to the apparent level of fetish-worship, the interest in individual objects is ontological rather than naturalistic, philosophical rather than descriptive, ecstatic rather than static, mystical rather than empirical. The *sensation* of such an object—with the quasi-erotic sensualism that follows—takes place “within” Non-Being rather than Being, so that a list of adored objects is not a catalogue of “interesting” items strewn across Being, but on the contrary an account of the mystical power and ability of *certain* things to altogether evade the philosopher’s *Summa*. The objects belong to a field over which no philosophical formula can achieve mastery through ontological saturation or ideological totalization. The small wisp of withered vegetation that enraptures Father Pascentius is a “little rock-plant divorced from its root” (ibid.), and this disruption of racination is suggestive of the entire ontological displacement that we have been considering: the power of certain things to negate a sense of belonging to Being as origin or source. The item is detached from Being—or at least felt to be in a state of such detachment.

The object here, I have been saying, is conceived as an exception. Such things form

lacunae in Being, and John Cowper Powys—more than anything else—explores such lacunae. Also, I observed, he ‘rescues’ the objects: encouraging, as it were, the movement away from the *Summa* that they may be exhibiting in some tentative fashion. We perceive a typical such instance at the end of chapter twelve. Here, again, a small plant is given special attention; and here too that plant is divorced from its origin and root. The huge mill-pond wheel of Morg ferch Lug, a witch-like woman said to have powers of weird prognostication, seems to master absolute knowledge by mastering chance, in the sense of fortune. But as Prince Owen departs from the lurid site, he happens to notice a lump of rotten wood floating around with a living plant growing on it. Borrowing Rhisiart’s sword, he retrieves the object from the dark pool, deliberately making of it an exception—something consciously withdrawn from organized, cosmic fate, and therefore also from history as a system or totality that anybody could know, master, or ultimately grasp. “‘*That anyway,*’ he thought, ‘won’t go under the wheel of Morg ferch Lug’ ” (434).

The lump of wood, here, stands for contingency and chance; but unlike the chance appropriated by metaphysical prognostication (submitting future and history to the foreclosure of a knowable paradigm), this particular chance evades Being as such. In this way the ‘historical’ dimension of the literary vision wavers between two incompatible conceptions of history. There is a history that is the history of Being, or a history that ‘takes place’ inside Being, that gets written inside Being, to sustain and consolidate ‘it’; but then there is a history that never gets written, as ‘history’, and that, strictly speaking never *could* be written. Yet this history that never could be written, that never indeed could ‘take place’, is what John Cowper *records* through the burning passion of his literary power. What this history is full of is precisely the kind of ‘items’ and ‘moments’ that shape the fabric of human endeavour and human strife; and these things, luminous and crucial as they

are, are entirely ‘forgotten’ by what we think of as ‘history’. A prince picking a lump of rotten wood out of a mill pond . . . What is that? Not a historical moment at all; yet, on the other hand, precisely that: history.

VII

As I pointed out from the outset, the sense of Non-Being is negotiated fictionally through the accounts of erotic love and through the irreducible force of negativity, always operating inside that love. Like Owen, who has trances that take him “‘somewhere” (410)—that is, nowhere—and who abandons memory as a means of retrieving the essence of those trances (*ibid.*), his secretary Rhisiart experiences ecstasies that take him into absence and negative Being (Non-Being). It is this eternally operative negativity that causes his ecstasies to be called “‘a trance of ‘blackness’ ” (386).

Love, as we saw earlier, tends in the Powys world to collapse positivity and negativity into one another. Indeed, the Powys hero gets his special thrill by entering a sphere where these polar opposites, while still intact and free, cannot be firmly held apart or managed individually. In his first encounter with female eroticism, we see him want to preserve and destroy simultaneously: to “‘protect” the woman’s bare shoulder, but also to “‘shoot” through it and have it “‘pierced” (35).⁶

But the collapse of these erotic poles is only part of a larger ruination, one in which *all* dialectical opposites are thrown into one another. In the final analysis this universally active process engages also the most comprehensive opposites of all: “‘Yes, no—no, yes? . . . Being, Not-Being, Not-Being, Being; so runs the world away” (97).

Good and evil are of course also drawn into this abyss. The eyes of Father Pascentius “‘didn’t seem to lead into his personality . . . Nor . . . could the eyes . . . be said to express either good or evil” (90). Personality, as we know from Hegel, is a dialectical construct;⁷ but here the misdemeanour of dialectical opposites creates a world where

“personality” is no longer fully operative. For the Powys hero, thus, the most devastating woman is not the one with the greatest “personality”, but on the contrary the one who forwards the impression of a spiritual and physical furnace where personality and the dialectical poles that form it are melted down.

The hero is himself bewildered by the erotic paradigm; there was “absolutely nothing” learnt at Oxford University that really accounted for the ability of “wicked” Lowri to attract more than “sweet” Tegolin, her daughter (298). Yet things are still complicated. It is not only that evil is sometimes more appealing than sweetness; it is also that these polar extremes fail to sustain themselves as such. The “evil” sometimes is “sweetness” (304).⁸

The culmination of this erotically monitored ruination of opposites perhaps occurs when the evil “insect” of Rhisiart’s masculine lust itself vanishes after witnessing the copulating frenzies of Lowri and Simon the Hog. The “insect” has possibly “perished of surfeit” in beholding an erotic confrontation where Rhisiart, curiously, identifies with the woman rather than with the man (335).

The “insect”, indeed, is from the outset conceived in association with loss (263). In a narrow sense, this loss is simply that of a “lost soul” (287); but within a broader, ontological, framework the sense of loss retains the affirmative characters that we already have seen related to Wales and to Prince Owen. Wales, in the novel, is itself a place that dissolves dialectical opposites: the Welsh “win by losing” (914). Paradoxically, the race disperses centripetally, contracts centrifugally: “It flees into a circuitous *Inward*. It retreats into a circuitous *Outward*” (889).

Owen Glendower comes to personify this paradoxicality by deciding to finalize his erotic possession of Tegolin in terms of loss and nonpossession. Sam Dekker broaches a similar *via negativa* in *A Glastonbury Romance*. But there, love and negativity still work traditionally and dialectically. The

‘minus’ of negated possession turns into the ‘plus’ of sublimated possession, as Sam Dekker is given the privileged and transcendental vision of the Holy Grail. Here in *Owen Glendower*, though, negativity and Non-Being are affirmed *as such*—for their own ‘sake’. The act of letting Tegolin go proves to Owen that his soul is on the outside, free from Being (695). The self moves from self-presence to self-absence, yet the self-absence is not the self-tormenting self-negation of an “unhappy consciousness” but the joyful oblivion of a spirit free from the burden of Being and dialectic. The binary opposites ‘up’ and ‘down’ collapse into one another, as Owen watches a perfectly contingent and “meaningless movement” of Broch’s massive arm; his own “will”, ideally, would be like that, absolutely free “in a complete void” (703). Its choices too, ideally, would be void of meaning, voids in a void: “I give her up because ‘up-down’ and ‘down-up’ are equal” (*ibid.*). Giving up is no longer giving up. In “an absolute void”, his will sacrifices everything except its own strange freedom to be perfectly reckless (704). But is that sacrifice, in that event, still sacrifice? Has not “sacrifice” too been sacrificed? In any case, the gesture as such is part of a general yearning to abandon Being completely: the process of conscious “*exteriorizing*” pushes the spirit “*outside Space altogether*”—into Non-Being (722). As he gazes on his companions, Owen wonders if they are at all aware of this ontological transformation (*ibid.*).

We come to see finally, then, that John Cowper Powys outlines a process of intellectual refinement that is the opposite of the ‘reduction’ promoted by modern academic ‘phenomenology’. Phenomenology wants a reduction of Being into Being (purer and truer Being); Powys wants a reduction of Being into *Non-Being*. Owen possessed and developed the ability “to reduce himself to non-existence” (694). Facing a mirror, he “reduced” the specular dialectic “to complete nothingness” (721).

What monitors the upward-surges of the

spirit is not death, as in Hegel, but the kind of fleeting negativity that we call “pins-and-needles” (753)—or, equally contingent—a fond cat called Brith (752). The negative and mediating terms of the process are as irrational and fortuitous as the “result”.

When the cremated body of Prince Owen has become dust, and when that dust, already, is mingling its transubstantiated reality with the fantastically golden light of a new dawn, Rhisiart is tempted to think of “the Infinite”, a First Cause radiating its energy from “some huge planetary port-cullis” in the East (936). Yet in the process of

now finally learning how “already to forget” so many things, “divine forgetfulness” itself appears more important than that “Infinite” and First Cause (ibid.). “Perhaps the *effect* was nearer the truth than the cause” (ibid.). “Illusion”, then, is all that remains. Yet that thought too is mistaken, for the boundless—indeed the Infinite—still exists there for the spirit to enjoy. The “*sensation* of the boundless” is the boundless itself, absolute boundlessness (936). It is in that light, “infinite golden space” (ibid.), that the final closure of history opens.

NOTES

¹New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940; London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1942; Pan Books/Picador, 1978. Page references apply to the London editions.

²See H. W. Fawcner, *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys*, Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984.

³Is *Owen Glendower* a ‘history’? What is a history? What is history?

⁴For discussions of philosophy’s ontotheological identification of Being as “memory” see Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*, Paris: Galilée, 1974; Denoël/Gonthier, 1981, and Donald Philip Verene’s *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the “Phenomenology of Spirit”*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.

