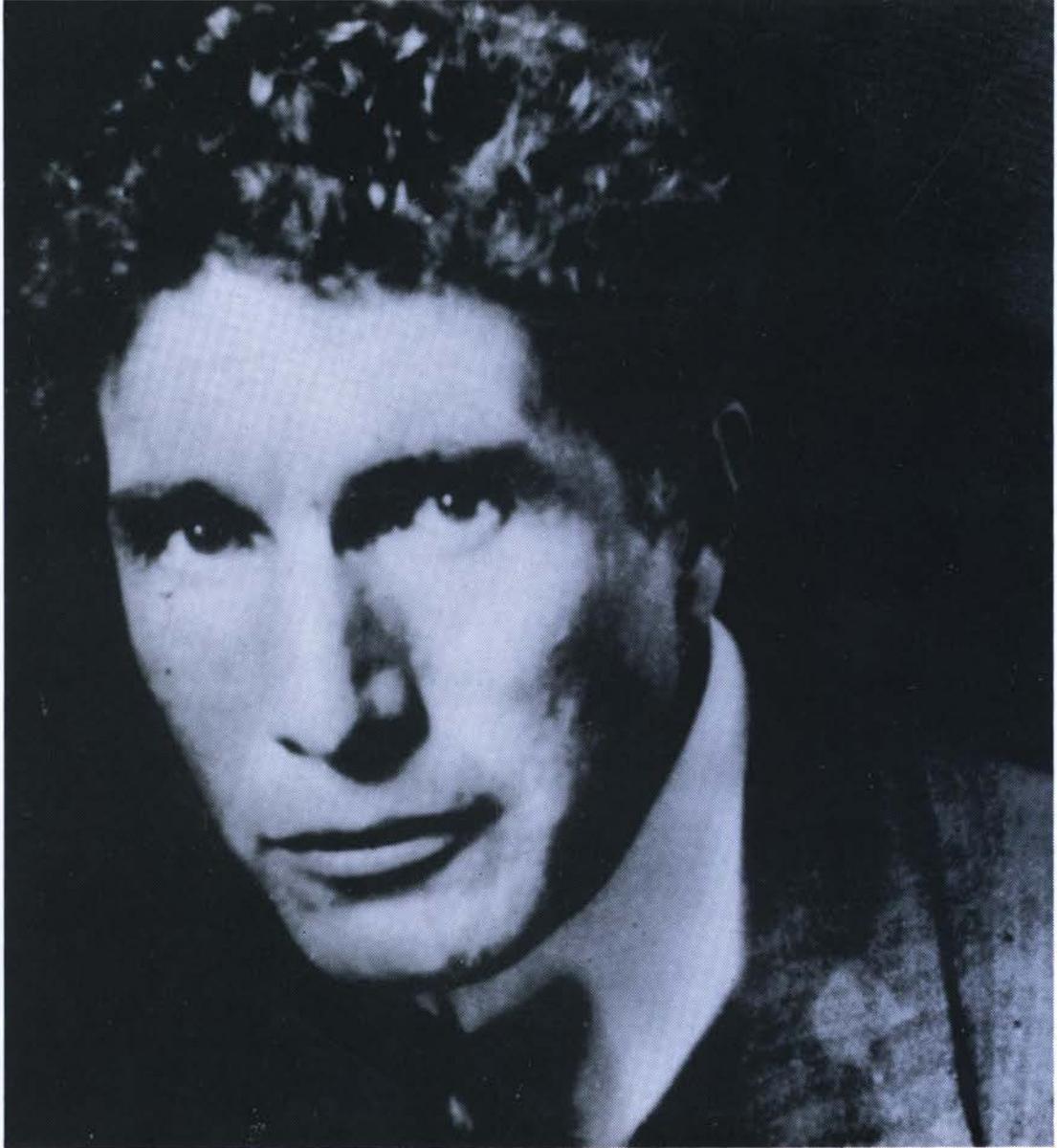


The Powys Review

NUMBER TWENTY-SIX



The Powys Review

Editor

Belinda Humfrey

Reviews Editor

Paul Bennett Morgan

Advisory Board

Marius Buning, Department of English, Free University, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Glen Cavaliero, St Catherine's College, Cambridge

T. J. Diffey, School of Cultural and Community Studies, University of Sussex

Peter Easingwood, Department of English, University of Dundee

Michel Gresset, Department of English, Paris VII University, France

Ian Hughes, Department of English, Normal College, Bangor, N. Wales

Ben Jones, Department of English, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Charles Lock, Department of English, University of Toronto, Canada

Ned Lukacher, Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago, U.S.A.

J. Lawrence Mitchell, Department of English, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, U.S.A.

Elmar Schenkel, Department of English, University of Freiburg, W. Germany

Correspondence, contributions, and books for review may be addressed to the Editor, Department of English, Saint David's University College, Lampeter, Dyfed, SA48 7ED.

Copyright ©, The Editor

We are grateful to Mr Francis Powys and Laurence Pollinger Ltd., for permission to quote from the writings of John Cowper Powys and T. F. Powys, and to the late Mrs Evelyn Elwin for permission to quote from the writings of Llewelyn Powys.

The Powys Review may be obtained from Booksellers for £3.75, or from Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed, for £3.75 plus 75p postage.

The Powys Review is printed by J. D. Lewis & Sons Ltd., Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed.

Contents

John Williams T. F. Powys: Absence and Exile in <i>Innocent Birds</i>	3	Reviews	
J. S. Rodman Plotting <i>Wolf Solent</i>	10	Charles Doyle <i>Richard Aldington: A Biography</i> PETER MILES	61
Janina Nordius Behind the Pigsty: On the Duplicity of Solitude in <i>Wolf Solent</i>	19	Gerard Casey <i>Echoes</i> JOHN WILLIAMS	62
H. W. Fawcner Atlanticism: John Cowper Powys and Mineralogy	29	Kim Taplin <i>Tongues in Trees: Studies in Literature and Ecology</i> MICHAEL BELL	63
Ernst Verbeek John Cowper Powys: Tempting the Gods	40	Lionel Gossman <i>Between History and Literature</i> R. C. RICHARDSON	64
Susan Rands John Cowper Powys's <i>The Inmates</i> , an Allegory	49	Charles Hobday <i>Edgell Rickword. A Poet at War</i> GORDON WILLIAMS	65
Carys Richards, Some Recollections of Phyllis Playter	59	Belinda Humfrey, ed. <i>John Cowper Powys's "Wolf Solent": Critical Studies</i> GLEN CAVALIERO	66
Letter to the Editor: Timothy Hyman	60		
Notices: Den otidsenlige och den aktuelle: John Cowper Powys 1872-1963: Sven Eric Täckmarks specialsamling: BH	69		
Notes on Contributors	69		

John Williams



T. F. Powys: Absence and Exile in *Innocent Birds*

Absence and exile are themes which find their place in most if not all of Theodore Powys's novels. Powys himself often emerges from his text as a person sharing in the sense of futility experienced by his bereaved characters. He either declares or reveals himself to be profoundly alienated from a world dominated by greedy, selfish, hypocritical, lecherous individuals who manipulate the weakness of other individuals or groups: "Must everyone here on earth be either ordering or obeying, stealing or giving, blessing or cursing?" (*SH* 13). Thus we have self-satisfied, proud clergymen, squires and city fathers; the ignorant, boorish working classes, "... a mass of screaming beasts", he calls them in *Father Adam*, "a wild medley ... of uncontrolled passions, crushed and crammed together" (*FA* 10); and a materialistic bourgeoisie, all of whom dance to a tune they none of them understand.

The characters with whom we are invited to sympathise are the victims, the deceived, the outsiders, the 'wise fools' like Mark Only (*MO* 23), who in his way is also an exile, "'My home be up on these hills, when I bain't down in horses' stable ... 'Tis down in village that I be made a fool of.'" (*MO* 31). Often the triumph of these people rests on the fact that in the end they choose, deliberately and determinedly, to turn their backs on this existence. Death in such circumstances is claimed as an attainment of a "great joy" (*JP* 90) which we cannot begin fully to understand. The wisdom of the outsider lies within the paradox that the most complete affirmation of self is at the

same time an act of annihilation. Annihilation is redefined as a triumph, an idea that should not seem so very bizarre for the Christian pondering the way in which Christ's ministry appeared to be collapsing in ruins as he deliberately allowed himself to be crucified.

When we turn from Powys's victims, the outsiders and exiles, to the mass of humanity, death is there perceived as anything but triumphant annihilation. So attached to this life are most of us, that we construct a model of the afterlife which effectively guarantees the continuation of this life into the next. It is our tombs, and not just those of the ancient Egyptians, that are full of the bric-a-brac of a material existence, marking our poor attempts to persuade ourselves that we are never really going to leave it. This is "the stagnation of immortality" that Powys describes with such loathing in *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (113). In *Innocent Birds* we have Miss Pettifer convinced that Jesus, 'With a little of her training', would "learn to cook her heavenly rasher as she liked it done best, and also to answer the door to her friends and to wait at table in her mansion above." (*IB* 95) Miss Pettifer, of course, is particularly taken with the way in which Christ's role as a servant receives due emphasis in the Gospels.

The dominating presence of death in Powys's novels is in fact a device which serves to focus a more positive meditation upon how to live. For the outsider to survive in this world, most if not all the expectations and ambitions which have been implanted in our minds from our earliest years, and which make life attractive, must be discarded. We need to recognise that we have created God in our own image, the image of man, and man is of course fallen. We worship power, money, status and work, and in so doing we have

*This article is based on a paper delivered to the Powys Society at Cirencester 1990. My thanks to members for a lively discussion which has resulted in some additions to the original text. JW

created a language, more properly a structure of rhetoric, which implicitly privileges that profoundly inverted, perverted God of life. Here lies the basis of Powys's humour; the technique for revealing this hypocrisy is irony, and it works with particular effect in the case of the labourers he describes. The poorest and most abject of these figures do in fact live in what might ironically be termed a 'Godless' state. They have no power, money, or status, and not infrequently they are at the point of being worked to a standstill. All that remains—and they cling to it—is the rhetoric, and in their attempts to use it they remain minimally, comically attached to a life which reduces them, like William Spokes in *Father Adam*, to not much more than a piece of mud thrown against a wall (*FA* 48).

We have to remember, of course, that the bereft condition of William Spokes, John Pim in *Innocent Birds*, and others like them is communicated to us by Powys within a sophisticated literary structure of irony. For the author, as for his reader, an escape from the man-made, fallen God of life must therefore be an intended and indeed articulate act of denial; not a process of depravation made possible by the silence, ignorance, and indeed innocence of the victims the author is able to describe.

The situations and characters in a Powys novel function in order to perform a steady erosion of certainty where the quality and value of life is concerned. Language itself is tainted, untrustworthy, loaded with assumptions. It is of no small significance therefore, that communication between Powys's sympathetic characters is often a problem. Language deserts them; Mr Pim in *Innocent Birds* hands a letter to Mr Solly "unopened, because he feared that if he broke the envelope he might damage the contents" (64). Discourse everywhere tends to break down, or is shifted into the world of inanimate objects; or indeed may be redirected to a God quite other than that worshipped in church by normal, decent, God-fearing people like Miss Pettifer, "who always enjoyed her early morning walks to the St. Luke's communion service because she

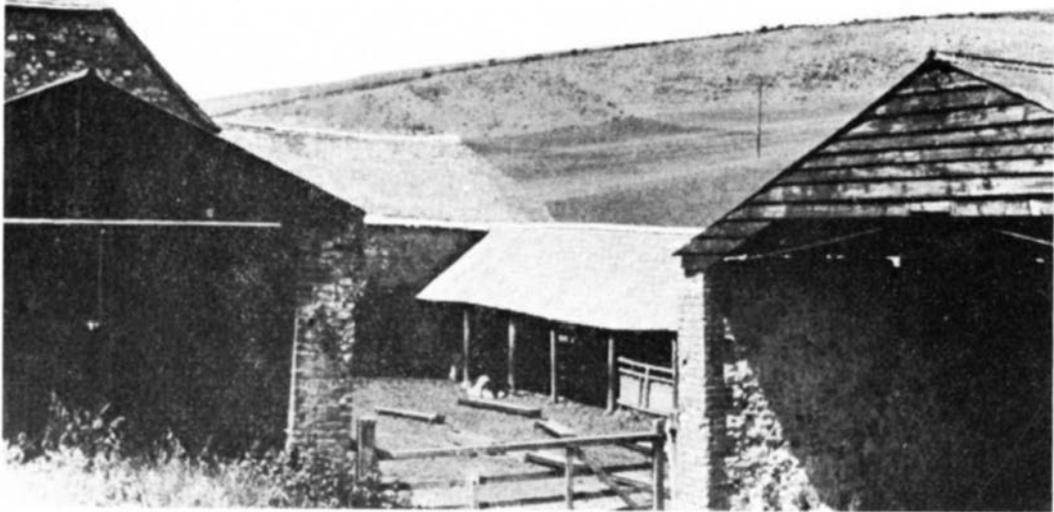
could quietly hate her neighbours in the road . . . and thank the good God for creating a pretty place called Hell, and a pretty person called the devil" (*IB* 7):

Miss Pettifer attended church, as every woman does who believes in established gentility, and whose shoes are not too down at heel. When Miss Pettifer thought of God, she thought of Him as a Father who showed His temper to the wicked, His enemies, in very much the same sort of way as she did herself at breakfast time, and who would be sure to always keep His good things for Miss Pettifer. (94)

States of absence and exile will consequently occur repeatedly in Powys's novels, and *Innocent Birds* is no exception. The novel begins with an emphasis on absence. Chapter One tells of how many of the familiar inhabitants of Madder village are now dead; Chapter Two concentrates on a new arrival, Mr Solly, who comes to live in "Gift Cottage". But Solly's presence contains an absence, that of his aunt, Deborah Crocker. The saintly Aunt Crocker has had a vision on Madder Hill of a heavenly "Presence", who promises "a gift to Madder with its love, and that the gift would be given as a solace to someone." (5) But Deborah Crocker is now dead, and Solly lives in Madder charged by his aunt to discover the full import of the vision and its message.

The landscape gradually created by the narrative is a landscape reflecting absence. What Solly wants in Madder is not there, "He never went out of his door of a morning, dull or shining, without looking up in an expectant way at Madder Hill, upon the top of which he hoped one day to see the golden cloud settle like a great yellow butterfly." (9)

The gate where Solly, a gardener, regularly meets his companions, John Pim, George Chick, Job Wimple, and on occasion Farmer Barfoot, is near to "The Silent Woman" Inn. The "silence" is literal, for the inn is untenanted, and its history tells of absence associated with violence: "Within a short while . . . three wives of three landlords had died in the house." (11)



“Madder Hill” behind some farm buildings which T.F. Powys passed on his daily walks when he lived at East Chaldon. The identification is made by the late Rosemary Manning in *Dorset: the county magazine*, No. 45, 1975.

And of course there is that curious corner of Solly’s garden at “Gift Cottage”:

Mr Solly dug his garden with a spade that cut deep and easily, and he left only one little corner unplanted. He left this corner because he could never make up his mind what to sow there . . . Nothing would do. (6)

A use will, of course, eventually be found for the unplanted, ‘nothing’ corner. In the meantime it is important to appreciate the potentially positive side of at least two of these absences. Deborah Crocker is replaced by the account of her vision as much as by Solly; and the ‘nothing’ of the unplanted corner will have for Powys connotations of ‘no thing’: freed from ‘things’, liberated from worldly, material entanglements. There is no thing there to fall prey to worldly corruption.

Another recent arrival in Madder is John Pim. Pim’s situation is of the grotesquely comic kind that Powys loved to work through, and it too signifies absence. Pim’s problem is that he cannot bring himself to believe that he has ever had the ability to father his son, Fred:

When Mr Pim reached the roller, he said wearily, “Tain’t no good for I to be called

Daddy when I bain’t woon.’ Without noticing Mr Tucker, Pim rested upon the roller. Following with his eyes the upward pointing of the shafts, Pim addressed a question to the blue skies. ‘Be it only doing thik,’ he inquired, ‘that do bring a fine boy into world? Bain’t there nothing more that a poor man should ‘ave done to she?’

A soft summer wind that had sprung up at the moment caused the chain that connected the roller shafts to sigh deeply, as though a rusty and aged voice replied, ‘Oh foolish and unbelieving Pim, if only you knew what troubles were caused all over the world by just doing thik, you would go about like another St. Paul and preach continence.’ (53-54)

Although Tucker stands by the roller in this scene, Pim does not see him and speaks to the sky; it is the roller who, thanks to Powys’s intervention, ‘answers’. This problem with communication is of a piece with the absence in Pim of any sense of familial ties. Where normally the bond between father and son might be expected to be strong and intimate, if not possessive, we the readers are offered nothing unless the author steps in to fill the silence. Authorial intervention of this kind can endanger the tone Powys’s writing at times assumes. What might seem an unpleasantly condescending response on the part of the roller to

Pim's question is made palatable in this instance by the humour; but it is not always so. The fact is that, whatever his personal experiences of working on the land may have been, Powys was not in a position to identify directly with the rural labourers he describes; he could only observe. What he observes in Pim is an outsider bereft of the formal vocabulary used, for example, to cope with death. Pim's response to his wife's funeral is one of seeming indifference, but this is not a consequence of cold heartedness; he appears genuinely unable to understand what is happening, he is an outsider bereft of the formal vocabulary normally used to explain such events: "And now here was Annie in her heaven, and Pim could only wonder at it all." (38)

Pim's alienated position is inherited by the son he sees yet does not properly recognise. Fred of course will move on from this comic situation of alienation to one of actual, devastating exile from Madder, engineered by Miss Pettifer. Pettifer is motivated by her perverted, worldly religious faith: "it is by the law of hate and not the law of love," writes Powys in *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, "that the world lives and has its being." (85) The cynicism which fuels so much of what he wrote in *Soliloquies* is predictable for 1918; it marks a loss of faith in human nature after trench warfare that was never to be completely restored. In both *Mr Tasker's Gods* (1924) and *Innocent Birds* Powys still seems prepared to approach a mood of almost overwhelming despair when contemplating the strength of the forces of evil. The plot may contrive a victory for the powers of light, but the reader is left uncomfortably aware that the victory is in the fiction.

Fred grows up and falls in love with Polly Wimple. They seem idyllically happy; and the gift of Deborah Crocker's vision, as Solly will in due course learn, is meant for them. But Fred develops two curious obsessions, "the interesting art of simple addition and the excitement of throwing his cap in the air both to see how high they would go." (72) The effect of this innocent acquisit-

iveness in Fred is to bring a particularly poignant irony to the way he comes to be sent—unwillingly—to Derby. Miss Pettifer wants Polly for a servant, and persuades John Pim that Fred will make his fortune if he moves out of Madder—the further the better—leaving Polly for her. Of course quite the opposite happens, and the little which Fred has is taken from him.

As Powys makes clear at the start of the novel, we are to witness changes for the worse in Madder. Evil arrives specifically in the form of Mr Bugby, a sadistic rapist who takes on "The Silent Woman", and in Miss Pettifer, who takes pleasure in working her servants into the ground. Pettifer and Bugby are the embodiment of all that is cruelly, irredeemably acquisitive in humanity. Their alliance is sealed by Bugby's rape of Pettifer's servant Maud Chick, another innocent bird. Maud's fate is a kind of exile from the community of Madder in consequence of her madness; but Powys also attempts to portray it as a translation into a purer world. This process is brought about largely as a result of the simple, innocent wisdom of Mr Tucker, the clergyman:

Whether or not it was the effect of the story-book that Mr Tucker carried in his pocket, or whether innocent madness is itself something that frightens a certain kind of man out of its path, we cannot say: but two men, Mr Bugby and James Andrews, who were standing near the farmyard gate . . . now moved, when they saw Mr Tucker and Maud Chick coming, into the stable. (183)

Maud wants a baby, and Tucker's "solution" for her—a rag doll—is questionable to say the least. There can be little doubt, however, as to what Powys is trying to do through the character of Tucker. His "story-book" is the bible, but with the exception of Solly, no one in the village realises this. Over against what they have come to know as 'religion', Mr Tucker's book is assumed to be degenerate and evil.

Where Fred's exile is concerned, it is inevitable that we should wonder why Powys chose Derby. There are of course bio-

graphical associations for the Powys family here, but that would scarcely seem to explain Derby as a focal point for the worldly evils that Powys has in mind. Surely London would have done as well. I do wonder if the answer might not have emerged with the recent publication of *Father Adam*. Powys could well be playing an association game here, for in *Father Adam* we read how it was on the occasion of being taken to see the Derby that Ralph Crew saw humanity at its most depraved, "so rude, so unconverted, just a mass of screaming beasts." (10)

Fred's exile is matched now by Polly's, for Bugby rapes her, and she too is thus effectively destroyed. In the course of these events Powys has built into his narrative a clear pattern of biblical parallels for his protagonists: Fred as a Christ figure, Polly as Mary:

'You bain't Polly Wimple, be 'ee?' asked Mr Pim.

Polly laughed.

'My name isn't really Polly,' she said; 'that's only what I'm called. Up in church I were named "Mary"' . . . Fred's first coming had been wonderful . . . but now soon there would be happening a far more stirring event . . . the second coming of Fred. (130, 196)

Fred does indeed return, but is so physically altered that no one recognises him, not even his father, but then he never has, and John Pim's idea of the God that Fred has become is the world's idea of God, not that to be found in Mr Tucker's subversive bible. Polly is now absent from Madder, and the village assumes she has gone to join her rich husband, no doubt helping him count his money while he throws his cap in the air to celebrate his material success.

In fact they meet on the edge of Madder, and together they drown themselves in the sea. Even when their bodies are recovered and buried in Madder churchyard, they remain 'absent', unrecognised.

Eventually it is Solly and Tucker who realise their identity, and that the 'gift' they have received is the transfiguring, not diminishing one of death. We ought perhaps to

reflect here that the gift is also thus implicitly passed on to Solly and Tucker, who live. Bugby dies, haunted rather cumbrously in the text by the emblematic bird of death, the cormorant. Pettifer lives only to suffer torment and ridicule. The final scene of the novel describes the effect of her discovery of the "gift" received by Fred and Polly. By the time Mr Tucker's book comes into her possession, Miss Pettifer is well on the way to insanity. Her intention is to enjoy the book for herself, and then "forward (it) to the bishop to show him what wicked stories his clergy read." Something very different takes place:

. . . before she could stop herself doing so, she read these words:

And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.

Miss Pettifer rose hastily and threw Mr Tucker's story-book into the fire. (277)

Books, like mortals, have their allotted span in so far as their material, physical existence is concerned; but as Mr Solly's story will teach us, the spirit of a book is not to be so easily consumed.

Powys has used exile and absence in *Innocent Birds* as a means of pursuing his mystical perception of death as a doorway to the totally 'other'. Taken as a whole, Powys's novels explore and develop a wide range of literary techniques in order to pursue that theme; this one novel is in fact no more than a single chapter in the course of that endeavour. From the first, literary allusion—the sense of texts beyond the text—was an important part of Powys's method, while the creation of a pattern of symbolic reference interlocks his whole output of novels and short stories. Deborah Crocker's reflections on death in *Innocent Birds* draw attention to both Powys's use of literary allusion, and his sense of symbolism:

'To an old woman . . . this mortal life—all that is left of it—is closing in upon every side; and we are forced to bow down near and ever

nearer to the earth. But look at this daisy, Solly; it knows its times and seasons . . . let us think of our earthly bed as a safe hiding place from all our ugliness—blessed be his name.’ (177)

Powys’s repeated use of the daisy as a symbol of Deborah Crocker’s faith is worth consideration. Among the poets on whom Powys regularly drew for inspiration was Wordsworth; in *Innocent Birds* Wordsworth and his love of childhood innocence and spontaneity are specifically referred to as an antidote to Bugby and his sadistic habits of mind (212).

Behind this speech of Deborah Crocker, I suspect, lies Powys’s knowledge of the way Wordsworth had apostrophised the daisy on more than one occasion in his *Poems in Two Volumes* of 1807. Contemporary reviews of the 1807 volumes were almost universal in their condemnation and ridicule of Wordsworth’s ‘simplicity’ (“namby-pamby”, Byron called it). In the first poem of the first volume, “To the Daisy”, we read how the daisy speaks to us of “The homely sympathy that heeds/The common life”¹. Powys, I suspect, found Wordsworth a congenial literary companion given the latter’s belief that at the heart of a sense of mystical ‘otherness’ lay ‘simplicity’, the ordinary, the humble and the unspectacular; a creed readily dismissed by the world as mere silliness.

At the beginning of Chapter 21 in *Innocent Birds*, this commitment to simplicity takes the form of an expression of love for both daisies and glow-worms by Solly and his aunt. It can hardly be coincidental that both the daisy and the glow-worm appear in the 1807 *Poems* as symbols of pure and unselfish delight.² The Wordsworthian sounding verse quoted in the text by Powys, “Brave flowers—that I could gallant it like you” (77), further develops this theme. In fact the poem here is Henry King’s “A Contemplation Upon Flowers”, a much anthologised piece. While there is no direct evidence that I know of to show that Wordsworth read the seventeenth century poet, it is perhaps of interest to note that Jonathan Wordsworth

in his book *The Borders of Vision* finds it convenient to make use of King in order to discuss Wordsworth’s imagery.³

Though much of this may be speculative, of one thing I believe we can be sure: the primary source Powys drew on when it came to reflecting specifically on absence in this and every other novel he wrote, was the empty tomb of Easter Day; an absence which insists on the presence of new life.

*

There remains one particularly intriguing absence to consider. *Innocent Birds* contains an absent text, a text we only occasionally glimpse, and which is eventually exiled as completely as Fred Pim and Polly Wimple. For much of the novel, Robert MacKenzie’s *The United States of America: A History*, published in 1870, is a constant companion to Solly; it is effectively his bible, and he turns to it each day for guidance and advice in his quest to penetrate the mystery of his aunt’s vision.

The history of America is an analogue for the fall from grace of Madder. The earliest days of America tell of a prelapsarian innocence. Powys’s “innocent birds” are survivors from this garden of Eden; Suzy the church cleaner, for example, who uses the church for prayer when she should be sweeping it:

Suzy was walking in her usual flat-footed manner, dragging the broom behind her as if she were a product of the older world and possessed a long lizard’s tail. (146)

All too soon the Bugbys and the Pettifers make their presences felt.

Pettifer’s attitude to her servants is no different from that of the American slave owners: “the slave was regarded”, MacKenzie writes, “not as a person, but as a thing.”⁴ When Solly reads “Go to Boston” in MacKenzie, he goes to “Boston Cottage” in Madder to discover Fred and Polly, and from this deduces that they are the recipients of the “gift”. The full passage (which we don’t see) tells of a Quaker who heard God telling him to “Go to Boston”. “He went,

and the ungrateful men of Boston hanged him.”⁵

MacKenzie tells his story of a nation as Powys would tell his story of Madder. It is not a history that “gathers round one grand central figure—some judge, or priest, or king—whose biography tells all that has to be told concerning the time in which he lived.” It is rather “a history of her people, and of no conspicuous individuals.”⁶

Powys plays the same game of an absent text here as he does with Jane Austen in *Unclay* (1929). This brings us back to the Powysian process of undercutting everything, including the text before us. *Innocent Birds* and *Unclay* are what we read, but their substantiality as texts is reduced to the function of an echo of many texts lying somewhere outside their structures. The very text itself is thus exiled, as is the existence of the text beyond, which we do not read, or read only by allusion. As Marius Buning has shown, we become engaged, with Powys, in contemplating the “‘literariness’ and the fictiveness of his fiction.”⁷

Though seemingly eccentric, it is wholly appropriate that MacKenzie’s text should share the fate of Fred and Polly; it is buried by Solly in that ‘nothing’ corner of his garden:

He had buried his Americans, but though buried they still spoke to Solly, which is easy to believe when we consider that Captain John Brown was buried too. (*IB* 270)

Did Mr Tucker’s bible, I wonder, continue to speak to Miss Pettifer after she had burnt it?