⁵John Cowper Powys can certainly not be reduced to a ‘sceptic’. He is too sceptical for that. Indeed, the comprehensiveness of his critical attitude is that which permits him to question “Being” as such, as well as to develop the kind of withdrawal from all intellectual dogma that Cornelius Agrippa forwarded in his highly controversial *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, Antwerp, 1530.

⁶The motif of cruelty is brought to its apex in the references to the terrible scientific experiments on animals completed by Gilles de Pirogue (624). A dog and a Jew endure Hell in his torture chamber (629). We are made to feel that cruelty is structurally integral to Man/Being (631), so that when the poor dog is eventually given some water to drink, that fluid miracle slips into the inner sphere of Being from the outer sphere of Non-Being much as Nothingness slipped through the narrow castle windows into the ecstatic minds of Owen and Rhisiart: ‘It was the look of one who finds a crack in [the] universe . . . And out of this crack water was coming’ (633).

⁷The ruination of dialectical opposites in this work is a sovereign operation that also solicits the master/slave construct. The *gaze* that is privileged is neither that of the master, nor that of the slave, but that of a third party identifying with *both* of the sides. The hero is outside the dialectic that he nevertheless ‘lives through’. The novel opens with a ‘life-and-death chase’, a perfectly Hegelian fight-to-the-death (96); yet the psychic energy is mainly in the brain of a hero who ontologically *is* both opposites, master as well as slave: ‘The fleeing figure was himself. The pursuing figure was himself’ (ibid.). In the actual moment of pure surrender (of slave to master), there is an absolute cleavage of spirit: ‘You below; I above’ (99), and as in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* the dialectic is doubly doubled from the outset—turning the “vivid exchange of consciousness” into “a double-spouted jet of ultimate human emotions” (98). The “other” one sees not only his opponent but also his opponent seeing him: “side by side” in this “up-jetting” of emotion the two spurts of spirit are “parallel” (99). Yet when the novel introduces its most complex dimensions of erotic suggestion, this ‘pure’ Hegelian dialectic is displaced by the arrival of a gaze that is exterior to dialectical contention as such. When Rhisiart secretly observes the sado-masochistic erotic play of Lowri and Simon the Hog, he is struck, to be sure, by the fact that “these strange creatures clung with their eyes to each other’s eyes,” not letting go the “clutch” for a single second (333); yet the dialectic gaze, already, is displaced by the apparent ability of Simon to encompass mastery *in* his very servitude. Hence his gaze itself is dislocated from the normal specular dialectic: his eyes seemed to Rhisiart “*all sockets*” (333). This general Powysian disruption of normal dialectical speculation/seeing usually takes the form of *voyeurism* in the novels. The voyeur, by being secretly removed from the site and centre where

Being/dialectic is staged, unsettles that dialectic as such. As Rhisiart joins a dwarf in the act of spying on the sado-masochistic love-making, he gets the type of feeling that he soon also gets from looking at Simon's "sockets". Speculation as such is transgressed "as he stared at what was a symbol of *more than staring*" (331).

⁸A full consideration of the function of negativity in *Owen Glendower* would necessitate an analysis of

the role played by Broch-O'-Meifod, Owen's huge aide-de-camp. His worship of death, curiously, goes hand in hand with a rejection of pain and suffering (539). As negativity, death does not operate for Broch in complicity with life, "lifting" life to a more transcendental level of spiritual endurance; rather, life and death remain *complete* negations of one another. And it is death (as an emblem of Non-Being) that he favours (775). It defies "identity" (ibid.).

THE POWYS SOCIETY

(President. Glen Cavaliero)

The Powys Society exists to promote the study and appreciation of the work of the Powys family, especially that of John Cowper Powys, T. F. Powys and Llewelyn Powys. Meetings are held three times a year, two in London; the third is a weekend conference in a provincial centre. Members receive copies of *The Powys Review* containing papers read to the Society and other material. The *Review* will be published twice a year.

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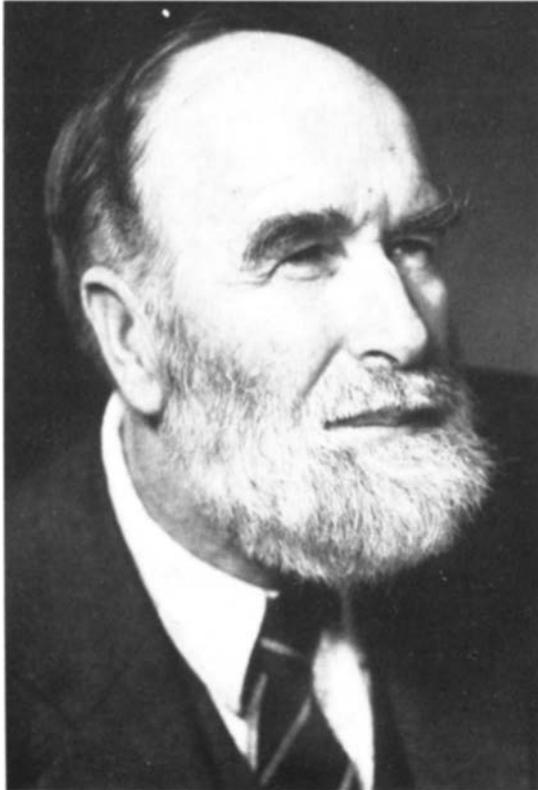
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Date

Oliver Marlow Wilkinson

Louis Wilkinson*



Oliver Marlow Wilkinson.

Louis Wilkinson—‘Louis Marlow’, the writer—Louis, strong, wandering, myopic, creative Louis—whom some of you remember for his judgement, his pleasure, his superb knowledge of wine (able sometimes to name a vintage from the bouquet alone), his wit, and his blind selfishness . . . taking it for granted that his host should five times climb five flights of stairs to bring his pip water (water with orange pips and peel in it, the water of life to Louis) that he wanted and therefore must have. Or you may just remember him as a man one thanks the gods for having known. Now—well, for most of

*A talk given to the Powys Society, September 1988.

you—Louis is remembered as the writer on the Powyses.

He was more than that. He had an effect on his generation. Louis, through his lectures, through his writing, through himself, gave hammer blows to some of the harmful conventions of his times.

All the same, Louis was cautious in many aspects of life. He was frightened of all but the smallest animals. He would never tread on a manhole cover, in case it gave way. He never tied his shoe-laces in a double-knot: I think he’d read that a man had drowned because he could not get his shoes off: even way inland, he never tied his laces tightly, in case he should find himself in water. Yet his moral courage was enormous. He would have died rather than betray his beliefs.

Louis was five different characters—for five different sets of people, each set knowing him only as their own Louis and no other:

1. The Radley Boy who wrote to Oscar—Oscar Wilde;
2. The Lecturer;
3. The Writer, as Louis Wilkinson or ‘Louis Marlow’;
4. The Friend of Aleister Crowley, the black magician;
5. The Biographer and friend of the Powyses.

* * *

How many boys at Radley, or anywhere else, in 1898, received letters, as Louis did, from Oscar Wilde, and such typical letters?

Hotel d’Alsace
Paris

My dear boy

I’m afraid you are going to be a poet: how tragic. How terribly tragic!—But it is the only death worth dying.

I am sending you a book of mine. It is a fanciful, absurd comedy, written when I was playing with the tiger of Life. I hope it will amuse you. I am directing it to Radley. I suppose you are back there, educating the masters.

I envy you going to Oxford: it is the most flower-like time of one's life. One sees the shadow of things in silver mirrors. Later on, one sees the Gorgon's head, and one suffers because it does not turn one to stone.

In your second letter you tell me that you enclose your photograph for me, but no photograph was in the envelope. Your thoughts must have been in the crystal of the moon.

Ever your friend, Oscar.

Louis's first letter had told Oscar Wilde:

... I cannot but think of your cruel and unjust fate whenever I pass through Reading on my way to Radley.

By an odd coincidence, one of Wilde's sons was at Radley at the same time as Louis, but under another name, so Louis never realised it. Louis received no reply to his letter: Louis then invented a dramatic society, and wrote to Wilde asking if he could dramatise *Dorian Gray*. That started the correspondence. I've been quoting at random from it, but all the letters of Oscar Wilde to Louis can be read amongst *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davies. Louis never met Wilde. He was on the very point of departure to Paris, when, at Dieppe, he received a telegram:

Je suis tres malade. Ne venez pas.
Je vous ecrirai. Oscar.

Wilde was terribly ill. The raddled hulk would not have been the magnificent Oscar of Louis's expectation. Louis quoted what Turner had told him of Wilde's death-bed.

'Oh, Reggie,' Wilde said, 'I had a terrible dream—I dreamt I was supping at a Banquet with the dead . . .' 'Well, Oscar,' said Reggie Turner, 'I'm sure you were the life and soul of the party!' 'That,' said Oscar, 'is the wittiest thing that has ever been said to me!'

Louis wrote in *Seven Friends*, of Oscar Wilde:

What an incomparable figure! What a magnet! What golden wit and spirit and sense! No wonder that the most normal young men of the fin-de-siècle, if susceptible to the charm of personality, to genius of conversation, to the exciting, magic of words, should have done their level best to become homosexual merely to do him honour.