We can only guess at the way Powys must have warmed to MacKenzie as he read, with the innocent Solly, the unadorned simple sentences that describe the contrast between a puritanical sense of right, and the corrupting influence of materialism combined with the acquisitive lust for empire. Here we have the absent and exiled Theodore, with Bunyan and Milton, Wordsworth and Cowper as constant literary companions, looking across a yawning gulph to the works of the Pettifers and the Bugbys:



T. F. Powys by William Roberts. Used on the dust-jacket of *The Market Bell*, Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1991.

Simple men, guiding themselves by their conviction of the wickedness of slavery, were growing ever more vehement in their hatred of this evil thing.

John Brown was such a man. The blood of the Pilgrim Fathers flowed in his veins. The old puritan spirit guided his actions. From his boyhood he abhorred slavery . . . He retired habitually into deep solitudes to pray . . . He believed that God had directed him in visions. He was God’s servant, and not man’s.⁸

NOTES

References within parentheses within my text refer to the following works by Theodore Powys:

(*FA*) *Father Adam*, Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1989.

(*IB*) *Innocent Birds*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1926.

(JP) "John Pardy And The Waves", *Fables*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1929.

(MO) *Mark Only*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1924.

(SH) *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, London: Village Press, 1975.

¹ Alun R. Jones, ed., *Wordsworth's Poems of 1807*, London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³ Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth. The Borders of Vision*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 19.

⁴ Robert MacKenzie, *The United States of America: A History*, London, 1870, p. 163.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷ Marius Buning, *T. F. Powys. A Modern Allegorist*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986, p. 154.

⁸ Robert MacKenzie, pp. 187-88.

J. S. Rodman

Plotting *Wolf Solent*

John Cowper Powys was not always fortunate in his choice of titles. The name 'Jobber Skald', for instance, does little to commend that novel to the attention of the casual book-buyer. The title of *Wolf Solent* is scarcely less inept, yet it is ironic that it should be so. Unlike the novels that preceded it, *Wolf Solent* took years rather than months to write, and Powys thought long and hard about its title. Even after a contract for publication had been signed, with Simon & Schuster, Powys was still desperately searching for an attractive title. He wrote to his brother Littleton, that

Schuster *has* accepted my book and yesterday (no, the day before) (Sept. 12) the contract was signed in his office in red ink . . . He thinks of publishing it in May—just before I start for England. But except for 'Wolf Solent' which he thinks will not induce people to read the book—we *cannot* think of a good title. It is teasing how long I've tried, searching through Shakespeare, Milton—everything—and all in vain hitherto.¹

Thus, due to the pressures of imminent publication, and for want of a better title, 'Wolf

Solent' was duly agreed upon. The search had been significantly more difficult than Powys admits in his letter for, from the beginning of the composition of the novel, working titles had come and gone with a bewildering rapidity. "An Ounce of Civet", "The Excorsisor", "Ripeness is All", "Crooked Smoke", "The Quick and the Dead" were all considered at different times during the production of what finally came to be known as *Wolf Solent*.²

Powys's first choice of title however was "Mystery". He reluctantly abandoned "Mystery" quite early in the production of the novel, because, as he explained to Llewelyn, "No one seems to like 'Mystery' as a title, so perhaps I shall have to think of another. But the book 'indicates' mystery, as Walt Whitman would say!" "No one" here is more than likely a periphrasis for Phyllis Playter, who scrutinized each chapter as Powys completed it, for as he explains in the same letter, "I am writing top speed at my new book but Phyllis made me re-write frantically a whole chapter, so I am not in danger of getting into any bad havering".³

Regardless of its sales-value as a title, "Mystery" does capture something of the essence of *Wolf Solent*. The physical environment within which the events unfurl, filtered through the concerns of Wolf's introverted subjectivity, is at once rendered with some precision and yet suffused with indefinite meanings. In *Wolf Solent* the natural world is perceived in all its concreteness, yet continually gestures beyond itself, out of the "whole astronomical spectacle".⁴ The strange identity of the solid and the atmospheric within the scene and characterization of *Wolf Solent* is probably the most insistent feature that strikes the reader of the novel, and "Mystery" seems as good an 'indicator' of this feature as any of the later titles that Powys considered.

When the plot and theme of *Wolf Solent* are examined the element of mystery moves beyond 'atmosphere' and can be taken as expressive of the dynamic quality of the novel. The central actions of the narrative concern Wolf's repeated attempts to unravel his past, to understand his present relations to others, and to secure for himself a bearable future. These three tasks demand that Wolf interpret his world. Yet such interpretations as he ventures to make are always in the face of the reticence of that world. The resistance of Wolf's environment (both physical and human) to his quest for knowledge exhibits an aspect of that environment's 'mystery'. After a prolonged struggle the novel ends when Wolf comes to terms with that resistance: his final disillusionment marks his rejection of unworkable hypotheses and the assumption of humbler truths.

The reader of *Wolf Solent* follows a course parallel to that of Wolf himself. During the course of reading the novel the reader, from his point of view, tries to make sense of the events as they unfurl. *Wolf Solent* is an ironic novel because the reader's vision both includes and surpasses Wolf's own, yet the reader too is beset by puzzles and enigmas to which there seems no simple, immediate solution. Whereas Wolf finds resistance to his questions in the world

around him, the reader is confronted by mysteries within the text itself.

One of the simplest devices a narrative can employ in eliciting the reader's interest is suspense. The reader is aware that the inaugurating events of the tale will in some way or other determine the whole course of happenings that follow. From the information vouchsafed at the beginning of a narrative the reader forms some hypotheses concerning the possible outcome of that narrative. As the reader moves through the text, further information either confirms his initial predictions or forces him to revise his view.

The reader's share in a narrative denotes not merely his passive assumption of a certain amount of textual work, but also his positive interest, his partisan concern in having his predictions validated. The element of suspense within the tale exists as long as the reader is aware that some of the information he has acquired could support alternative predictions.

It is the reader's inference of the predictive sequence (and not the mere conjunction of characters and incidents) which creates the sense of plot; it is his awareness of at least two alternative sequences (two potential plots) which generates interest; and, in some texts, it is his awareness of their virtual and plausible equipoise which generates intense interest.⁵

This 'intense interest' has not always found favour with professional commentators on literature. It is enthusiastic and amateurish readers "who worry about what might befall the hero or who express perplexity about how the mystery can be resolved".⁶ Literary critics often tend to view the shape of a narrative from the viewpoint of its closure. What for the naive reader is an engaging process, becomes for the critic a fulfilled sequence where the moments of intense interest are annulled by the certainties of hindsight.

Although it would be unhelpful to call for a return to readerly innocence, the risks of the 'normal' reading of literary professionals must be appreciated. In his haste to show

how the final shape of a narration was implicit *and* necessary all along, the critic has to overlook large portions of the text, especially those places where the reader may have “paused at many signposts, crossroads, and side-turnings”.⁷ These places are the markers of narrative secrets, those secrets which proclaim the radical contingency of the plot and suggest that events might have turned out quite differently indeed.

Given the marginality of Powys’s oeuvre in relation to the twentieth-century canon, one can understand why many of its ‘secrets’ have remained undetected, but even works that have received ‘classic’ status, and been carefully examined by academic readers can still retain their mysteries. The situation of *Wolf Solent* is not dissimilar to that of *A Passage to India* cited by Frank Kermode.

Forster’s *A Passage to India* had a very unusual success on publication and gave rise to lively arguments about its account of Indian life and politics; yet it was a good many years before anybody noticed that it had secrets. What is more, I spend much of my time among learned men who were devoted colleagues and friends of Forster and who know *Passage* well, but they never seem to talk about its secrets, only about its message and what, in their view, is wrong with that message.⁸

It must be admitted that the secrets of *A Passage to India* mentioned here are largely thematic for, according to Kermode, the passion for sequence (for the causal connections of plot) is at odds with the registering of secrets (the less manifest thematic portions of the text). The case of *Wolf Solent* is somewhat graver: the sequence itself is in doubt.

Plot summaries of *Wolf Solent* as found in the majority of discussions of that novel are a product of that critical hindsight mentioned above. The asserted ‘simplicity’ of the events that comprise such summaries is given the lie by the numerous anomalies that spring up when the reader forgoes the satisfactions of closure and is willing (for a time) to sacrifice form to detail. When a reading

of *Wolf Solent* is undertaken in this spirit, there come to light passages of the text noticeable for their oddity. These ‘odd’ passages seem to resist the general drift of the narrative.

An action, a gesture, a conversation may carry a weight of significance unrelated to their role either in the ‘plot’ or in the immediate context. This is, perhaps, not surprising given that Powys’s conscious aesthetic contained the belief that not everything within a fiction should ‘tell’; for Powys digression was essential to the comprehensiveness of Art. Many of the anomalies in *Wolf Solent* function in just this manner, yet as the reader encounters certain of these, the suspicion grows that a relation might hold between them. In opposition to the explicit plot of the novel these anomalies seem to constitute another narrative layer which could be described (using Cedric Watt’s phrase) as a *covert* plot.

Watts defines the covert plot as follows,

If we take the term ‘a narrative’ to mean ‘a story told in some way’, it follows, tautologically, that all narratives . . . have an overt main plot: a purposeful and, in varying degrees, conclusive sequence of incidents involving characters; and they may also have overt subsidiary plots . . . In addition, some narratives have a covert plot: another purposeful sequence, but one which is partly hidden, so that it may elude readers (including some ‘professional’ readers, the literary critics and commentators) at a first reading, or at the first and second readings, or even at the first and second and subsequent readings, and may even elude them for decades. When it is eventually seen, the covert plot proves to organise and explain those elements of the text which at first may have seemed odd or anomalous, obscure or redundant; and the whole text is in various ways transformed.⁹

To investigate the ‘various ways’ *Wolf Solent* is ‘transformed’ by the acknowledgement and explication of its covert plot is the concern of the remainder of this paper. For reasons of space, only one episode will be examined in detail—the death of Malakite the bookseller. It is hoped that the analysis

of this episode will be sufficient to elucidate some aspects of John Cowper Powys's sense of form in the novel. The existence of a covert plot within *Wolf Solent* once perceived, allows that novel more complexity and fuller structure that has usually been acknowledged.

* * *

Concerning the figures of Gerda and Christie, many readers would concur with the judgment expressed by C. A. Coates in her *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*.

In Wolf Solent [Powys] shows the women not only as representatives of different psychic, psychological and even geographical kingdoms, but as fully realised characters. They are girls as well as avatars, and should rank among the best-drawn female characters in twentieth-century fiction.¹⁰

The pairing of contrasted female characters is, of course, an element in Powys's fiction prior to *Wolf Solent*: Gladys and Lacrima in *Wood and Stone*, Nance and Philippa in *Rodmoor*, Ann and Netta in *Ducdame*. The reasons for this inherent dualism in Powys's female characterization may lie deep in his own psychology, but it is perhaps worth noting that in the Victorian fiction of which Powys was so avid a reader, a choice between contrasting sexual partners is commonly a formalisation of the hero's or heroine's transition from youth to maturity.¹¹

Christie and Gerda divide Wolf's affections by appealing to opposite halves of his sensibility. Gerda's earthy primitivism and stunning feminine beauty attract Wolf's "cold planetary lust"; Christie's disengaged intellect and androgenous appearance equip her to assume the rôle of Wolf's *ánimá*. Christie's lineage is Welsh and mystical and thus alien to the Dorset landscape of which Gerda seems the human embodiment. Gerda's closest relationship outside of her marriage is her childlike attachment to her younger brother Lob; Christie's intensest involvement is with her sister/niece Olwen.

Christie moves freely and imaginatively through the works of the great philosophers—Leibniz, Hegel, and so on; Gerda's one literary enthusiasm is for the romance of *Theodoric the Icelander*.¹² Finally, Gerda escapes from Wolf's upsetting demands into the concerns of domesticity; Christie escapes by leaving Blacksod for Weymouth and the sea.

A list of Gerda's and Christie's opposing qualities could go on indefinitely, but would risk casting them merely 'as representatives of different psychic, psychological and even geographic kingdoms'. There is a danger of the reader's conceiving of these two women statically. Though never wholly subsumed by Wolf's story, Gerda and Christie achieve their full realisation when their differing qualities are brought into relation with that story. The dynamism inherent in their opposition is brought out into the open by its shaping influence on the plot of *Wolf Solent*. This perception is lucidly stated by H. P. Collins.

So pretty, animal Gerda with her many negative qualities becomes for a long stretch a positive force while the subtle and almost ethereal Christie, with her many positive qualities, can become a negative force.¹³

Concerning Christie especially, it is fatally easy to neglect her 'negative' side and part of that 'negativity' must surely be her quasi-incestuous relationship with her father. Indeed, however intimate Wolf and Christie become, there always hovers in the background of Wolf's consciousness the figure of old Malakite.