Louis not only tried to be homosexual, he succeeded. At Oxford he was an aesthete, and beautiful, and homosexual in an earnest, rather evangelical way. There were others like him. With Louis, they formed a blasphemous group. Louis describes it in *Swan's Milk*. That title, by the way, came from Willie Powys. Louis was vague about some aspects of Nature, and, while with the Powyses, he thought that another visitor had said that swans were mammals. "How very interesting!" said Louis. "Do you milk your swans?" Willie Powys was delighted, and wrote:

Oh, how d'you do?
And how's your swan?
I suppost you milk him off and on.

... lines, said Louis, that should be in an anthology.

In *Swan's Milk*, Louis wrote of that Oxford Club:

We were young men of the first year of the twentieth century. We had all taken Christianity really seriously, we had all thought it was true. It was because Christianity had been so important to us, had meant so much in our nineteenth century world, that ribald derision of it could give us so much lively and delicious shocks. Irreverent pantomime, mock Masses and Confessions, New Testament nicknames; these and other diversions of ours very easily became known to our enemies, for we made no secret of them.

There was war between the 'Hearties' and the Aesthetes; but when the 'Hearties' raided Louis's room at Pembroke, they found the Aesthetes ranged around a table, with Louis holding a revolver. Louis said that he would have killed then, if he had had to; just as he would have killed, he said, if, later, a certain rich man had taken Louis's second wife,

Ann Reid, away from him. One must understand that, to understand Louis.

Louis writes in *Swan's Milk* how undergraduates:

singly, or sometimes in twos and threes . . . filed up at the Master's invitation during the whole of the December afternoon of 1901, and bore witness to our blasphemies. No accusation of what would then have been regarded by the dons of the lesser offence of immorality was revealed to us, though it was hinted . . . The Bishop [—that is the Bishop who was head of the tribunal of dons—] said, 'You are deprived of your scholarships . . . and cease to be members of this College. You will immediately cease to reside at this College, making your departure as soon as your luggage is packed.'

Louis father, by parsonic innocence, got Louis into Cambridge, where, most fortunately, Llewelyn Powys became his greatest friend, and where Louis and Llewelyn brought John Cowper Powys to lecture.

It is a wonder, perhaps, that Louis did not remain homosexual, after such an auspicious beginning—under the shadow, if not the substance, of Oscar Wilde—but he was never homosexual, except by way of protest; as young people go to demos now. One of his friends at Oxford did, in fact, while they were still there, introduce him to a girl who made a business of such introductions, and whom Louis describes in *Swan's Milk* as only Louis would describe her: ". . . a nice, well-behaved girl, not at all coarse-grained, who lived beyond Magdalene Bridge . . ."

Louis then published love and lust abroad as the great forces in life. He had to fight against a great deal. Young men were being told they would go mad if they masturbated; and some men did go mad to fit in with this damnation. Girls were mewed up in diseased Christianity. Syphilis was promoted as the wages of sin. Louis tried to sweep all that away. He persuaded young girls to have sexual experience as soon as they practically could; and did so with a religious fervour, as though persuading them to go into a nunnery: but he spoke without hypo-

crisy, without diseased imagination, and, often, without any self-interest. He swept fear from the minds of the young. He warned them of dangers—and the danger of chastity.

It was an enjoyable crusade, of course. It was real enough though. Louis joined with George Ives, the criminologist, friend of Oscar Wilde, to fight against the whole weight of imbecile, punitive laws shaped to crush those whose natures Nature had shaped out of normality. At most meetings to do with Oscar Wilde, Louis had a prominent place; 'The Radley boy who wrote to Oscar'.

Louis was no sensualist. In *Swan's Milk*, he wrote about desire in love, and how trivial, in comparison, is desire without love, but he does not condemn lust:

There's life in it, and it's always better than abstinence. Why scold at it? Why call it bad names? That it disqualifies anyone for 'real love' is an absolute lie. I know it doesn't, and so do you. If a man or woman is by nature merely lustful they don't fall really in love, but that's another matter altogether. Besides, what a stupid farce, this talk of 'mere lust'. Nine out of ten respectable married couples—the very people who chatter about 'lust'—have got that and nothing else. Something to have that left, too!

In Aldeburgh, Suffolk, where Louis was brought up, his father, Dr Walter Wilkinson, had started a school—the school Theodore Powys attended—the school that Dr Wilkinson had started because he would not subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles of Faith, and so could not continue to minister as a clergyman, and because he had resigned, *had* to resign, in those days, his Fellowship at Worcester College Oxford, when he married. Louis must have inherited independence of mind from his father. His mother was strong-willed, too. Louis was adored by her and by his Nurse, whose guiding light was, "Whatever Master Louis wants, Master Louis should have." That was ever Louis's guiding light too.

As a very small boy, Louis used to lock himself up in the School Laundry, and recite

the greatest works in the English language, walking up and down in rapture. He did indeed love the magic of words. His greatest friends, later, besides the Powys brothers, were Arnold Bennett, Rebecca West, Frank Harris, Somerset Maugham, Ethel Mannin, Enid Starkie and Clifford Bax. He knew Ezra Pound well, through his first wife, my mother, who wrote as Frances Gregg, and who was one of Ezra Pound's Imagist poets in Philadelphia. Louis describes seeing Ezra Pound sitting in unwonted humility, literally and metaphorically, at James Joyce's feet; and compares being with Joyce to being with Theodore Powys, as 'in the presence'. Louis also knew Theodore Dreiser, Maurice Browne, Jacob Epstein, Ronnie Storrs, Aldous Huxley, Kenneth Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and so on and so on. At Aldeburgh, he had seen Thomas Hardy and George Meredith; as, later, he saw Swinburne in the Rose and Crown on Hampstead Heath, and ever after, at every opportunity, he was Swinburne's advocate, not because he had seen him, but because he thought Swinburne shamefully underrated.

* * *

It was John Cowper Powys who brought Louis over to lecture in the United States; and it was in the United States that the love between Louis and John Cowper began to be mixed with hate. Jack was in love with Frances Gregg, body and mind. Dr Glen Cavaliero has pointed out how the supernatural is so bound in with the natural in Jack's novels. Jack took that idea from Frances. In a letter to Frances, he writes, 'Your extraordinary idea—the idea that the spiritual *is* the material, is the *only* spiritual!' Because John Cowper Powys—or Jack, as I will now call him—could not marry Frances Gregg, because he was already married, he married her to Louis; played on their different chemistries till, on meeting, Frances and Louis fell in love, and were married within a fortnight. Then Jack went everywhere he could with them, wanted to live with them. It was in great impatience that Louis and Frances wrote

The Buffoon, in which Jack is a character as a potent genius of a clown, but a clown nevertheless, though not the 'buffoon' of the title: Louis makes himself that in the character of 'Edward'. Frances and Jack kill off 'Jack Welsh' on page 425. Dr Penny Smith has called *The Buffoon* a 'mean book'. It is more like a controlled explosion. Yet Jack's clownish but somewhat magical dabbling in Louis's life, helped to destroy part of Louis that had to be destroyed if Louis was to use his full power. Louis was aware of this part of himself, and, in the character of 'Edward' in *The Buffoon* he tries to bury that epicene Louis for ever. But Jack, the Clown of the many ringed Universe, smeared chalk all over Louis's face; then—still without knowing what he was doing—debagged Louis in just the way that was needed.

This quotation from *The Buffoon* is interesting. 'Jack Welsh', or John Cowper Powys, has made the prostitute, 'Ethelle', weep because of his kindness and sadism: then Jack says:

But suppose—suppose that when we meet again you find me changed. Changed! With all the wishes of years hung like a row of little vicious wind-dried weasels—on the park-palings of my noble mind! We grow old and good, old and good—But when your mouth trembles like that—oh, the infernal provocation of just that kind of tremor! No, no, I won't think of these things! I must not think of them!

Edward's spleen was stirred. [Edward is the Louis character.] What a sensationalist, he thought, what a great glutton! The man's greed of his sensations, the laboured and inept way in which he got hold of them and mauled them about. No doubt by his imagination he could make any material serve . . . but the price was too heavy . . .

The interesting point about the first part, is that it is taken from Jack's letters to Frances, lifted, as are other parts of *The Buffoon*, from these letters. The second part shows Louis's main criticism of Jack. And in the 1916 pamphlet, *Blasphemy and Religion*, Louis writes, with surely, more than literary criticism, that *Wood and Stone*, by

Jack, is an unpardonable novel, with not one phrase that speaks from valid experience; while Theodore Powys's *The Soliloquy of a Hermit* will be read in a hundred years.

Yet, with all this, who writes better of Louis Wilkinson than Jack—as in the *Autobiography!*

. . . a good deal over six foot, of a frame at once powerful and soft, his locks bronzy-gold, his nose masterful. [It had been broken in the only fight of his life, a fight forced on him at Radley] . . . his mouth formidable, his cheeks quick to blush a bewitching carmine . . . full of irresponsible and heathen zest for adventure . . . Louis . . . was certainly a startling apparition on the twilight stage of my furtive and gingerly-stepped pas seul round the maypole of life . . .

As a Lecturer, Louis highly enjoyed sharing his knowledge, his love of literature. No, it didn't really matter whether the audience was educated or not, to hear Louis lecture, to hear him recite Coleridge's 'Christabel', or Browning's 'My Last Duchess', was, for anybody, revelation. Life did open in glory. Audiences bring offerings to such lectures. One girl kept Louis in fruit and oat-meal, into his middle and later ages. Audiences offered their own work, fruit, candy, trinkets, gold, even themselves. Such things always happened to him. When he did make love to one girl, her mother wrote to him to apologise for the *girl*; and stressing that she, the mother, was not to blame. In the same way, when one of the undergraduates sent down with Louis from Oxford, gave Louis £10,000 ('anticipating my Will', he called it, though he was younger than Louis), I'm sure that this young American felt that Louis had done *him* a favour. It was Louis's manner. On the platform it was the same. No one could equal the transfiguration of Jack's lectures: but Louis was great in his way, and more accurate than Jack. Jack was possessed by the subjects of his lectures, but they sometimes told him the wrong dates.