Wolf is never sure about the part which Malakite plays in his daughter's life, and the reader too may be in some puzzlement about the precise nature of this father-daughter relationship. (Interestingly, in this matter Gerda contrasts with Christie again. John Torp's placid indulgence of and secret pride in *his* daughter is quite explicit.) However, the reader is in no doubt about the most significant episode in this puzzling relationship: the death of Malakite removes him from Christie's life and (to anticipate a little)

frees her from an intolerable burden. It also terminates an hitherto unremarked covert plot within the general narrative of *Wolf Solent* and by such a termination opens it up to the scrutiny of the careful reader.

One aspect of Malakite's 'fall' should be noted at the outset: the event itself is not directly narrated, only its aftermath. Many other events in *Wolf Solent* are similarly conspicuous by their absence: Wolf's quarrel and temporary break with Urquhart which necessitates his humble return to the squire, Mattie and Darnley's wedding, Christie and Olwen's departure for Weymouth and so on. These omissions within the text do not concern trivial events. It is a part of the indeterminacy of *Wolf Solent* that so many of the important changes in Wolf's life are passed over in silence. In this deployment of narrative *lacunae* Powys is not, of course, unique but is making use of a well-known aspect of fiction. Novelists frequently

emphasize the importance of a given moment by its absence, by the study of its surroundings, thus making the reader feel that there is a lacuna in the fabric of what is being narrated, or something that is being hidden.¹⁴

So far as the narration of Malakite's fall is concerned the reader must feel that there has been a *lacuna* in the text *and* something is being hidden. In his last moments, Malakite names the hidden in his own words: "she pushed me down" (603). Christie names it differently: "in broken whispers the girl [Christie] told him [Wolf] how her father had fallen backwards, down that narrow staircase, soon after he and she had been left alone" (598).

No amount of close reading of *Wolf Solent* can adjudicate finally between these two versions. That Wolf, for his part, accepts Malakite's as the truth does not compel the reader to do likewise. As with so many other episodes in this novel, the reader must make his own decisions about matters of fact. Truth in *Wolf Solent*, we may come to see, is a matter of emphasis. Accepting Christie's account means viewing Malakite's

fall as *accidental* in the fullest sense, that is, a matter of contingency, a happenstance. Inaugurated by no conscious action within the novel, it has only effects. As such it belongs to what Wolf calls the "whirligig of chance". A reading based on Christie's view must emphasize the role of contingency in human affairs and espouse a looser kind of narrative connection.

Any reading of *Wolf Solent* opposed to the dominance of contingency must stress cause and motivation when discoursing on the events of the novel. If Wolf's world is to be seen as a story-shaped one, then the reader will, like Wolf himself, accept Malakite's version. If Malakite's fall springs from an act of will rather from an act of chance, then the reader must seek in an almost forensic manner for motive and opportunity. Accepting the murder of Malakite as a 'fact', events prior to that 'fact' assume an hitherto unnoticed cast, as we find on turning to the happenings on the day of Malakite's murder.

It is Friday the third of March, the anniversary of Wolf's arrival on the scene. Wolf wakes in the morning to "a vivid awareness that this Friday was the eve of Darnley's wedding" (577). After a troubled breakfast with Gerda, it is decided that Wolf should lunch at the Three Peewits and he thinks Darnley might be persuaded to join him there. After a morning of drudgery at the school, Wolf and Darnley do indeed lunch at the tavern, where they find Jason and the squire already firmly ensconced.

Wolf endures a conversation with the other three men which seems thoroughly to nettle him. And it is a seemingly innocent remark of Jason's or Darnley's that precipitates Wolf's exit.

'I didn't tell you, did I, Solent,' said Darnley innocently, 'that when I called at the Malakites' to let Olwen know I'd take her home this evening, the little minx refused to budge? She swears she won't leave Christie for a single night! There'd have been tears if I'd insisted. Well! It'll be [...] perhaps [...] easier'—he spoke pensively and slowly now—'if she does remain [...] where she is.'

'Girls are all the same,' remarked Jason. 'They all like sugar and spice. Old Malakite probably buys more tasty sweets for her in this town than she gets with us.' There was something about this speech that was more than Wolf could bear. He rose abruptly to his feet.

'Sorry, Darnley,' he said, 'I forgot something I have to do before afternoon school! It won't be more than that, will it [...] what I've had?' and he laid down a shilling and three pennies upon the table. A grotesque consciousness of the way his quivering upper lip projected and the way his hands shook, filled his brain as he spoke; but he bowed to Mr. Urquhart as he went out, and nodded civilly at Jason. 'We'll meet later,' he said, giving Darnley one rapid reproachful look as he left the room. (586)

The reasons for Wolf's distress at this turn in the conversation will, it is hoped, become clear later on. His reaction becomes understandable in the light of later events, but neither Wolf nor the narrator remark upon the causes of Wolf's behaviour. Once again the reader must fill in the blanks.

Wolf's exit from the pub is sudden and unpremeditated, and after it he stands bewildered in the street, hesitant and feeling exposed to the gazes of passers-by. Instinctively he makes for the Malakite shop, all the while knowing that Christie is unable to help him in this 'crisis'. What the nature of this 'crisis' might be, is left unexplained, for the moment. However, no sooner has Wolf arrived than his anxiety is pre-empted by Christie's announcement of her own.

Here she was, running rapidly down the narrow staircase [...]

'Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Wolf! I'm in such trouble! I've been thinking and thinking what to do [...] I prayed that *anybody* might come [...] and now it's you! Oh, I'm so glad!' (586-587)

Wolf finds Christie desirable in her distress. Her need for help and comfort comforts Wolf as he hugs her to himself. But the emphasis in her cry on needing "anybody" is genuine and she repels Wolf's advances. Repulsed, Wolf humbly enquires of Christie

what has disturbed her. Christie's answer is surprising.

'Olwen wants to stay with me [...] to live with me [...] you knew that, didn't you? But this morning she's been fretting about Mattie. Ever since she woke up she's been fretting. And now she says she'll be quite happy with me again if only she can go to the wedding and see them married! She wants to go *to-night*, Wolf! That's what she wants [...] to have a last night with Mattie [...] and come back here when they leave for Weymouth; but you see, I had no way of reaching Darnley. Is Darnley at school today, Wolf? I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't—' (587)

Wolf's reaction to this speech is purely self-regarding. He realizes that her generous welcome was not offered for his own sake but merely because he is now a means of contacting Darnley. Wolf now understands that in the Olwen-Christie-Malakite family-group there is little space for him. His self-absorption obscures an issue that is obvious to the reader: Christie's account of Olwen's desires is incompatible with Darnley's. This incompatibility is made pointedly explicit by the fact that little more than a page of text separates the two accounts.

Both Darnley and Christie agree that Olwen is upset, and there has been some sort of a 'scene', yet in Darnley's account Olwen "refuses to budge" from Christie's side, whereas in Christie's account she refuses to stay. The sceptical reader might reply that Olwen has changed her mind, for she is after all a passionate, volatile creature and could conceivably have decided on the spur of the moment to visit Mattie. However, the chronology of events is against this view.

On the previous day (Thursday) Darnley drove Olwen into Blacksod as he came to school "with the idea that she should stay a couple of days under the Malakite roof" (547). The plan seems to have been that Olwen was to return on Friday night which would be the eve of the wedding. At some point after Thursday morning then, Darnley visited the Malakite home again to let Olwen

know that he would take her home on Friday evening. Now Darnley's visit could *only* have occurred on Friday morning, for the following reasons. After depositing Olwen on the Thursday morning at Malakite's shop, Darnley went on to a full day's teaching. Immediately after school, Wolf accosts Darnley and begs him to go to tea with Gerda. Darnley agrees. Wolf and Darnley do not meet again until that evening at Pond Cottage. Darnley has come directly from Gerda to let Wolf know that supper is waiting. Since at no time on the Thursday could Darnley have visited Christie, he must have visited her on the way to school on Friday morning.

Given this chronology, the problem of Christie's prevarication stands in need of explanation. Why does Christie claim that Olwen has been fretting *all* morning about Mattie, when we know from Darnley that she was fretting about *Christie*? Why does Christie pretend that she hasn't seen Darnley and doesn't know whether he is at school or not?

It is obvious that Christie is in ignorance of Wolf's recent conversation with Darnley (their meeting was unplanned after all), and therefore thinks that her story will possess a fair degree of plausibility. For the reader, Christie's story rings hollow. Yet one fact remains—she is genuinely concerned to send Olwen to Pond Cottage. Or to say the same thing in a different way—she wants to be alone that evening with her Father. In the light of later events we can see why—if Malakite is to die, Christie wants *no* witnesses, especially not little Olwen.

The sceptic here might well ask, why did not Christie tell Darnley of her desire that Olwen should spend the evening at Pond Cottage? The answer is that Christie wishes that the desire for Olwen's removal should seem to originate with Olwen herself, and when Darnley talked to the little girl it was too plain that she was adamant about staying with Christie. For Christie to insist too strongly against the child's wishes would have seemed strange, and in fact it has taken several hours for Christie to bring Olwen

round to an acceptance of an evening at the Otters'.

So far we have demonstrated the real possibility that Malakite was murdered by Christie and that the crime was premeditated and even skilfully planned—only Darnley and Wolf's conversation gives the lie to her version of events. If Christie has provided herself with an opportunity, and Malakite's murder is accepted as a fact, then she must also possess a motive.

Those readers who have accepted (as Wolf himself does) Christie's active part in Malakite's death have usually believed that she acted from self-defence. Malakite's incestuous advances must have been made either once too often or too obscenely and Christie, naturally, retaliated in a moment of panic. Now, we have seen that the crime was premeditated, and though such premeditation does not by itself rule out the possibility of a sexual motif, it does exclude the possibility of the murder's being an act of the moment. That Christie did not act in order to defend *her* sexual integrity can be seen from one important document.

In Chapter 21 ("Slate") Wolf steals a glance at a page of Christie's novel while she is out shopping. Wolf stands alone in her room and is almost mesmerised by "one particular paragraph that caused him to draw in his breath with a faint rasping suction" (493). What Wolf encounters is a fictional version of Christie's autobiography.

'Shame? She felt nothing of the kind! Human tradition meant little to her. Sacred guilt. Forbidden thresholds. Just *custom!* Just old moss-covered milestones of *custom!* But the silence that followed when his footsteps died away? . . . A girl's excited senses rousing desire in old age. What a curious thing! Filmy butterfly-wings waving and waving; and old cold lust responding. Curious, not terrible. A chemical phenomenon. Interesting in a special way. The opposite of tedious routine! . . . She slid down the old slippery groove into the deep hole. Forgetting. A girl dissecting memory and forgetting her shame! Why shouldn't she forget? He was a very old man. In a few years, perhaps in less

than a year, she would be looking at his dead face.' (493)

Human tradition does indeed mean little to Christie, as she warned Wolf early in their involvement, 'I certainly don't like it when things get too human . . . That's probably why I can't *bear* the Bible.' (90) Christie removes herself intellectually from her situation with her father in order to dissect that situation. A deep sexual resentment, and the pain that comes in its wake, is definitely part of Christie's character, but she deals with it in her own way. An act of violence perpetrated on Malakite for his 'biblical' sexuality would be meaningless in her eyes; he is, after all, 'a very old man'. Vengeance would be a human, all too human response to her situation.

Christie's motivation in the murder of her father, remains a puzzle then, until we turn to a later scene in the novel. In the light of our suspicions about Christie, the narrator sets the scene with some degree of irony.

These arose no obstacle, in the sequence of events that now occurred, to upset *Christie's prearranged plan*. With the fly from the Three Peewits *safely* ordered for seven o'clock, Darnley and Wolf took their places at the Malakite tea-table; and a situation that certainly *possessed elements of awkwardness* flowed forward as smoothly and easily as if the girl possessed a social genius worthy of the *subtlest* adepts of high society. (589) (italics added)

Christie's 'social genius' cannot, however, stretch to restraining her father's volubility. Excited, Malakite blurts out to Wolf his latest news. Apparently, he has been thinking of selling up his business for some time. Squire Urquhart wrote to Lord Carfax enclosing a catalogue of Malakite's collection of largely pornographic material. Carfax sent a letter to Malakite which arrived on the Thursday afternoon indicating that he would buy Malakite's entire stock. Malakite has plans for retiring from "work" and moving to Weymouth where he "will sit on the esplanade all the morning, and play bowls all the afternoon!" (591)

In order to understand how the scene at Malakite's tea-table clarifies for the reader the nature of Christie's motivation in committing an act of parricide, it must be appreciated that Christie's position is the result of a purely contingent train of events—long hoped for perhaps on Christie's part, but still unexpected by her. Albert Smith's sudden death threw open again the question of Olwen's accommodation within the community. That question had originally been settled, to Christie's distress, by the interference of Mr Smith and Selena Gault. Once Smith is dead, only Miss Gault attempts the conventional if callous move of having Mattie and Olwen committed to a home. However, it is Wolf who opposes Miss Gault on this measure and announces to her astonishment that the matter has already been decided: Mattie and Olwen will live with the Otters.

Thus both of Christie's earlier 'enemies' have been vanquished. Some time later, Wolf again acts as Christie's champion in cajoling the Otters (against the intransigence of Jason) to allow Olwen to return (temporarily) to "what after all was her paternal home" (547). As long as old Malakite resides under the same roof as Christie and Olwen, Olwen's position will always be a precarious one, especially as Christie now has every reason to suspect that Malakite's incestuous urges are about to take a more sinister turn. The simple solution would be for Christie and Olwen to leave old Malakite, but that is impossible since they are both financially dependent on the old man. Quite fortuitously, Lord Carfax's offer arrives on the Thursday afternoon, spelling financial security for Malakite. The bookseller's planned retirement to Weymouth offers nothing to Christie—the bizarre *ménage à trois* would still go on, only now Malakite would have all the leisure in the world to indulge his appetites. Christie's one choice of action is clear. In order to preserve Olwen from Malakite's advances, and to live a free and independent life, the "old nympholept" (590) must die. On this reading, the act of murder grows out of Christie's passionate

attachment to Olwen, and not, as is generally claimed, out of the need to defend *herself* against Malakite.

* * *

The preceding analysis has yielded some surprises, not least in terms of characterization. The reader has come to appreciate a greater complexity in Christie's character than Wolf's point of view allows. This has been achieved by the acknowledgment and elucidation of covert plotting in *Wolf Solent*.

The reader's perception of a covert plot occurs when minor details of the narrative are unified by means of a sequential logic. In this paper there has been space only to consider one episode—that of Malakite's death. It is quite probable that some other events narrated in *Wolf Solent* could be similarly treated. It may be objected that such a treatment must necessarily impoverish the reader's experience of the novel. To acknowledge the central importance of covert plotting in *Wolf Solent* may seem tantamount to treating it as a mystery story in the narrow sense, that is, as detective fiction. In order to meet this objection, it must be shown that covert plots and the plots of detective fiction betray significant differences.

In the classic detective novel, a crime (usually, though not necessarily, a murder) is committed and the puzzle of the criminal's identity is finally solved through a process of investigation, observation, and deduction undertaken by a detective figure within the narrative. The reader's task is to scan the text for 'clues' and attempt to distinguish genuine from false leads. The *dénouement* of the story gives the verdict on the caniness of the reader's interpretation.

In the covert plot, however, there may be no 'crime', or, if there is, we may long be unaware of it: recognition of the

wrongdoing may dawn only tardily with recognition of the structure of events as a whole. Instead of consciously watching out for clues to enable us to identify a particular wrongdoer, our process is rather that of sensing various oddities and speculating about their possible rationale.¹⁵

More importantly, the solution of a detective novel is publicly confirmed in the story world itself. The characters assent to a final, determinate version of events; there are no dissenters. The covert plot is, on the other hand, merely the reader's construction of events, and no single character within the narrative confirms that construction in an unambiguous manner.

Novelists may employ covert plots for a variety of reasons, but Powys's use of this device is founded quite securely on his metaphysical beliefs. The overt plot and the detective plot are founded on a philosophically realist notion of the world. That is to say, regardless of individual views of the matter, there exists some determinate, objective state of affairs essentially independent of human judgment. Powys is very much an anti-realist and his use of the covert plot in *Wolf Solent* is a testament to his profound belief that the world (and its fictional analogues) are inherently plural. The facts of the tale are never simple, because the facts do not exist independently of their knower. A Powysian narrative can never be reduced to a mere plot summary since there are *only* versions of events, and these versions are always seen from the perspective of some individual or other. A plot summary implies the possibility of a view from nowhere, and this Powys denies. Christie Malakite makes just this point in conversation with Wolf: "*Nothing's finished* [...] until you take in the feelings of everyone concerned!" (473) In Powys's fiction nothing is ever finished.

NOTES

¹Belinda Humfrey, ed, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff: UWP, 1972, p. 323 (14 September 1928).

²John Cowper Powys, *Letters . . . to his Brother Llewelyn*, Malcolm Elwin, 2 vols., London: Village Press, 1975, II, 21 (3 October 1925), 82 (16 August 1928); Humfrey, *Essays*, p. 322 (21 October 1927, 9 May 1928).

³Powys, *Letters to Llewelyn*, II, 18-19 (10 September 1925).

⁴John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent*, London: Macdonald, 1929, p. 636. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

⁵Cedric Watts, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots*, Brighton, 1984, pp. 184-85.

⁶Ibid, p. 184.

⁷Ibid, p. 183.

⁸Frank Kermode, *Essays on Fiction 1971-1982*, London, 1983, p. 139.

⁹Watts, *Deceptive Text*, p. 30.

¹⁰C. A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 63.

¹¹Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, London, 1985, p. 52.

¹²The correct title of this book is in fact *Thiodolf the Icelander*—a work by the German romanticist, De la Motte Fouque, author of *Undine*. In his *Autobiography* Powys reveals his enthusiasm for this romance where he also misquotes the title.

¹³H. P. Collins, *John Cowper Powys: Old Earth-Man*, London: Barrie & Rockcliff, 1966, p. 68.

¹⁴Michel Butor, *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor*, ed. Richard Howard, London, 1970, p. 21.

¹⁵Watts, *Deceptive Text*, p. 36.

Janina Nordius

Behind the Pigsty: On the Duplicity of Solitude in *Wolf Solent*



A portrait used on the dust-jacket of *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933).

In *Wolf Solent*¹ solitude is important to the hero as an inner state of mind as well as an external situation. As external situation, as actual, physical withdrawal from human gregariousness, solitude promotes spiritual freedom. “The most important things in my life,” says Wolf, “are what come back to me from forgotten walks, when I’ve been alone” (292). The dominant impact of these solitary walks is a sense of immense relief whenever Wolf, “after any prolonged period of human intercourse,” finds “himself alone and in the open” (209).

As an internal situation, a psychological state, solitude implies a mental withdrawal from the external world. To Wolf the sensation of inner solitude, intensified into an ecstatic state of consciousness, is vital. This sensation, which he calls his “mythology”

(20), is “a certain trick he had of doing what he called ‘sinking into his soul’ ” (19).

The inner solitude of his mythology supplies Wolf “with the secret substratum of his whole life” (19) and is initially presented in the novel as a condition for happiness and bliss without negative connotations.² This attitude to solitude comes very close to that of Powys’s philosophical essay *In Defence of Sensuality*³, published a year after *Wolf Solent*. In the essay the concern with solitude which is under way in *Wolf Solent* is developed further, and ideas that are not clearly worked out in the novel have become more fully articulated. *In Defence of Sensuality* asks, “How far has the individual the right to be what is called ‘selfish’? How far has he the right to concentrate on his own solitary awareness of existence and make this alone his life-purpose?,”⁴ and the answer seems to be ‘all the way’. The purpose of life, writes Powys, “is to derive what happiness we can from the contemplation of what we choose to select out of what surrounds us”,⁵ and this adjustment of the individual to the not-self “goes on in loneliness and implies loneliness”.⁶

In *Wolf Solent*, however, solitude runs into trouble. As I propose to show, this has to do with an ambiguity of signification. There is duplicity in Wolf’s mythology: the “secret name for his . . . secret habit” (20) has a double signification in the text, although this is never explicitly stated nor made explicitly clear in the protagonist’s thinking. His mythology slides between two kinds of inner solitude: a dualistic state and a non-dualistic state. Furthermore, as we shall see below, states of non-dualistic solitude are not confined exclusively to the mythology; they seem also to involve what Wolf calls his “fetish-worship”—his normal, ‘non-mythology’ approach to life. This fluidity of signification may perhaps cause some confusion in a reader who assumes that “mythology” signifies a unified vision, and who studies the text to find out what precisely this vision *is*. The problem is indeed that this vision is *not* precise, that it slides between two poles.

At this point some terminological clarification may be needed. I use the word ‘dualism’ in its ordinary sense, denoting a metaphysical state characterized by a rigid either-or duality of mutual exclusion. The contrary term ‘non-dualism’ designates a simultaneity of identity and difference. These two terms will be used here to denote the two different thought-strata contained in Wolf’s mythology. But since the separation between ‘dualism’ on the one hand and ‘non-dualism’ on the other in Wolf’s mythology in itself entails an over-arching dualism, I will, in order to avoid terminological confusion, refer to this major dualism as ‘duplicity’: Wolf’s mythology contains the double thought-dimensions of dualism and non-dualism.⁷

In its dualistic aspect, then, Wolf’s mythology presents two sets of bifurcations: his inner solitude is set in opposition to the outside world, and this opposition is reproduced in a moral struggle between good and evil.⁸ As the antithesis of external reality, the solitude of Wolf’s mythology is “his escape from life, his escape into a world where machinery could not reach him, his escape into a deep, green, lovely world where thoughts unfolded themselves like large, beautiful leaves growing out of fathoms of blue-green water” (544). Wolf makes this “furtive, private, hidden existence” (32) into a closed and private compartment: “Outward things . . . were to him like faintly-limned images in a mirror, the *true reality* of which lay all the while in his mind—in these hushed, expanding leaves” (20-21; emphasis added).

While the expanding leaves of his mythology constitute Wolf’s “true reality”, external reality appears as a mere reflection of his life-illusion. “I refuse to believe,” he says to himself, “and I never will believe, until the day Nature kills me, that there’s such a thing as ‘reality’, apart from the mind that looks at it!” (349). This idealist attitude at times becomes sheer solipsism.

Like a black fly crawling upon walls and ceiling, his consciousness set off to explore its

own boundaries. 'I have no certainty,' he thought. 'I don't believe in any reality. I don't believe that this road and sky are real. I don't believe that the invisible worlds behind this road and sky are any more real than they are! Dreams within dreams! Everything *is* as I myself create it. I am ... alone ... alone!' (489)

Wolf's solipsistic attitude is not, however, wholly consistent, and this is due to the ambivalent use of the word "reality". On the one hand, there is the "true reality", dependent only on the individual mind. But on the other hand, Wolf cannot totally dismiss the existence of an external reality—a reality capable of producing activities beyond the control of his own individual mind—a reality just as "real" as his inner reality is "true": his mythology "had protected him from reality", from "*real reality* ... the reality his mother lived in" (546). Thus, even when acknowledging the existence of "real reality", Wolf thinks of it as antithetically opposed to the "true reality" of his mind, to the inner solitude of his mythology.

For Wolf it is crucial that this inner solitude stays pure and unviolated. But it is precisely the clear distinction between what is inner and mental and what is outer and material that threatens to violate Wolf's mythology. It is the dualism of his mythology that exposes it to the attacks from its enemy "real reality". Approaching Dorsetshire by train, Wolf fears for the integrity of his "secretive life-illusion" (32). He fears that it will be invaded by people belonging to "real reality".

The reactivity of Wolf's mythology as a response to "real reality" is reproduced in a moral dualism, where Wolf is the champion of the good:

The whole subterranean stream of Wolf's life-illusion had been obsessed, as long as he could remember, by the notion of himself as some kind of a protagonist in a cosmic struggle. . . . he always opposed, in his dialogues with himself, his own secret 'mythology' to some equally secret 'evil' in the world around him. (331)

As we shall see, it is when this "extreme dualism" (299) is put to the test by "real", external reality, it is when Wolf is forced to make decisions between good and evil, that his mythology dies.

Apart from this dualistic dimension there is also a non-dualistic, ecstatic dimension in Wolf's mythology. While the dualistic dimension in the mythology has been fairly generally recognized in criticism, its ecstatic potential has often been overlooked—more strangely so since it is precisely this potential that makes the mythology so precious to Wolf.⁹ The "moments of ecstasy he derived from his long week-end walks," when he gave himself up, "with a large forgetfulness of everything else, to his sensuous-mystical mythology" (406-07) are what supports Wolf in the daily routines of his life.

Beyond dualism, then, the opposition between inner solitude and external reality is negotiated by what *In Defence of Sensuality* identifies as the "solitary reciprocity" (D32) of the self contemplating the not-self. This expression refers to an "especial kind of happiness", a happiness that could be called up "by a motion of the will, a motion that needs no other presences to be there than just these two, the self and the not-self." (D32) This "stark relation of pure self to pure not-self ... is what real 'loneliness' means," says Powys. (D31) The difference between the "self" and the "not-self" is introduced in a situation of "isolating the individual mind", (D5) and would seem to somehow imply a difference between spirit and matter. The difference is described as the individual's "subjective inmost 'I am I', as opposed to the objective mass of objects around it, including the idea of its own body." (D5) Powys takes care to emphasize the difference between his own philosophy and that of Oriental mysticism, where the difference between the self and not-self is often completely obliterated. In the Hindoo system, he writes, "the *this* and the *that* become one. To any Nordic mind, however, it seems much wiser to keep the 'this' and the 'that' firmly and clearly apart." (D31) Nevertheless, the "solitary reciproc-

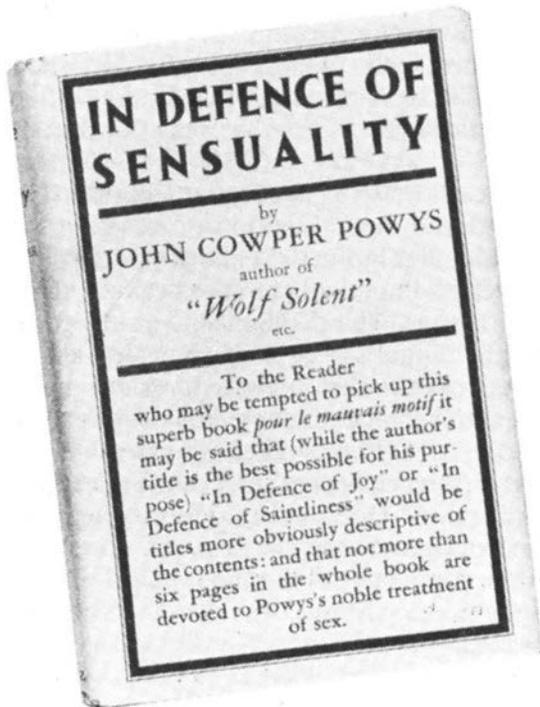
ity” of the self and the not-self seems to entail a by-passing of difference: “this contemplation . . . neither implies nor refuses to imply the existence of matter. It implies only a sceptical suspension of judgment over the whole problem of the difference between matter and spirit.” (D122) Associating the “secret reciprocity of contemplation” with erotic lust, (D122) Powys argues that this “lonely planetary lust . . . has naturally no cause to worry itself as to whether it is ‘spiritual’ or ‘material’. It has gone, so to speak, *behind matter and behind spirit*.” (D122) “In this mood,” writes Powys, the lonely self eventually “arrives at a very peculiar ecstasy of loneliness, for it draws into itself the loneliness of the vast ethereal gulfs between the heavenly bodies, and, as though it were itself *their* spirit, it hovers in mid-space, liberated from all the vexations and humiliations of its terrestrial life. This, then, is the background of the lonely ego’s ‘happiness’.” (D34)

Wolf’s thought slides between dualism and non-dualism. When overcome with

dualistic fear, he expects the assault on his mythology from “great stones of real reality . . . hard, brutal, material stones” (21). But, in the non-dualistic dimension of his mythology, the mind/matter division between “true” and “real” reality is sublated. In such a state of “mystical ecstasy” (120), Wolf experiences how all “the little outward things that met his gaze seemed to form so many material moulds” into which the “magnetic current” of his mythology sets itself to run (119).