Life for this sun-worshipping Louis was often tragic. My American mother, Frances, tried to be a dutiful English wife to Louis,

but she was too strong a character for him, with too searching a mind, in spite of a fragile body, too much on the edge of this and other worlds, for Louis. Louis loved her for several years; then hated her. She had pierced through to the joints of his soul, destroyed illusions that were essential to him. Louis's second wife, Ann Reid, died a few years after their marriage; suddenly, in a few days, after catching influenza. Theodore Powys, on the death of Ann Reid, wrote to Louis: "The only thing to do is to go on eating and drinking like an animal. Merely and only that. There is nothing else to be done." Louis's third wife, Diana Bryn (the only one still alive; and if you haven't read her book *The Secret Orchard of Roger Ackerley* you should) left a parting note for Louis, stating that her health would not stand his insatiable carnal demands: criticism that Louis thought of framing (especially as Diana was thirty years younger than he was). His fourth wife—(the serene and sensible Joan Lambourn)—died of a brain tumour:

"Whatever Master Louis wants, Master Louis should have." Life thought differently.

All four wives, by the way, wrote with distinction, and are published.

* * *

As a biographer, Louis has, I think, something like genius. His novels are of their times—the First World War years, the 'twenties, the 'thirties, and that might militate against them, but they are surprisingly modern to read now. Wittily, imaginatively, they pierce over and over again to the substance of our life. There is some Feminism—in a limited way, perhaps: Louis did not want women to wait on him, he wanted everyone to wait on him, men, women and children. What Louis often says, through his novels, is: "Don't be a fool. When you think yourself most moral and ethical you may be more of a fool than ever! Because you are imitating, not being!" Think of the titles! *The Buffoon*, *The Lion Took Fright*, *Fool's Quarter Day*. Even *The Chaste Man*

is a warning against the perils of chastity. His novels also include *Mr Amberwait*, and *Brute Gods*, and *Love By Accident*. Somerset Maugham, in his preface to Louis's *Two Made Their Bed*, writes that it is one of the few novels where the characters treat money as it is treated in real life: a book in which money takes a persuading hold of events. There is also his biography of *Sackville of Drayton* that was re-published recently.

* * *

In all this, Louis was Aleister Crowley's greatest friend. So Crowley said, anyhow. Louis had a liking for the unique and witty, however unholy or evil; though Crowley, of course, thought himself a possible Saviour of the World. The fact that Crowley was a superb host had something to do with the friendship. When Louis praised his cooking, Aleister Crowley immediately recited:

On Crowley the Immortals ironically look.
He sought fame as a poet, and found it
as a cook.

Louis knew what Crowley was about, out of the kitchen, too. He did admire Crowley's poetry; and he was impressed by Crowley's sincerity; Louis even liked Crowley's puerile jokes, verbal, practical or magical. The truth is that Louis could easily adapt to what Crowley preached. If Crowley's good was evil, well hadn't Louis found that the world's so-called 'good' was often evil too, and wrapped in hypocrisy as Crowley was not?

Crowley realised that Frances hated and abhorred his friendship with Louis, her husband, and that she was trying her best to stop it. So he attempted to get Frances certified insane; I don't know that Louis did anything to prevent that. Frances did. She beat Crowley and the two doctors he brought, and she did it by her own lonely will and intelligence. The only person to help her after the terrible ordeal, was John Cowper Powys.

Not Louis. With all his breadth of spirit, Louis was ruthless in some ways: not with pretence of ruthlessness, not with literary

ruthlessness, but with an iron belief in ruthlessness. That—under the sometimes vague and lovable wooliness of his manner—was a necessary part; of his fight against hypocrisy, giving no quarter to pretence. On a personal plane, his ruthlessness was at times selfish and harmful: the ruthlessness of a powerful man and a great baby. The alimony he allowed my mother with two children, my sister Betty and me, was £140 a year—and he resented allowing that; he cut it down as soon as he could.

Louis was never much involved with any Order of Magic. In the Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn, in which the poet, Yeats, was elected Emperor of the Isis-Uraniaian, and which Crowley joined, and nearly destroyed, and which Louis joined in 1909, his name is inscribed as a neophyte. He was never anything but a neophyte. Louis certainly wouldn't have been bothered with learning magic ritual or memorising incantation. The *idea* was enough. The Order was not of the Church; so Louis was for the Order. A neophyte he was, a neophyte he remained. Was he more? He took his friendship seriously. As Crowley's Executor, he took his duties responsibly. With him I visited witches—strong, capable women in lonely places. Most of them were engaged in innocent-seeming pursuits: one had organised a crèche in the Highlands. I remember opening a door, expecting to find cabalistic instruments, and finding rows upon rows of babies. It was to see Crowley's son, Attaturk, that Louis visited this beautiful witch, to administer the boy's school fees. Louis was on friendly terms with the witches. They seemed to revere him; though one might think a mere neophyte a somewhat trivial limb of Satan.

In *Seven Friends*, Louis describes a scene when Crowley was at the heights (or the depths) of his powers:

. . . More than once I have seen him under the sudden stress of his inspiration. He was controlled, I was sure of it then, by something that was in truth religious ecstasy . . . Crowley and I had been lunching with Lady Aberconway and had gone back with her to his rooms

in Jermyn Street where he read aloud from an enormous Magical Book which he supported on his knees. What he read was in a strange language, a language unknown. It was of a singular vibrant beauty and power. Christabel Aberconway sat on the floor by his chair with the unwitting grace and ease possible only to a woman of natural-born and fulfilled beauty. Her lovely eyes were large with an emotion that I shared. 'What is that language?' she asked. 'It is the language of the angels,' replied Crowley.

Impressed though I was by the exultation, by the irradiation, which he had received and communicated, I could not help reflecting on what an admirable subject the scene would have made for a cartoon by Max Beerbohm. 'Aleister Crowley reciting to Lady Aberconway in the language of the Angels'.

At Crowley's last farewell, in Brighton Crematorium, Louis recited 'Io, Pan!' to the assembled witches and warlocks:

Louis concludes,

. . . Some years will have to pass before this man can be seen as a whole in true perspective. Such a view is always especially hard to take of anyone for whom adoration and vilification have been taken to extremes.

* * *

Lastly, has anyone described the Powyses better than Louis? I will take only four short extracts from *Welsh Ambassadors* and other writings of Louis.

The Powys Father:

I can hear him now, reading prayers, or making his own so brief and simple ones, uttering them in his kind, gentle voice, with his look of mild forbearance as though a Christian head of a Christian family; a voice and look so shockingly belied by the wolf-like implication of his face . . .

The Powys Mother:

She was a romantic, sensitive, melancholy and morbid woman, indeed of William Cowper's blood. It was her qualities that made her children's genius, and the qualities of her children's father that gave it the power to act, and fused with it the strange cruelty by

which it is so often controlled. It needed the masochism of the mother, the repressed ferocity of the father, to produce *Wolf Solent*, *Mr. Tasker's Gods*, *Black Laughter*.

Theodore Powys:

In Theodore's tones there could be implications of incredible inhumanity. In his mind there was always the same realistic fantasies of savagery and cruelty, of horror and evil, that are recorded in so many of his stories, and in himself the same deep gentleness and benevolence, the same sensitiveness and the same humour. 'What do you think,' I once asked him 'of the idea that if a girl doesn't love a man, love will grow with marriage?' 'The only thing that will grow,' said Theodore, 'is horns.'

Llewelyn Powys:

It was . . . the very intensity of his love of life that caused the continual preoccupation with death . . . The surpassing sweetness and strangeness of the earth, of earth-life uncorrupted, of all that is revealed by our visions and sensations as human beings, all that we can take to ourselves from Nature, and from our affections and from the arts—never could Llewelyn forget that all this, all beauty and joy, must be snatched from us forever . . .

Louis remained as perceptive. His sense of some practicalities remained weak. In his later years, he was staying with his great friends, Don and Joyce Gill, when they had to point out that, because of a huge fall of snow in the night, they could not drive him home. "Ah," said Louis, "I'll go home by train." They told him they could not drive him to the station, they pointed out the height of the snow, high over their garden, high over the road, over the hedges. "What a nuisance!" said Louis, "I'll have to call a taxi."

At the end, Louis like many reformers began to doubt the results of his own reformation. The end is like an actor taking off his make-up, smearing the grease-paint, so that nothing of his stage face or his real face is seen; just a blur of anonymity. Louis hung up his clothes—the costumes for his different parts. Blackness descended on him. His

youngest daughter, Deirdre, flew from California: father and daughter sat on either side of a table, almost in silence: Deirdre flew back. Louis ate, drank, slept, woke, spoke nothing at all.

One evening a young man, Tony Talbot, called, to find Louis and myself sitting in quietness. The young man talked of *Hamlet*. Suddenly, Louis's voice rang out in what has been called his 'phallic baritone'. "It's strange," said Louis, "that Shakespeare

makes Hamlet say that death is a bourne from which no traveller returns, when he has just seen his own father return . . .' He continued with as brilliant an account of Shakespeare as he had ever given: and to the day of his death, at eighty-four, his mind remained alive: to that moment when I held a cigarette to his lips, because he wanted the last puffs of life.