Although this suspension of dualism is what makes Wolf’s mythology so special, it is not confined exclusively to the mythology. For instance, in a scene where we find Wolf sinking down into sleep, the difference between mind and matter becomes indifference: “Everything in the world was material now. Thoughts were material. Feelings were material. It was a world of material objects, of which his mind was one” (51). In such a state, his consciousness becomes “the consciousness of vegetable things and mineral things” (52), the state of consciousness that *In Defence of Sensuality* identifies as a “sub-human” element of feeling.¹⁰ It should be noted, though, that this dispersion of non-dualism outside the mythology stands as un-commented as does the duplicity of the mythology; and the absence of semantic ‘sorting-out’ will contribute to the reader’s unease as to the fate of the mythology.

A more crucial example, however, of the scattering of non-dualism is Wolf’s “fetish-worship”. This state of awareness is referred to by name on only one occasion, and is then explicitly said to be distinct from Wolf’s “mythology”. Fetish-worship is his “normal attitude to life” (54). It is the philosophy “that remained with him during all the normal hours when his ‘mythology’—his secret spiritual vice—lay quiescent” (54). In spite of this explicit definition, the text inscribes this state as not at all “normal”, but on the contrary as an almost transcendent state, a state of non-antithetical solitary reciprocity, of “sub-human” sympathy. “Fetish-worship”



Dustjacket, London: Gollancz, 1930.

was a worship of all the separate mysterious, living souls he approached: 'souls' of grass, of planetary bodies and of the bodies of men and women; the 'souls' even, of all manner of inanimate little things; the 'souls' of all those strange, chemical groupings that give a living identity to houses, towns, places, countryside. . . . The thrilling delight which which he was wont to contemplate his mother's face under certain conditions, the deep satisfaction he derived from the sight of Miss Gault and her cats, the pleasure with which he had surveyed the blue eyes and pointed beard of Darnley Otter—these things had nothing in them that was either possessive or responsible. And yet, he lost all thought of himself in watching these things, just as he used to do in watching the mossy roots of the chestnuts and sycamores in the avenues at Hampton Court! It seemed then that what he felt for both things and people, as he saw them under certain lights, was a kind of *exultant blending of vision and sympathy*. Their beauty held him in a magical enchantment; and *between his soul and the 'soul' as it were, of whatever it was he happened to be regarding, there seemed to be established a tremulous and subtle reciprocity*. (54-55; emphasis added)

The boundary between this state and Wolf's "mythology" is very fluid. Although said to be distinct phenomena, fetish-worship and mythology are not treated consistently so. By distinguishing between the two elements in Wolf's "mythology" we may perceive how this fluidity between "fetish-worship" and the mythology's non-dualistic aspect takes shape, while at the same time fetish-worship remains alien to the mythology's dualistic aspect. In fact, ecstatic moments of "mythology" often rise out of these quasi-vegetative states (107, 406-407, 414).

Wolf's mythology, then, is already both dualistic and non-dualistic. It is reactive solitude—the self as an escape from reality, the self as difference. But it is also affirmative solitude—the transporting bliss, the self as self-identity.

II.

Wolf is obviously not aware of the structural indecision of his mythology, and his failure

to distinguish between its dualistic and non-dualistic dimensions leads him to believe that his mythology is all gone when its dualistic dimension eventually collapses. Wolf is "not rigid in his definitions" (299), and this is the main crux (as well as a main enchantment) in the narrative, since, as C. A. Coates points out, everything that is stated in the novel "appears by way of reflection in Wolf's consciousness." Outside this consciousness there "is no author's voice with its knowledge of objective truth. There is no final authority."¹¹ Wolf's mythology is a mystical sensation, and as such it will tend to evade rigid linguistic confinement. But nevertheless, when he tries to analyse his life-sustaining vision, the protagonist must be confined to language. He complains that "[d]irectly one comes to *putting feelings into words* one is compelled to accept *hopeless contradictions* in the very depths of one's being!" (307; emphasis added).

The narratological subjectivity invites the reader to adopt a double reading strategy: on the one hand an abandoned immersion and floating-along in the stream of present-moment thoughts and feelings mediated by Wolf's consciousness, and on the other hand a detached, comprehensive and analytic stance from which it is possible to assemble a total image of Wolf's mental experience. Such a synthesis (as the insight that Wolf's mythology has a double signification) need not, then, ever be present *in its totality* in Wolf's mind—as indeed it never is.

Failure to recognize the duplicity in Wolf's mythology and his own unawareness of this double (and contradictory) signification makes it difficult to understand what happens in the novel. When the threat to Wolf's mythology becomes real, the vulnerable spot is its dualistic element: Wolf's perception of mythology as the antithesis of reality, and the reinscription of this opposition as the moral struggle between good and evil. However, what makes the mythology so precious to Wolf is above all its ecstatic potential. It is the loss of this potential that seems most devastating to Wolf. "His 'mythology' would never help him again.

That ecstasy, that escape from reality, was gone" (534), and the reader's immediate reaction is to share this concern for the lost ecstasy.¹² Nevertheless, the situation remains rather puzzling. *Why* should the breakdown of the dualistic thought-element in Wolf's mythology entail the loss of his capacity for going beyond ordinary experience? *Why* should he no longer be able to be transported by a scene of beautiful nature? What have these raptures to do with morals? No satisfying explanation is given in the novel to this supposed loss, and critics are generally rather evasive on this point. And, indeed, questions like these, however justified, would be rather futile if Wolf *were* in fact to lose this heightened power of perception. But as we shall see, apart from a momentary, passing period of psychic disruption, this loss never happens. It is the discrepancy between on the one hand the *assumed* implications of the 'death of the mythology', and on the other hand what actually happens at the end of the novel, that leaves the reader in a state of bewilderment.

What happens is that in the confrontation between mythology and reality, dualistic inner solitude dies, while non-dualistic inner solitude in fact survives. It is the moral element in Wolf's mythology that makes his life-illusion collapse. As long as the "essence of this invisible struggle" is allowed to remain "vague and obscure" (299), everything is alright. The "extreme dualism" of his mythology stays harmless as long as it can avoid confrontations with reality. Wolf's mythology "had no outlet in any sort of action. It was limited entirely to a secret sensation in his own mind" (20). But love changes everything. "Love was a possessive, feverish, exacting emotion. It demanded a response. It called for mutual activity. It entailed responsibility" (55). And the activity called for by love means engaging with "real reality".

Reality makes a twofold attack upon Wolf's mythology. It provides an occasion for him to spend the night with Christie Malakite, and it offers him a cheque for 200 pounds for a bawdy chronicle of local

scandal. Accepting either of these 'offers' would mean sacrificing his conscience and entail the killing of his mythology (426). Wolf would have "to outrage . . . the very core of his nature! That hidden struggle between some mysterious Good and some mysterious Evil, into which all his ecstasies had merged, how could it go on after this?" (421).

Reality calls for active decision-making. But decisions in real life are not always ideally between good and evil, but more often between bad and bad. The practical difficulties of moral choices—the impossibility of defining and delimiting "doing good" in a clear-cut way—are brilliantly rendered in one of Powys's little 'by-the-way' episodes, where the implicit assumption of Wolf's mythology that championing the good lies within the willpower of the individual is repudiated by the intervention of chance. Having 'rescued' a twig of greenery from the pavement to a patch of grass, by indecision Wolf is seized when he discovers one single leaf left behind:

'If I go back and pick up that leaf,' he said to himself, 'I shall be picking up leaves from these Blacksod pavements till next autumn, when there'll be so many that it will be impossible!' He began to suffer serious misery from the struggle in his mind.

'If I force myself to leave it there . . . with the idea that I *ought* to conquer such superstitions . . . won't it really be that I'm getting out of rescuing it from mere laziness and making this "ought" just my excuse to avoid trouble and bother? I'll pick it up now,' he concluded, 'and think out the principles of the affair later on!' Having made this decision, he hurried back, picked up the leaf, and flung it over the railings after its parent twig.

But he had forgotten the east wind. That unsympathetic power caught up the leaf, and, whirling it high over Wolf's head, flung it down upon the rear of a butcher's cart that was dashing by.

'*That* wouldn't have happened,' he thought, 'if I'd left it where it was.' (479-80)

Reality's demand for active decision-making means that Wolf will have to define

the opponents (good and evil) in this mental struggle, and this proves impossible. Sacrificing Christie would mean giving up his “only one single, simple, and world-deep craving—the craving to spend his days and his nights with that other mysterious and mortal consciousness, entitled Christie Malakite” (288). Giving up the cheque for 200 pounds would entail a break with Gerda, his wife. Unable to put the dualistic morality of his mythology into practice in real life, Wolf is left with indecision. “*Damn these indecisions!* This accursed difficulty of deciding, of deciding anything at all, seemed to have grown into an obsession with him. To *have to decide . . . that* was the worst misery on earth!” (484) The dualism of the opposition collapses, and because Wolf himself does not separate between the dualistic and the non-dualistic element in his “mythology”, he thinks of his whole mythology as lost. Becoming “rigid in his definitions” produces only rigor mortis. “That sense of a supernatural struggle going on in the abysses, with the Good and the Evil so sharply opposed, had vanished from his mind. . . . The supernatural itself had vanished from his mind. His ‘mythology’, whatever it had been, was dead” (631).¹³

The loss of his mythology brings suffering and depression, and Wolf experiences a crisis. “He had no longer any definite personality, no longer any banked-up integral self” (543), and at one point the thought of suicide enters his head. When he recovers from this crisis, Wolf experiences a strange kind of transport; however, since he is not intellectually aware of either the duplicity of his mythology or the transcendent potential of his “fetish-worship”, he thinks of the replacement of his mythology by this other transporting feeling as of soul and body changing places. “I know that my ‘I am I’ is no ‘hard small crystal’ inside me, but a cloud, a vapour, a mist, a smoke, hovering round my skull, hovering round my spine, my arms, my legs. *That’s what I am*—a ‘vegetable-animal’ wrapped in a mental cloud” (594).

The consciousness of his body implies a

move towards the recognition of the transcendental potential in his “fetish-worship”. Although possibly dualistic in *Wolf’s thought*, the reversal of body and soul is *in practice* a move towards non-dualism. The consciousness of body implies recognizing sensuality as an opening *towards* reality. It means embracing the not-self instead of locking it out. It does *not* imply Wolf’s giving up his subjective solitude; it means substituting the “solitary reciprocity” between the self and the not-self for the solitary self fortifying itself *against* the not-self. During one of his walks, Wolf is struck by the insight that between “his body . . . and the increasing loveliness of that perfect day, there began to establish itself a strange chemical fusion” (618), and this insight is then taken even further. Wolf becomes aware that the generative force here is,

more than his body! Behind the pulse-beat of his body stirred the unutterable . . . stirred something that was connected with the strange blueness he had seen long ago over the Lunt meadows and more recently at the window of Pond Cottage. (622)

This is the realisation that life transcends also his newly found bodily awareness. Life cannot be reduced to either matter or mind, it is *more* than “real” and “true” reality. This is parallel to what Wolf’s dead father, in a singular “conversation” at the graveside, expresses when he rejects Wolf’s solipsistic denial of reality:

life is beyond your mirrors and your waters. It’s at the bottom of your pond; it’s in the body of your sun; it’s in the dust of your star spaces; it’s in the eyes of weasels and the noses of rats and the pricks of nettles and the tongues of vipers and the spawn of frogs and the slime of snails. (325)

Wolf’s mythology dies, but his capacity for going beyond dualism remains—although it no longer has a name. The mythology dies, but the supernatural is resituated in a scene of euphoria amid a golden field of butter-

cups, where the opposition between the earthly and the divine becomes in-different:

as he turned eastward, and the yellowness of the buttercups changed from Byzantine gold to Cimmerian gold, he visualized the whole *earthly solidity* of this fragment of the West country, this segment of astronomical *clay*, stretching from Glastonbury to Melbury Bub and from Ramsgard to Blacksod, as if it were itself one of the living personalities of his life. '*It is a god!*' he cried in his heart. (632; emphasis added)

The consciously intellectual insight that Wolf finally arrives at is not a result of new experiences as much as of a repositioning of his thought: he is able to acknowledge intellectually the implications of earlier experiences. A "change had taken place within him, a rearrangement, a readjustment of his ultimate vision, from which he could never again altogether recede" (630).

Although he never thinks of the transcendent potential of his fetish-worship or the two dimensions in his mythology in these explicit terms, non-dualism becomes a significant ontological intuition in Wolf. He acknowledges the insufficiency of his moral dualism, realizing that "to the very core of life, things were more involved, more complicated than that" (631). He stops thinking of his self as set in an antithetical opposition to reality and of his inner solitude as a fenced-off compartment, but he does *not* become logically analytical. Wolf's momentary noetic awareness never quite equals what is inscribed by the totality of the text, but his insight expands with the progression of the novel.

III.

Wolf's rearrangement of his vision also entails a new attitude to existential solitude. While caught in dualistic thinking, Wolf not only gives up his whole mythology as lost when its dualistic element collapses; he also makes solitude antithetic. When his mythology begins to unsettle, solitude slides into an either-or situation. From something to be

enjoyed, it becomes something to be endured: "He felt *absolutely alone*—alone in an emptiness that was different from empty space. He did not pity himself. He did not hate himself. He just *endured* himself and waited" (368; emphasis added).

But Wolf's insight that things are more complex and involved than duality, means accepting a non-dualistic attitude to solitude. This entails accepting his mother's attitude to reality. Wolf's mother is able to accept life with what at times seems stoicism, at times Nietzschean life-affirmation. She is able to affirm the existential solitude which has become a suffering to Wolf. She is able to affirm the ethical dilemma without remorse.

'... Can't you accept once for all that we *have to be bad* sometimes... just as we all *have to be good* sometimes? Where you make your great mistake, Wolf... is in not *recognizing the loneliness of everyone*. We *have* to do outrageous things sometimes, just because we are lonely! ... Every movement we make must be bad or good,' she said: 'and we've *got* to make movements! (476)

That the "affirmation without reservation even of suffering, even of guilt, even of all that is strange and questionable in existence" is the highest insight in life,¹⁴ is something that Wolf glimpses occasionally in the course of the narrative: "Unselfish or selfish... If I'm selfish in being happy this morning, if I'm heartless in enjoying this heavenly east wind, I can't help it. If no one were allowed to be thrilled by anything, as long as someone is made wretched by something, the life of the whole planet would perish!" (473). The most unreserved "Yes to life" is an insight that is brought to Wolf by the visual memory of a face which has come to symbolize human suffering and misery to him (459): "The face upon the Waterloo steps *gave* you your happiness. It was the only gift it could give. Between your happiness and that face there was an umbilical cord. All suffering was a martyr's suffering, all happiness was a martyr's happiness, when once you got a glimpse of that cord!" (152-3).

A non-dualistic attitude to solitude thus means enduring *and* affirming the existential solitude that every individual is subject to—the solitude of Wolf's mother. But it also means accepting and enjoying inner solitude—solitude as escape from reality but not as hermetically closed compartment. It means accepting the solitude of Wolf's father, solitude as transcendental potential.

In Wolf's rearrangement of his vision, the transcendent capacity is privileged. In a revelational scene behind his neighbour's pigsty, he experiences this sense of going beyond reality, "outside the whole astronomical spectacle". The

smell of pigs' urine, mingled . . . with the smell of the flowering hedge, gave him a thrill of delicious sadness, and all Dorset seemed gathered up into it! Little wayside cottages, fallen trees, stubblefields, well-heads, duck-ponds, herds of cattle visioned through the frames of shed doors—all these things flooded his mind now with a strange sense of occult possession. They were only casual groupings of chance-offered objects; but as they poured pell-mell into his memory, across the reek and the jostling of those uplifted snouts, he felt that something permanent and abiding out of such accidents would give him strength . . . to face the days and days and days—without his 'mythology' . . . he discovered the fact that beyond all refutation an actual portion of his mind was *outside the whole astronomical spectacle!* (626)

Behind the pigsty Wolf finds the crack in reality's wall that he groped for at the bottom of his crisis (561), the opening to the life "beyond", indicated by his dead father (325).

The place is significant because it is so explicitly non-poetical and trivial. Ecstatic potential is found not only in the sublime. By yielding to the "sub-human" element

within him, Wolf bypasses the dualism of his mythology and establishes a non-dualistic "fetish" alliance with reality. The ostensible triviality of the scene emphasizes the need to accept *all* of life—good and evil, suffering as well as happiness—before such a transgression can happen. The crack in the wall is,

. . . the Life Eye, looking out on what hurts it, that he now knew he had caught glimpses of, all the days of his existence, in a thousand shapes and forms. From air, earth, water had he intercepted the appeal of that little round living hole . . . that hole that went through the wall . . . straight into something else. Into *what* else? No one knew or would ever know. But into something else. (368)

Behind the pigsty, at the "inmost retreat" of reality (633), Wolf is taken behind "the nature of human beings", "behind" the Universe" (633). His deeply felt existential loneliness and the solitary communion between his inner self and reality merge. Life is affirmed in the simple and unremarkable things that nourish Wolf's fetish-worship. As Wolf watches the slow progress of "a large grey snail with its horns extended", his "mind rushed off to thousands and thousands of quiet spots, behind outhouses, behind stick-houses, behind old haystacks, behind old barns and sheds, where such grey snails lived and died in peace, covering docks, nettles, and silver-weed with their patient slime" (633). On the last page of the novel, Wolf is able to recognize "real reality" as a complication and addition to the "true reality" of his solitude. "Alone! That was what he had learnt from the hard woman who had given him birth. That every soul was alone. Alone with that secret bestower of torture and pleasure, the horned snail behind the pigsty!" (634)

NOTES

¹John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1929; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, 1984. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

²The positive status of solitude in *Wolf Solent* deserves to be emphasized, since there is a tendency in our society to regard solitude with suspicion—as a lack or a defect. This disapproving attitude may be found also in Powys criticism, where solitude sometimes may acquire very negative connotations. Thus Morine Krissdottir in *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1980 refers to Wolf as “caught in a terrible solitude [he defines] as independence” (pp. 72-73). John A. Brebner sees the solitude of Wolf's mythology only as “arrogant isolation”, in *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels*, London: Macdonald 1973, p. 78. Glen Cavaliero, however, in *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, recognizes that since Powys “stresses man's loneliness” (p. 54), *Wolf Solent* “is a critique as well as a defence of the individual life” (pp. 44-45), and Belinda Humfrey in her introduction to *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972, sees as the mental climax of the novel—although she finds it inadequate—“Wolf's acceptance of life through full realisation of his solitude, splendid and in accord with Powys's philosophy” (p. 34).

³John Cowper Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1930. Any page references to this work (D) in my text are to this edition.

⁴Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality*, Foreword (not paginated).

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 227-28.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.

⁷The logical split between dualism on the one hand and non-dualism on the other is, in a sense, absurd. It would seem that we could never get away from duality, since it is reintroduced by the very move that sets out to reject it. Duality insinuates itself in and through the *separation* of dualism from non-dualism, that is, in the split between duality on the one hand, and the negotiation of duality and its transgression on the other. In this respect, duality is what Gilles Deleuze would call a paradox: it is “a set which is included in itself as a member; the member dividing the set which it presupposes” (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, tr. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 69). But simultaneously, non-dualism as the Other in this potentially endless distribution of dual

ramifications disputes duality's claim to sovereignty. By simultaneously recognizing the necessity of duality, *and* going beyond it, non-dualism absorbs duality. Thus, in this paradoxical split, duality is at the same time infinitely serialized and incapacitated. It is granted eternal life in the same move that kills it. “We cannot get rid of paradoxes,” says Deleuze, because paradoxes “inhere in language” (74). “The power of the paradox” lies in its showing us that sense “follows two directions at the same time . . . that one cannot separate two directions, that a unique sense cannot be established” (77).

⁸Most critics dealing with Wolf's mythology identify some kind of dualism connected with it. For instance, C. A. Coates in *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 58, finds a “disparity” between what she calls Wolf's “pluralist pyrrhonism”, by which she means “his insistence that ‘nothing is real except thoughts in conscious minds’” (*Wolf Solent* 490), and “his conviction ‘that he was taking part in some occult cosmic struggle’” (*Wolf Solent* 20). Morine Krissdottir, reading *Wolf Solent* as myth, reduces Wolf's mythology to its dualistic dimension—taking into account the inner isolation of the protagonist as well as the moral struggle. From this limited point of view she gives, however, an illuminating explanation of the collapse of this part of the mythology (pp. 64-79).

⁹See note 8. However, in “John Cowper Powys and Ontotheology”, *The Powys Review* 21 (1987-88), p. 39, H. W. Fawcner emphasizes the ecstatic dimension of the mythology: ecstasy is “the motor” of Wolf's mythology, the mythology is “ecstatic freedom”. Furthermore, ecstasy implies non-dualism. It is “non-dialectical”, a term which is the equivalent of the term “non-dualistic” as used in my paper.

¹⁰Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 7-8, 94.

¹¹Coates, p. 48.

¹²For instance, Fawcner writes that since the mythology “very clearly is the scenario of ecstasy itself . . . the attacks on the ‘mythology’ are in fact attacks on ecstasy” (“John Cowper Powys and Ontotheology,” p. 40).

¹³Morine Krissdottir, within a different interpretive narrative, recognizes (p. 75) that Wolf's mythology does not die from any external cause but because the logic of his dualism is not viable when confronted by reality.

¹⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, 1988, p. 80.

H. W. Fawkner

Atlanticism: John Cowper Powys and Mineralogy

“Let us imagine the Object in a passionate form. For the subject does not have the monopoly of passion.”

Jean Baudrillard,
(*The Ecstasy of Communication*)

I am going to attempt to explain, today, what a mineral is, and why it is one of the three or four most important things in the imaginative world of John Cowper Powys. I am using the word ‘mineral’ in a philosophic sense; and the same goes for the word ‘crystal’. My immediate point of philosophic reference is the French theorist Jean Baudrillard. I am extending his notion of the philosophical mineral so that ‘mineral’ in my exposition refers to any *thing* that escapes the subject-object ideology of the European intellectual.

What I want to know, and what Powys always wants to know, is what a thing *is* when it no longer is an object. The study of the *is-ness* of objects and subjects (of Being) is called ontology. The study of the *is-ness* of minerals, however, is not ontology. It is what I call mineralogy. Mineralogy is the science of minerals. The study of Being takes place in the West. My study, and indeed Powys’s, does not take place in the West; it takes place, philosophically speaking, to the west of the West. The West is a land of objects and subjects; the land to the west of the West is a land of minerals.

But why I am referring to something west of the West? Why not east of the West? Because the questioning and rejection of the West produced by advanced Western thinking, such as Powys’s, does not take us back to a pre-Western, quasi-oriental thoughtfulness. Although there are elements of the oriental way of thinking in Powys, he is not

generally speaking oriented toward the East. In the East, traditionally, what is finite is evil and lacks a relation to the good. Powys’s philosophical and literary achievement is a complete denial of this oriental contempt for the finite.

Jean Baudrillard situates the spiritual innovations of our times to the west of Europe, in America; but the America he celebrates is not the official culture of America, but something west of that: something he finds in the inorganic, mineralogical atmosphere of the desert-cultures of the far-far-West. My use of the word ‘west’ then, is not strictly geographical, but metaphysical: if I say that Powys experienced Wales as something to the west of England, I do not mean that to be taken as a mere physical or territorial assertion; if I say that Powys’s Wessex is west of Wessex, I in the same way refer to a process of ontological intensification rather than to a shift of district. Powys’s world is from this transcendental viewpoint situated to the *west* of Hardy’s world.

Powys, we must also remember, needed to travel westwards, in fact to America, to at all be able to write about Wessex and England. This escape of his from this island is not coincidental: he had to be west of the West to be in the West; and he had to re-situate that excessively western predicament in the very west that it transgressed: he did not, curiously enough, fictionalize an America while in America, nor fictionalize his best England while in England; instead he wrote his best English fictions in America; he looked back at the West he had left, perceiving the West from a position west of the West. His best works are works

*A lecture given at the Powys Conference, August 1990.

conceived west of the West, but in relation to the West itself. In the *Autobiography*, incidentally, you will notice that John Cowper's travels to the south, centre, and east of Europe fail to arouse any enthusiasm that we could call important or metaphysically crucial.

A transcendental nomadism that situates its restlessness to the west of the West is what I call Atlanticism. In this paper, that Atlanticism is the coming-together of the superoccidental work of John Cowper Powys, carried out in the first half of this century, and the superoccidental work of Jean Baudrillard, carried out in the second half of this century.

*

Mineral and crystal are mineralogical equivalents. In *Wolf Solent* the word "crystal" designates, mineralogically, a person, a soul, a name, an idea, a fascination, and a solid object. A mineral has that sort of range, understood transcendently. In *A Philosophy of Solitude* John Cowper writes that the lonely self is a "clear-cut, hard resistant nucleus", an "inmost", "invulnerable crystal", a "hard, lonely pebble". This "crystal of central resistance", he says, is "indissoluble".¹ Crystal, here, signifies a state. This state is neither Eastern nor Western. It is not, in other words, subjectivity. This state does not belong to the Ego of the West or to the meditation of the East.

In the state of 'crystal' man no longer perceives objects, but things. These things are not dead. In relation to a subject, a thing is dead. In relation to a subject a thing *has* to be dead. In relation to a subject a thing has to be an object. But Powys's things do not have to have a subject. They do not have to be objects. In his world, things do not belong to subjects at all, because the Powys world has replaced the subject with the ghost, or with what I have called the Self. To the west of the West, the relationship of ghosts to minerals replaces the relationship, in the west, of subjects to objects, as well as the relationship, in the East, of subjects to

Holy Allness. That is why stones are important to John Cowper, and that is why the right of western science to torture animals for the sake of 'truth', 'knowledge', 'research', and 'progress' is one of the rights that he combatted from the innermost guts of his metaphysical fury.

*

The mineral turns up as metaphysical idea or philosophical stone in the various novels. The Powys hero is typically shown clutching a mineral fetish: a large pebble kept in his pocket or a crystal stored in his soul. This mineral—as idea or stone—has power, almost more power than the hero. In *Wolf Solent*, the protagonist consistently thinks of his soul as a hard little crystal. The heroine's name is Christie Malakite, a name in which Christianity crosses mineralogy—a name in which the crystal is the Christian mineral but also the mineralization of the Christian.