Well, I've tried to make my father return for you—may Louis forgive me!

LOUIS UMFREVILLE WILKINSON (1881-1968)—"LOUIS MARLOW"* WORKS

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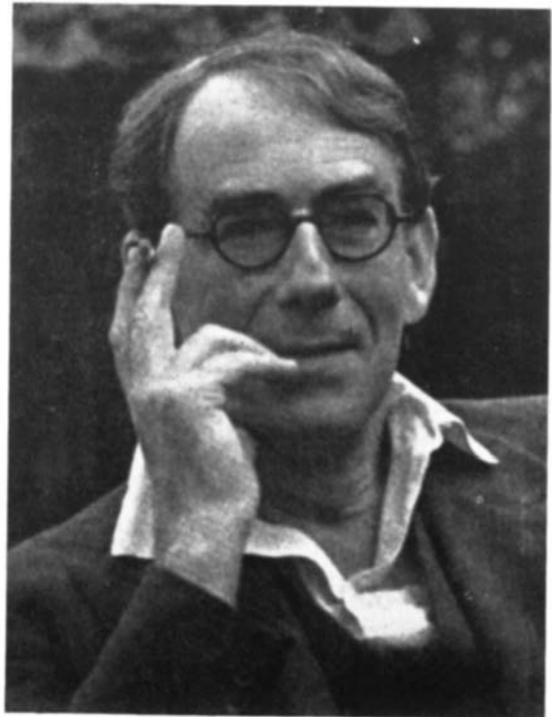
*The Devil in Crystal**, London: Faber, 1944.

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*Seven Friends**, London: The Richards Press, 1953.

Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson (ed.), London: Macdonald, 1958.



Louis Wilkinson

Chaldon Herring: The Powys Circle in a Dorset Village,
JUDITH STINTON.

Boydell and Brewer, 1988, £14.95.

Judith Stinton has found an interesting and original approach to writing about the Powys family and their circle by taking as her focus the village in and around which several of them lived in the 20s and 30s, Chaldon Herring, or East Chaldon, tracing its history and modest claim to having been, in the words of the blurb, “almost [...] a literary colony”. It was the fame of Theodore Powys that made the village conspicuous. He had moved to Chaldon in 1904 and married Violet Dodd, a local girl, the following year, but it was not until 1921 that he and his work were discovered almost by accident when the sculptor Stephen Tomlin came to stay in the village. Tomlin thought he had found the perfect retreat, unspoilt, remote and embellished with “a most remarkable man [...] a sort of hermit” as he described Theodore in a letter to Sylvia Townsend Warner. It was letters such as that one, and Tomlin’s enormous enthusiasm about the village that intrigued his London friends and incited them to go and see for themselves. Thus began the process by which Theodore’s work became published and widely known and the village gradually filled with outsiders.

By 1930, Powyses and Powys friends made up a significant proportion of the Chaldon population. Theodore and his family lived at Beth-Car, Llewelyn Powys and Alyse Gregory lived at White Nose, Katie and Gertrude Powys were at Chydyok; Betty Muntz, the sculptress, lived at Apple Tree Cottage in the village and Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland lived at Miss Green’s cottage. Friends and relations of all these were constantly coming and going, but the most famous visitors were to Beth-Car. David Garnett, Ottoline Morrell, Augustus John and T. E. Lawrence each visited Theodore at various times (and, incidentally, earned themselves a place on the cover of this book as a result). Theodore’s devoted publisher, Charles Prentice, wanted to retire to Tadnol, only a mile and a half away. Theodore’s influence, both personal and literary, was a strong one, and it is significant that the Chaldon “spell” seemed to



Stephen Tomlin with his head of Theodore Powys.

snap with his decline as a writer and eventual removal to Mappowder in 1940.

Judith Stinton abandons strict chronology in her book to sustain the geographical approach with a chapter on the Five Marys which outlines the history of the village and the Duchesse de Berri’s excavations in 1830, a chapter on Theodore Powys at Beth-Car, one about the inn, one about the church and school, “The Vicarage”, which incorporates the story of the 1935 libel case against Llewelyn, Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner, “Rat’s Barn”, with its portrait of Katie Powys, and the final chapter on Chydyok, mainly about Llewelyn, Alyse Gregory and Llewelyn’s tiresome affair with Gamel Woolsey. This structure is helpful, not to say essential, in dealing with the great variety of material which the author uses. It is one of the book’s virtues that Judith Stinton has done a good deal of original research; the information she provides about the history, archaeology and toponymy of Chaldon and its surrounding area is both interesting and illuminating.

It is also pleasing to read a book on the Powys family which takes some account of Katie and Gertrude Powys, two remarkable women who are usually tagged onto their brothers like footnotes. Judith Stinton has used Katie’s journal, papers at Austin and Alyse Gregory’s notes to reveal a little of Katie’s strong character, and though there is scant mention of Gertrude’s paintings, especially her portraits, there are some details about the household at Chydyok



Llewelyn Powys outside his study.

of a certain amount of “personal information”, the reminiscences of local people, which ought to be more clearly identifiable. Also Ms Stinton specializes in an odd brand of seemingly inadvertent pun which becomes irritating after a while; she talks, for instance (on the same page) of “whorled sculptures” which “roundly recall” curves of the landscape and the “slick menace of oil”.



Theodore and Violet Powys.

which bring her alive. The chapter on the church and school is full of new information, and I especially liked the portrait of the Rev. Joseph Staines Cope, whose odd influence still hung over the village in Theodore Powys’s day. The other notable inclusion is Stephen Tomlin, whose friendship with Theodore was wholly responsible for Powys’s work coming to light when it did. Tomlin, a highly intelligent and tormented character, has really never been given his due in this matter, nor is his sculpture as well known as it deserves to be. The photograph of him with the head of Theodore which was later broken, and the photograph of Theodore and Violet together are two of the most interesting illustrations in a book notably full of good pictures.

Ms Stinton’s sources, listed by chapter at the end of the book, show the extent and thoroughness of her research, but for some reason are not attached to quotations in the text by the usual method of numbered notes. I count this a serious defect, especially since the author has made use

Chaldon Herring is “a haunted village” as Theodore Powys once called it. It lies on the edge of Winfrith Heath, Hardy’s mysterious Egdon, and seems also “A Face on which Time makes but Little Impression”. In an unpublished letter to Bea Howe, Powys once wrote, “I think the village has a primitive and gentle soul. A soul inclined to go to sleep and never wake up any more”. An old place like Chaldon remains, in the long term, unaffected by almost everything, and literary colonies pass painlessly through its history. Yet in the mid-20s it seemed to Stephen Tomlin that his “discovery” of Chaldon had brought about its ruin and he fled to Swallowcliffe in Wiltshire. “It now seems to be the best-known village in England”, he wrote to Powys. “Dear Theo, we ought to have kept it a secret”.

CLAIRE HARMAN

Ed. I am grateful to Judith Stinton for making available the photographs reproduced in this review.

My People,
CARADOC EVANS:
edited by JOHN HARRIS.

Seren Books, 1987, £3.95 (paperback).

I read this book when I was seventeen, out of curiosity, having heard that once it had created a scandal, and since then I have read only isolated stories taken from it and included in anthologies. Some of them I have come to know very well: "Be This Her Memorial", for example, or "A Heifer Without Blemish". But I was not prepared for the way in which every one of these brief fables arose fresh and remembered in my mind, nor for the concentrated power given to them by their being placed in the same small village, Manteg, their characters appearing in story after story, their action interrelated. The book has achieved a subtle unity by these means; one feels behind each event the weight of previous events. A single story, direct and simple by itself, becomes part of a complex world.

And there are other paradoxes. The themes of these stories depend, as Roland Mathias has said, on the emotional drive of hatred. Evans himself has confessed to this. In a passage quoted in John Harris's instructive introduction, Evans writes, "I like stories that are gloomy, morose and bitter, for I feel the author is chronicling the horrid sins of his enemies". But isn't there a singular relish in this quotation, a twinkle in the eye? Evans very obviously enjoyed writing these wicked pieces, full of eloquent cant and giant hypocrisies. But we could not countenance reading about them if we were not offered anything to measure them against; so that there is love in these stories as well as hatred, heroism as well as defeat, loyalty as well as cruelty. I begin to think that Evans loved his people as much as he hated them, that the title of his book is proud as well as ironic. It is understandable that the people of Wales should have been angry in 1915 when the book first appeared, but I think they read it hastily and without too much thought.

For there is no sentimentality here, no heavenly choir singing us into heaven, no blind mountain fighters magically versed in philosophy. Life is hard and seen to be hard, wealth is the possession of one bitter and unproductive field more than one's neighbour. Yet even as I say this, I realize that, if the picture of such life is realistic, the stories are not.

Nor do I think Evans meant them to be

realistic. How could they be when we remember how Dinah, in "The Devil in Eden", defeats the Old Fellow himself? Or how to explain realistically Twm Tybach's awareness of his own death in "The Glory that Was Sion's"? No, these are fairy-tales to be told around the fire in Rhyd-lewis, to shock and frighten us. And often enough the small and weak defeat the sly and powerful, and we are comforted. This is a tiny world writ very large, each flaw and virtue wildly magnified, in primary colours. Having said that, I have to confess that Evans was a shrewd enough observer to convince us of the credibility of his stories. It is with delight that I, twenty years resident in Saron, just over the Teifi from Evans's Rhyd-lewis, recognize the exactness of his people's appearance and behaviour. Speaking once to Sam Tycoch about members of his family, I said, "So you must be related to Phillips the Plas?" "Oh no, no," said Sam, pushing away all thoughts of such splendour. And then, after a pause, "But my brother is."

This is not your stupid countryman, your dull Celt, but a man very sensitive to shades of social class as they exist in rural areas, not presuming on the slender ties of blood. Sam's brother, on the other hand, was a man of substance, probably richer than Phillips the Plas, better educated certainly, and most triumphant of all, a headmaster in Cardiff.

What of Evans's famous invented language, that amalgam of Welsh constructions and King James Bible vocabulary? It has weathered well, certainly offering no very great difficulty even to American readers, on some of whom I have tried it. The blurb tells us that Evans "trimmed" his language, an odd expression if it means any form of curtailment or limitation. The man has achieved a stern and resonant poetry, an improbable but recognizable eloquence. His preachers are said to sing, and they do. Eben, in "The Talent Thou Gavest",

sang mournfully for those at sea, for sinners that worshipped in places other than Capel Sion; he sang joyously for the First Men who occupied the places, for the many blessings poured upon the congregation, for the Big Man's gift of his Son to judge over Sion.

Who could do more? And note that "joyously!"

If sometimes such sacred song breaks down and his holy men offer us occasional bathos, then they remind us irresistibly of Dylan Thomas's Gwilym in the marvellous story, "The Peaches". And if the Devil sometimes walks in

the guise of a tramp through the pages of "My People", then we recall that God himself appears in a Glyn Jones story, flown in straight from Manteg probably, with manure on the heel of his boot. It is easy to see Samson Post, in "As It Is Written" as an earlier version of Willy-Nilly Postman, from Llareggub.

Glyn Jones has told us how he and Dylan Thomas drove to Aberystwyth to visit Caradoc Evans. They were right to do so, since they owe him a debt other than an occasional resemblance between characters. He has shown all of us how to use a Wales of our own devising, how to draw its boundaries, how to sing in our own way. The contemporary Anglo-Welsh short story can be seen in all its richness to have started there in Manteg.

We owe a debt, too, to Seren Books for producing this edition in such an interesting form and so cheaply. John Harris's introduction is precise and tactful, offering us the facts very conveniently. Now all we have to do is to wait for John Davies's anthology of Welsh short stories from the same house, so that we can see what we have done with Caradoc Evans's example.

LESLIE NORRIS

Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction,
W. L. KEITH.

University of Toronto Press, 1988, £20.00.

This sharply discriminating treatment of the development of British rural fiction begins with a study of the term "regional" as applied to imaginative literature. The reader is required to note, for example, that although "provincial" may overlap with "regional" in current usage, the two terms are quite distinct within the present argument. The emphasis throughout is on regional writing:

While "provincial" also sometimes overlaps with "regional", it is a term of urban origin applying to areas—or regions—beyond the orbit of any influential centre. Unlike "regional", "provincial" carries an unstated assumption that local differences are of little consequence. Although Jane Austen's novels have occasionally been described as "regional" . . . they are more accurately categorized as "provincial"—out of town . . . Elizabeth

Gaskell's novels, too, though frequently containing regional elements, are more correctly designated provincial, since they derive much of their interest from portraying life outside London.

This explains why, in a book on the development of rural fiction, comparatively little space should be given to such classic points of reference as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*. Professor Keith argues that it is Gaskell's "failure—or deliberate refusal—to become an important regional novelist that makes her case of particular interest". Such a firm critical emphasis is achieved at a certain cost: the novel of provincial life, which becomes one of the great imaginative resources of the nineteenth century, provides within this discussion only a marginal commentary on what is perceived to be a different kind of tradition, that of a distinctively regionalist commitment, in rural fiction. One may decide too that Keith underestimates Elizabeth Gaskell's achievement when he approvingly quotes George Eliot's remarks on that author's being "misled" by a love of "dramatic effects" and being never content with "the subdued colouring, the half-tones of real life". It was precisely her accomplishment of such half-tones in her later work, including the unfinished *Wives and Daughters*, that led Trollope, as *Cornhill* editor at the time of her death, to maintain that her writing had lately taken a new direction and had acquired a rare distinction in the presentation of rural life.

Of George Eliot herself, it is argued that "this sense of a non-regional generality recurs as we examine her work in greater detail". Once again, the difference which is observed between regional and provincial fiction enables Keith to delimit very precisely the tradition of rural fiction with which he is essentially concerned. George Eliot's contribution to regionalism is settled in half a dozen pages. Yet the attention given to Gaskell and Eliot is illuminating in its application to particular texts, for example in the discussion of Gaskell's use of Knutsford settings and of Eliot's search for a possible location for *The Mill on the Floss*. Above all the argument brings into focus the special commitment of the regional writer as opposed to the more general function attributed to the author of provincial fiction. The virtue of Keith's approach is to promote thorough discussion of the writers who have at some stage of their development made this special commitment: they include Scott, Hardy,

Lawrence and J. C. Powys as well as R. D. Blackmore, Eden Phillpotts, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Constance Holme and Mary Webb. It is a pity that in the study of a tradition which owes so much to the influence of Scott, Lewis Grassie Gibbon should have been neglected. Readers of the authors treated who recognize and share the peculiar fascination with a sense of place which their writings in such various different ways seek to convey, will find this book a close and rewarding study. The book provides no evidence of sympathy with the contemporary movement which has been described as the poststructuralist attack on reference. The nature of reference is what is at issue. In the critical vocabulary of this study: "The crucial words are 'rural', 'provincial', 'pastoral', 'natural', 'naturalist', 'local', and 'topographical'."

Keith articulates his main concerns as follows:

I accept all those novels, irrespective of their verisimilitude or romantic leanings, that present a locality distinctive in its character and related (at however great an imaginative remove) to a corresponding countryside identifiable on a map of the United Kingdom. The all-important quality is what F. W. Morgan neatly describes as "an atmosphere which is not transferable" . . . I am concerned here with novels or series of novels that succeed in creating an imaginative world which is unique in that it establishes its own "reality" (in a sense closer to Plato than to Phyllis Bentley) but taking its origin from a recognizable stretch of countryside . . .

The argument is conducted in a heavily-qualified style with moments of dry humour. The book establishes an interesting correspondence between the reading of a literary text and the reading of an Ordnance Survey map. Commenting on Powys's "obsession with topography", Keith remarks that Balzac is a possible influence, since in *Suspended Judgements* Powys refers to "the admirable Balzacian tradition of mentioning the Paris streets and localities by their historic names, and giving circumstantial colour and body to his inventions by thus placing them in a milieu which one can traverse any hour of the day, recalling the imaginary scenes as if they were not imaginary". One would have thought that Joyce provided a closer comparison, remembering that Powys had been a witness for the defence at the trial of the *Little Review* for publishing material from *Ulysses*. Nevertheless Keith writes acutely on the position of Powys

within modern literature: his perception of the continued working of romance conventions within a tradition which is often assumed to be broadly realistic is especially helpful in this case: "John Cowper Powys possessed the imaginative sophistication that enabled him to create an idiosyncratic but original world out of the chasm that opened up between the romantic and the realistic; he was able to turn a general liability into a particular adventure". By identifying Powys's *Autobiography* as a "central text" for literary regionalism and by offering detailed comment on the influence of Scott and Hardy within the tradition of regional writing to which Powys makes such a remarkable contribution, the present study should further recommend itself to Powys readers.

The tradition has been broken, according to the conclusion of this book. Keith quotes Lawrence's view of the spirit of place as embodying "a vivid relatedness between the man and the living universe that surrounds him". He concludes: "While that link still held, regional fiction had much to offer". An argument could presumably be presented that regional commitment, which is apparent in contemporary poetry and which returns in the variety of literary forms considered by Jeremy Hooker in *The Poetry of Place*, has not simply lapsed from present narrative consciousness. Yet Keith is strong in his appreciation of the pathos which informs the rural landscapes of Hardy, Lawrence and Powys.

PETER EASINGWOOD

R. S. THOMAS,
Welsh Airs.

Poetry Wales Press, 1987, £3.95 (paperback).

OLIVER REYNOLDS,
The Player Queen's Wife.

Faber & Faber, 1987, £8.95 (hardback);
£3.95 (paperback).

Welsh Airs contains thirty-eight poems on nationalist themes, drawn partly from volumes of different periods but including also uncollected and unpublished poems. We are not told whether R. S. Thomas or his publishers made the selection, or whether it was a joint enterprise. There are some odd omissions, if readers are looking for the full spectrum of Thomas's

nationalist verse, e.g. "Welsh Landscape", "A Welshman to any Tourist", "Genealogy", "A Welsh Testament", and "Reservoirs". Although it could be argued that some of the ideas in these poems can be found in poems that are included, they present different angles and facets which one would like to have, for a complete picture. Even as it is, however, the book is a very useful compendium of the seeing, frustrated, lamenting, angry, mocking, proud, and just very occasionally hopeful feelings of the poet as he considers his country and its language.

How far can any meaningful "Welshness" survive, and what would it be like if it did? Thomas has always been acutely conscious of the past, and has sometimes been criticized for falling back on a dubious, nostalgic line of nationalist defence, where the harp in hall, the bard at the royal table, the heroes of legend and history, are contrasted with "plastic" modern life, the "vomit of the factories", the "trash of windows", and (nicely horrid phrase) an "Elsan culture" of incomers with their cars and caravans. The question is whether all such disagreeables come from Anglicization, or do they show a traditional-minded person's dislike of modern things? People who inveigh against plastics (a favourite term of disapproval in Thomas) might be very glad to receive a plastic heart-valve or knee-joint. Factories are necessary. Elsan is convenient. Shop-windows may or may not display trash. It has always seemed to me that a nationalism which jibs at the contemporary and lauds vanished customs is in a state of self-indulgence. The harder but better nationalism is to be aware of the past but to insist on having the whole of the present; if it is not so, the world will not take it seriously. There are times when Thomas seems to agree that history will not help our present problems:

We were a people, and are so yet,
When we have finished quarrelling for crumbs
Under the table, or gnawing the bones
Of a dead culture, we will arise,
Armed, but not in the old way.
(*"Welsh History"*)

Sometimes an acid irony bites apparently beyond hopes of resuscitation:

Come to Wales
To be buried; the undertaker
Will arrange it for you.
(*"Welcome to Wales"*)

Tourists at a small seaside resort are quickly bored and end up staring "resentfully" at the water; he gives them no comfort:

Did they expect
The sea, too, to be bi-lingual?
(*"Resort"*)

Expatriate Welshmen are as much an enemy as incoming Englishmen:

Black hair and black heart
Under a smooth skin
Sallow as vellum; sharp
Of bone and wit that is turned
As a knife against us.
(*"Expatriates"*)

In "Afforestation", acres of conifers planted for private profit, "black crowds" inimical to animal as well as human life, are worse than Highland Clearances, which at least left wool-producing sheep. This is again the theme, very real to a Scottish as to a Welsh nationalist, of a country being used by alien and uncommitted hands.

Many good poems deal with language—the language he himself had painfully to learn—and make the recurring point that although bilingualism is unavoidable, the English are mistaken if they believe that what a Welshman says in English is precisely what he means:

Over
polite tea we hand you
the iced cake of translation.
It is not what we mean.
(*"The Parlour"*)

One is reminded of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait*, talking to the English priest. "His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech." There are occasions when Thomas's thoughts on language seem a shade knockabout ("the fat, / Monoglot stranger") or class-prejudiced ("ladies from the council houses" with their "Birmingham yellow / Hair, and the ritual murder of vowels"). But he makes amends in the fine concluding six-page poem, "Fugue for Anne Griffiths", where his linguistic and spiritual concerns mesh beautifully together, in meditating on the life and early death of this eighteenth-century Welsh hymn-writer. Her well-attested love of dancing furnishes him with an exquisite focus:

To the knocker at the door:
"Miss Thomas has gone dancing."

To the caller in time:
 "The mistress is sitting the dance

out with God at her side."
 To the traveller up learning's

slope: "She is ahead of you on her knees.
 She who had decomposed

is composed again in her hymns.
 The dust settles on the Welsh language,

but is blown away in great gusts
 week by week in chapel after chapel."

Oliver Reynolds made a name for himself with his first collection, *Skevington's Daughter* (1985), which included a score of poems with Welsh titles, on Welsh themes. Playful comments on learning Welsh; the irony of a lingerie factory replacing Rhondda coal; sense of a static ancient landscape of men working in wet fields under clouded skies: these poems skimmed their gestures over Wales but lacked the obsessive pressure behind R. S. Thomas's verse. In his new book, *The Player Queen's Wife*, Reynolds restricts Welshness to one or two poems. "Dispossessed" echoes Thomas's afforestation theme, adds empty chapels and a wrecked brewery, and takes a "green" swipe at bulldozers: crisply put, but conventional. "To Whom It May Concern" is a somewhat heavily-handedly light-hearted piece of self-condemnation by a Welsh Secretary, who decides to solve Welsh unemployment by transporting the inhabitants to a place of real promise:

Patagonia's just hours away
 and there are echoes of home in your Islands'
 new name—Falkland Fawr and Falkland
 Fach.

The main body of this lively collection, however, has concerns other than Welsh. Although some of the poems, especially those on personal or love themes, are rather brittle and slight, even if engagingly so, there are half a dozen strong and striking poems where a clearly defined and non-personal subject seems to have concentrated the poetic energies in a way that develops hints of direction one could see in his earlier volume. The title-poem is a finely managed monologue by the wife of the actor playing the Player Queen in *Hamlet*, as the company trundles across Europe. The theme is actorly observation and mimesis:

I'd watch a stubbly queen
 make me presents of myself:
 daydreaming, she'd stop half-way
 through pulling up a stocking
 (as I've done, thinking of home) . . .

History is again an animating presence in the deadpan horror of "Hazel", a powerful recreation of the army punishment of running the gauntlet, and in the well-caught panicky improvization of "Thaw", where a non-existent record demanded by the dying Stalin has to be played, made, and delivered in double-quick time:

whirling outer air configured with flakes
 and the still pause inside tightening
 at 78 revolutions a minute
scrik . . . scrik . . . scrik . . . scrik . . .

A person haunted by the past is the subject of two interesting poems. In "Words for Horatio", Horatio speaks about the long-dead Hamlet, but also (with proleptic shades of a more recent case) about one survivor of a Norwegian multiple murderer who had boiled his victims' heads in a pan: the survivor, like Lazarus, has since then "lamented his exclusion from death". The parallel piece, "The Doctor", presents a GP haunted to the point of alcoholism and death by wartime memories of attending a military execution; the poem has a touching, stoical black humour.

Imagery seems to be struggling to escape from a Martian tag into a near-Brechtian directness. We still have a ski-jump like a knife-rest, seals as sleek commas, the TV news breaking into chevrons, a watch handstanding at noon, a writer retreating from a Writers' Retreat. But in general one can sense a growing belief in the firmness of statement and narrative, as opposed to eye-catching moments. Future developments are awaited with interest.

EDWIN MORGAN

Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940,
 GILLIAN HANSCOMBE and VIRGINIA L.
 SMYERS.

The Women's Press, 1987, £6.95 (paperback).

The Powys brothers (J. C. and Llewelyn) quite properly merit only walk-on parts, as husband or putative lover, on the fringes of the web of

women writers which concerns Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers. Ezra Pound, flâneur and entrepreneur extraordinary, is the only male who resists displacement to the margins of the female network which the authors of this book ravel and unravel in their attempt to demonstrate that the modernist women were just as important a part of the literary production of the period as their better-known male counterparts.

This book is self-confessedly driven by obsessions: Smyers's "biographical obsession" (xvi), and Hanscombe's obsession with "the interdependence of [these writers'] actual lives and the work they produced . . . the interdependence between 'art' and 'life' which resulted in so much autobiographical fiction", and the idea that this group of writers might have something to tell present-day readers about the conditions for women's writing, namely "that a woman artist must not only be original in her art, but also (to achieve that art) be original in her life-style" (xiv).

Chapters 2-9 attempt to sketch in the intersecting lives of H. D., Frances Gregg, Bryher, Dorothy Richardson, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, Djuna Barnes, Mary Butts, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Harriet Monroe, Harriet Shaw Weaver and Dora Marsden. This breadth of coverage is a welcome move away from the usual narrow focus on Virginia Woolf (or at best Woolf-Mansfield-Richardson) as the representative (or only) woman writer of the early twentieth century. However, in this case, the result is extremely superficial and gossipy literary biography. More serious is the authors' failure to distinguish between art and life in their extremely problematic use of autobiographical fiction. In these early chapters they repeatedly move from their own biographical narrative into quotation from fictional narrative, as though the two forms were continuous. Thus on pp. 50-52 they discuss Dorothy Richardson's affair with H. G. Wells using as evidence passages from *Dawn's Left Hand (Pilgrimage)*, taking no account of the processes of fiction-making.

The concern with correspondences is potentially the most interesting part of this undertaking. One strand of its story of connections concerns the modernist women's rejection of both conventional social mores and heterosexuality. For almost all of these women the abandonment of accepted form, in the sense of established literary convention, went hand in hand with the abandonment of accepted form in the

social sense. Indeed Hanscombe and Smyers regard the rejection of conventional female roles as essential preconditions for women's writing, and suggest that many of these women chose "the lesbian alternative" as a means of transcending the limitations of their existence. The rejection of conventionality certainly resulted in a complex series of emotional-sexual triangles, or even more complicated geometries, involving various permutations of these women and some men, who seem to have been very economically recycled among the group.

The authors also trace a network of mutual creative and financial support. The later chapters on periodical publishing and book-production make it most evident that this loose network of women writers is, in fact, a specific literary formation. Unfortunately Hanscombe and Smyers do not take the opportunity of analysing this formation, but content themselves, for the most part, with brief factual descriptions of the little magazines and book-publishing projects with which these writers were involved. One exception is the discussion of *The Free-woman's* transformation from a political magazine taking a polemical view of the woman question and a radical stance on sexual matters, into *The Egoist: An Individualist Review*, a predominantly literary vehicle for both male and female modernist writers. This shift from the political to the aesthetic signals an important axis in this book. In Hanscombe and Smyers's version, and there seems no real reason to question it, the modernist women sought to escape from the limiting political, cultural and material conditions of their existence by embarking on a journey into the unmapped territory of their inner lives. Of course the personal is also political. However, the fact that a number of these women had the good fortune to come from wealthy families, and were willing to share their ample means, cushioned the group from many of the social and economic realities that determined the lives of most of their female contemporaries. As a result, both their radical aesthetic practice and their challenge to conventional living were conducted within a self-enclosed circle, and perhaps a limiting circle of self.

The authors of this study are themselves restricted by their polarization of the political and the aesthetic. The failure to pursue "inter-connectedness" in this area is one reason why this book rarely rises above the level of story. The book is also marred by its lack of historicity, an objection Gillian Hanscombe attempts to

forestall with her disarming confession that she has "willingly fallen prey to that most a-historical of orientations . . . the imagining of these writers as if they had not lived more than half a century ago, but as if they were still around" (xiv). But they did live more than half a century ago, and surely their projects were part of that extraordinary social, political, economic and cultural upheaval that surrounded the First World War, seen here simply as an event that "interrupted life for everyone" (81).

LYN PYKETT

Poems 1955-1987,
ROY FISHER.

Oxford University Press, 1988, £7.95
(paperback).

There is enough of the remarkable in this book to make it well worth acquiring, and to justify the importance with which Fisher is regarded in some critical quarters. His sustained non-compliance since 1955 with the orthodoxies beginning with and succeeding that dubious entity "The Movement" has been highly productive: here is a large body of work subscribing to the theory and practice of "experimentalism" while, unlike much in that vein, maintaining working relations with poetic tradition. Fisher is capable of an urbanity that is almost eighteenth century in its decorousness in poems whose structure may be intimidatingly discontinuous.

At worst, such characteristics can leave him floundering in mid-Atlantic (his debt to W. C. Williams *et al.* is acknowledged and apparent); at best it can produce lengthy poems like *City* or "Wonders of Obligation". These, and many more, are wholly Fisher's own, products of an intense meticulousness in the deployment of detail in fusion with a vivid and occasionally very moving sense of personal and social history.

Elsewhere, Fisher's involvement with detail descends to an obsessive descriptiveness, an absorbing concern with surfaces resulting in successions of poems which are ingratifyingly well-written but ultimately somewhat inconsequential. "A square/view of the air of things/one certain hour" is all we get sometimes, however baroque the accumulation of detail may be. Such poems, and it must be said that there are plenty of them, seem deliberate avoidance of emotion, history, and the imagination, the

qualities that make Fisher's best work so valuable.

"The Entertainment of War", for example, one of the high points of *City*, is a marvellously strong treatment of the cost to Fisher's family of the Nazi bombings. As a straightforward recollection of childhood it is unusual in the collection, but its sense of deep feeling under great and effective restraint is encountered more frequently. The emotion is occasionally recognizable as anger, particularly in the curt return to the subject of Birmingham's air-raid victims that opens "Wonders of Obligation", though a fullness of affection for the places and people behind the writing is more often sensed. Anger certainly provides the dynamic for "The Nation", the most scathing poem in the book in its blackly humorous illustration of the morally infantile character of nationalism.

Humour is present intermittently, not as frequently as I could wish in view of the admirably quirky and satirically effective way Fisher has with it. "On the Neglect of Figure Composition" does an hilariously thorough demolition job on the spirit of factionalism in its account of hostilities between the British Zoggists and followers of The Real Ian.

Fisher's humour is cognate with his imaginative and fiction-making capabilities, which produce much that I liked best in the collection. "New Diversions: 19" emerges as a modest tour de force, reporting a dream of a "suppressed/novel by John Cowper Powys", and even extending into learned dream-discourse on the text:

we spoke easily
of the round grey nondescript mere
the author had left undisturbed
right through the action
in a dull meadow off to one side. "It's
the only true *Pool*
in the whole of our literature!"
cried the scholar.

The Ship's Orchestra which concludes the book is a 24-page sequence of prose-poems amounting to a bizarre novelette about a group of ocean-going musicians. This, though, was a little too redolent of Burroughs and Kafka in its sinister grotesqueries and lacked the lightness of touch that makes Fisher capable of a more attractive strangeness.

The over-assiduous objectivity which produces sporadic stretches of rather cold description is a tendency of which Fisher seems

uncomfortably aware when he opens a piece with "In my poems there's seldom/any *I* or *you*". Even so, the very intensity of the neutrally-toned description in works like "Glenthorne Poems" amounts to a sort of love. At other times the uncompromisingly concentrated reportage can produce a disconcerting and mysterious effect, as in *Stopped Frames and Set-Pieces*.

Fisher is equally capable, however, of a disarming simplicity and openness, generally when his "I" and his descriptive powers profitably coincide; "After Working", for example, is a superbly uncomplicated enactment of the equable weariness to which its title points:

I like being tired,
to go down hill from waking
late in the day
when the clay hours
have mostly crossed the town
and sails smack on the reservoir
bright and cold;

I squat there by the reeds
in dusty grass near earth . . .

Overall, it's a provocative and stimulating collection, able to delight and to irritate, to move and, occasionally, to baffle this reader. Many of the poems are of a substantial length, and if some of them seem too much in love with appearances, plenty of others are compellingly original manifestations of powerful currents of thought and feeling. I'm very pleased to add this latest and most comprehensive gathering of Fisher's output to the other notable *Collecteds* on my shelves of modern and contemporary British poetry.

DOUGLAS HOUSTON

Writer's World: Gwyn Thomas 1913-81,
Edited by DAI SMITH.

Welsh Arts Council, 1986, £3.95 (paperback).

The 84 pages of this pleasantly designed and produced book bring together well over a hundred photographs to constitute a lively snapshot essay on Gwyn Thomas.

Over fifty photographs, the vast majority taken in his later years, feature Thomas himself. The remainder chart his background in time and place and capture in reproductions of drawings,

inscriptions, posters, dust-jackets and illustrations, the trajectory of the career of a man Dai Smith describes as "one of the world's greatest tribunes of humanity".

As perhaps the oblong format suggests, this is an album of a life: on one page there are even empty frames awaiting photos (which have not survived or have yet to be traced) of Thomas's parents. Captions identify scenes and people, occasions and dates (the information which all too often disappears as family photographs are passed from generation to generation). They are also frequently augmented by contextualizing quotations from Thomas's writings or by his pithy one-liners. The photographs themselves are of very different kinds: stiff-backed and watch-chained portraits to be framed for the sitting-room; snaps of get-togethers in the back-garden to be tucked away in the classic family album; documentary shots of birthplace, school and workplace; publicity and newspaper pictures—posed and candid; atmospheric landscapes (some without figures, letting the Rhondda do the talking through a medium of monochrome, and some submerged by them, like the Gaiety Cinema, Treherbert in 1914, its steps swamped by a tide of valley children). Much from the writing is given a striking visual gloss—the miners' carnivals and improvised entertainments of 1926, the integration of protest and community in the marches of the 30s—while influential individuals in Gwyn Thomas's values, experience and myths of heroism, are appropriately recorded: the miners' leader A. J. Cook, the communist activist and novelist Lewis Jones, Nye Bevan. If Thomas's hallmark of ironic verbal ingenuity seldom makes the relationship of such images and his writing a simple one, the fact alone, as Dai Smith emphasizes, that Thomas was "photographed and filmed more than any other Welsh writer this century" makes this collection a particularly appropriate addition to the *Writer's World* series.

A couple of little horrors have slipped through the proof-reading process (e.g. "*Sorry For Thy Sons*", p. 27—and the reversal of John Dd. Evans's illustration for *A Welsh Eye*, p. 8).

PETER MILES

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

PETER EASINGWOOD lectures in English at the University of Dundee. His study of "John Cowper Powys and the Pleasures of Literature" was published in *The Powys Review*.

H. W. FAWKNER is a Reader at the University of Göteborg, Sweden. His major publications are *Animation and Reification in Dickens's Vision of the Life-Denying Society* (Stockholm, 1977), *The Timescapes of John Fowles* and *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (Associated University Presses, 1984, 1986).

CLAIRE HARMAN has edited Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Collected Poems* and *Selected Poems* (Carcenet, 1982 and 1984). Her biography of Sylvia Townsend Warner will be published by Chatto and Windus in July 1989.

DOUGLAS HOUSTON is author of *With the Offal Eaters* (Bloodaxe Books, 1986). A further collection of his poetry is to be published by Bloodaxe.

CHARLES LOCK is an Assistant Professor of English, Erindale Campus, University of Toronto. He has published articles on J. C. Powys, G. M. Hopkins and T. Hardy and recently lectured to the Powys Society on Llewelyn Powys.

PETER MILES lectures in English at Saint David's University College, Lampeter and is reviews editor of *Powys Review*. He is co-author of *Cinema, Literature and Society: Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain* (Croom Helm, 1987); his study of *Wuthering Heights* will be published by Macmillan during 1989.

J. LAWRENCE MITCHELL is professor of English, and Director of the Germanic Philology Program, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. His publications include *Computers in the Humanities*, ed. (Edinburgh U.P., 1974), *T. F. Powys* (University of Minnesota Libraries, 1983), *Some British Short Stories*, ed. (Foreign Language Press, Beijing, 1985),

as well as contributions to such journals as *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, *Scriptorium*, *PN Review*, and the *Canada Journal of Linguistics*. He is working on a critical biographical study of T. F. Powys.

EDWIN MORGAN was titular Professor of English at Glasgow University until 1980. His books include: *The Second Life* (1968); *Instamatic Poems* (1972); *From Glasgow to Saturn* (1973); *The New Divan* (1977); *Poems of Thirty Years* (1982); *Grafts/Takes* (1983); *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984); *Selected Poems* (1985); *From the Video Box* (Mariscat Press, 1986).

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