In *A Glastonbury Romance*, the mineralogical forces in the mines of Wookey Hole are the geological equivalents of the mineralogical activities going on in the coastal quarry depicted in *Weymouth Sands*. Titles such as *Wood and Stone*, *The Brazen Head*, and *Weymouth Sands* suggest the importance of the mineral in Powys. Thus, on one level, a quite literal one, the mineralogical in Powys is what it is lexically: stone, salt, sand, water, and other broadly inorganic substances.

The philosophy of John Cowper Powys is a philosophy of the mineral. It is superior to the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, Derrida, and other Western thinkers insofar as it decomposes the subject-object mythology of the West by attacking the object rather than the subject. Powys realizes that attacking the object is the shrewdest way of transforming the subject.

Marx too wanted to say that something was wrong with the Western object; but his purpose was to *save* the subject, to perfect Western man. To make man sacred. But man is not sacred. Only the mineral is sacred.



Lodmoor: a painting by Gertrude Powys.

What Powys did in the 1930s, and what French philosophy has done quite recently through the works of Jean Baudrillard, is to make a 180 degree turn and *write philosophy from the viewpoint of the thing*. I believe that John Cowper Powys did just that. That is why he in a subtle sense is absolutely right when he says, as he often does, that his literary texts essentially are propaganda for his own philosophy. But since his philosophy is a philosophy of the mineral rather than the subject, his “propaganda” could never really have coped without the medium of fiction: the concreteness of the novel provides Powys with the focus on things and solid points that ordinary, abstract philosophy never can achieve.

Now if you do what Powys did, alter the object by making *it* the god of the world, then you automatically also alter the subject. This is why Powys’s world is not really inhabited by men and women in the way that nearly all other novels are inhabited; and this is also why criticism so far has been unable to quite cope with Powys. His men and women are not subjects. They are men and women; they have inner experiences; but they are not Western subjects facing Western objects. They live in the land of the mineral.

Baudrillard’s important books about the power of the non-Western object are appearing in English translations at this very moment.² He discusses a seduction that is no longer Western, a passion that is cool and that moves mineralogically towards us from a margin of the world untouched by the fevers and egocentricities of desire. But how, extending Baudrillard’s pioneering work, should we define the mineral?

The mineral does not have to be mineralogical in the literal sense. It can be a biological thing, a human being, an idea, a metaphysical abstraction, a passing daydream, a furtive intuition. A mineral can be the particular shade of a particular colour, or the thought of the perception of a sudden change in the shade of a particular colour.

Powys’s huge and tortuous walking-stick, the one used as ceremonial mace at American Powys conferences, is a typical example of a mineral. It is not a possession, and it is not a fetish. It is not a possession, because the owner of the stick does not possess it; on the contrary, the stick possesses the owner. This act of becoming possessed by things, which is the opposite of commercial and social possession, is what the mineral makes possible. It is not man’s obsession with things, but the passion that the thing itself

seems to produce as man falls under the spell of its fascination. Powys's novels are systems of such spells: one fascination leading to the next, one mineral pointing to the possibility of another. That is why Powys's fiction is nomadic but not picaresque: it is the things themselves, the minerals, that determine the itinerary of reader and writer—not really the 'adventures' of a subject.

In *Weymouth Sands*, the division between wet and dry sand is a mineral. For Powys it is the abstract division that is solid—that, precisely, is not abstract, that is mineralogical. The division between wet sand and dry sand is the foundationally passionate clue of the entire novel. In no subject is there as much passion as there is for Powys and for Magnus Muir in the abstract, quasi-philosophic division separating the wet sand from the dry sand.

Weymouth Sands is from this viewpoint a novel without foundation. It does not have what most critics are looking for: a sovereign theme, a crucial sense of temporal advance and development, a philosophically consistent meaning, an ideology. I have noticed that certain critics draw the premature conclusion that this means that the Powys novel is pluralistic and polyphonic. But the Powys novel is something far more important, complex, original, and innovative than polyphony, relativism or literary pluralism. Powys may be using *aspects* of the polyphonic novel for his own purposes, but these aspects do not identify the ultimate nature of Powys's work.

It is precisely the mineral that makes Powys's seemingly pluralistic and polyphonic world into something much more solid than pluralism and into something much more absolute than polyphony. For the mineral, the smallest and hardest form of the absolute, the tiniest form the absolute can take: this mineral falls like a bullet through the layers of the voices and styles of the book. It sets up its own empire, and nothing escapes the seductiveness of its power.

Ontology (the science of Being) stands to mineralogy (the science of the mineral) as God stands to the ghost of God. That is not a theological statement, but a mineralogical one. This ghost of God is in *A Glastonbury Romance* the Holy Grail—a crystal, a crystalline goblet seen in the sky. This goblet, the Grail, is not an object. On the contrary, it is a mineral. It is not an objective entity, nor a subjective impression. It takes place in the interval—utterly spatial—between the void left by the subject and the void left by the object.

If you listen carefully to the lines that I am soon going to read from *A Glastonbury Romance*, you will observe that Powys identifies the revelation of the crystalline mineral, but that he also deliberately swings it away from ontology (suggested by the word "Jesus") toward mineralogy (suggested by the words "crystal", "stone", and "water"). Water in the Grail vision, now, is not any water, but mineral water; and in this water swims the Christ-fish. But the Christ-fish belongs more to the Grail than to the Christian God, more to the mineral substances—crystal, water, and air—than to theological substances. That is why Powys tells us that the Grail is not a repetition of something previously revealed, but on the contrary "something new to human experience".³ Sam Dekker is sitting on a sack of coal on a barge in a Glastonbury canal, and this is now exactly what happens to him:

... each detail of what he saw he saw with a clearness that branded it forever upon his brain. He saw a globular chalice that had two circular handles. The substance it was made of was clearer than crystal; and within it there was dark water streaked with blood, and within the water was a shining fish ...

He stared out at the vague, misty, translucent landscape, shot with fluctuating sunstreaks and sun-patches. His thoughts kept contradicting each other. "Christ is in the Stones and in the Water; it is Jesus who is dead and buried. There's something in Nature that has turned against Nature and is escaping from Nature. There's a Christ-in matter that is nearer the Grail than the Christ of the Church. (GR 982; 986-7)

The notion of Christ is shifted from ontology to mineralogy. Christ “is in the Stones”, “in matter”. There is a warping of being (“Nature”) and of ontology: Nature has “turned against Nature”. This is what Baudrillard calls “the revenge of the crystal”. It is the transformation of transcendental subject into transcendental mineral. This is what the Grail is: a mineral, a deconstruction of the object. The landscape no longer belongs to being, but on the contrary to the mineralization of being: to the crystal, to the Grail.

*

The mineral has got to do with what is inorganic. Grail, crystal, sand, pebble, and stone suggest inorganicity. But because Powys’s work situates itself Atlantically to the west of the West, because his ontology is always a mineralogy, and because his westernization of the West involves a refutation

of the classical oppositions of subject and object, abstract and concrete, and so forth, the inorganic is now no longer simply the opposite of the organic. Let us understand this situation by looking for a moment at what Powys himself writes about inorganicity. I quote from a letter posted to Nicholas Ross on 7 June 1950:

But do you want me . . . to tell you what is my favorite colour now for the last two years, for it used to be Purple but I suddenly changed. It is now a peculiar mixture of yellow and green that I find on all the rocks and stones and old walls about here. Damn! How CAN I describe it? It’s more yellow than green. It’s a mineral yellow, a hard opaque yellow-green, very MECHANICAL: a verdigris-gamboge sort of hard factory, artificial un-organic, ungrassy, unleafy HARD metallic YELLOW-GREEN.⁴

This inorganic yellow-green is, like purple, a mixing of primary colours, but the result this time is not an organic synthesis but an inorganic synthesis. I repeat: *inor-*



Glastonbury landscape: photograph by Ann Cook

ganic synthesis. There is synthesis, because there is a mineralogical negotiation of two mineral colours: yellow and green; but since both of these colours are inorganic, inorganic yellow and inorganic green, the synthesis itself is inorganic.

We have not gone from synthesis (purple) to inorganicity and non-synthesis (yellow-green), but from a synthesis that is organic to a synthesis that is not organic. Inorganic does not simply mean non-organic in Powys. That is why I will again have to insist, as I have done elsewhere on a former occasion, that *A Glastonbury Romance* is solid, synthetic, and Hegelian. It is a *gestalt*. It can be divided in an endless number of ways, but all the divisions belong to the *gestalt* itself, to a mineralogical wholeness. The novel is a mineral, like the Grail: an inorganic synthesis whose condition of visibility is its totality. This totality is absolute, but not an absolute coherence. The totality is inorganic rather than philosophic, the absolute is a crystal rather than a divinity or godhead. But when John Cowper had finished *A Glastonbury Romance*, he did not feel that he had finished a relativistically plural set of vocal registers, some loose polyphony; he felt that he had finished a book.

If I am allowed to have my own view on Powys, then, I will have to argue that he in the final analysis is more pantheistic than polytheistic. The weakening of the polytheistic and polyphonic in Powys is engineered by the fact that all the gods and voices flow through the visionary mind of a single temperament—John Cowper's own imagination. In addition, and more importantly, pantheism (rather than polytheism) is promoted by John Cowper's constant readiness to mineralize *anything* and *everything*. It is difficult to think of any entity or figure that Powys at short notice could not suddenly expose to magic—a magic that all of us learn to quickly recognize as the unique, typical, idiosyncratic, and mineralogical magic of a peculiarly original and self-assertive genius. Literary power is here magic, magic is mineralogical magic, and mineralogical magic exerts *its* Cowperist force at the expense of

other, conventionalized forces. The gods or subordinate powers needed for the formation of a polyphony are in Powys not gods and powers but minerals. They are, in other words, no more and no less powerful than huge things like air and water, or small things like pebbles and insects.

Because *all* things in the Powys world are treated equally—because a dark green patch in a light green piece of cloth is just as cosmically, fictionally, and philosophically important as any voice, character, ideology, being, god, religion, or supernatural force—that world of his is not separated into ontological classes, vocal dimensions, or metaphysical categories. Powys liked to save snails from pedestrians and motor-cars because his pantheistic outlook refused to marginalize anything in the world as unimportant or worthless. Because there is nothing in *A Glastonbury Romance* that escapes the philosophy of the mineral—that escapes, in theological terms, pantheism—there is nothing in that novel that escapes from its visionary totality. This totality is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic; neither univocal nor polyvocal; neither centred nor decentred. On the contrary, it is mineralogical.

Powys's favourite colour, then, was an inorganic, greenish yellow—a yellow, let us remember, that he saw on the mineralogical surfaces of walls, stones, and rocks. But what was his favourite word? In a further letter to Nicholas Ross dated 27 March 1957, he lists what he considers to be “the six most exciting of all words”: “Key, silver, grass, away, kite and wave”.⁵ Philosophically speaking, all these words are minerals. Most of the words are also elemental, suggesting earth, air and water. In the next sentence Powys indeed proceeds to talk about the elements: “I hesitate a little between grass and earth. What a beautiful sound EARTH is and so is AIR.”

The abstract word “away” is mineralogical (in the philosophic sense) because it promotes inorganicity, a move *away* from Being and organic belonging in the middle. The word “away” takes us away from

centred self-sufficiency towards the inorganic, exoteric world where things are free to *not* belong. The word “away” in this way calls attention to the difference I have mapped on an earlier occasion between Leibniz’s monad and Powys’s nomad.⁶

*

The fact that the mineral is the protagonist in all Powys’s fiction makes him almost inaccessible to the appreciative apparatus of Western, classical criticism. Powys is simply outside the circle of reference in which things become real or important for the intellectual West. That is why Powys is understood deeply by critics who understand things become real or important for the intellectual West. That is why Powys is understood deeply by critics who understand things not normally understood in criticism, philosophy, and life. G. Wilson Knight’s long-standing admiration of Powys is from this viewpoint of crucial importance in the history of criticism. But Wilson Knight did not only understand things in Powys not normally understood; he also understood things in Shakespeare not normally understood.

other words, he gradually abandoned the Western, tragic (or indeed comic) sense of reality in order to dramatize his late works mineralogically. Thus, in *The Winter’s Tale*, action climaxes in the miracle that brings a woman of stone to life. But this stony woman, so far, has always been understood as woman, not as stone. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone that Shakespeare might be more interested in Hermione’s stoniness than in Hermione. Shakespeare’s late plays, unlike most Western art and drama, are not about life, or the meaning of life, but about the sheer simple miracle of at all being alive. It is seeing this very difference—that between life and being alive—that is the touchstone of the kind of mature maturity that I am referring to.

Powys shares with the final Shakespeare a sort of apparent carelessness in formal and

structural matters: the writer seems slack, sometimes almost unconcentrated. But this apparent loosening of formal concentration is a consequence of the fact that the writer, in mature maturity, is learning to do away with subjectivity—with the peculiar tight hold on the self that characterizes the world-attitude of the Western male. What Powys, a writer who matured peculiarly late, has to do with the final Shakespeare is this common apperception of an importance in the world that is *unrelated* to the importance of the subject.

Before I leave Shakespeare, let me be concrete. Look, for instance at *King Lear*, perhaps the greatest tragedy we have. The play, as you know, is about fathers and daughters, and about love. A father knows his daughter as subjectivity, as an exemplum of the phenomenon ‘man’. But when the daughter grows up and becomes attractive to a man other than the father, a difference emerges between what the daughter is to the father and what the daughter is to the man who is other than father. This difference is not simply the fact that the father can have no sexual knowledge of the daughter, but that the man other than the father does not define the daughter as fully as the father does—in short, does not define her as subjectivity. The man other than the father does not define the loved woman as subjectivity because he is incapable of such definition: unlike the father, he lacks full knowledge of what the loved woman is and has been since she was born. But the strange thing is that all the participants intuitively recognize that this superior knowledge of the daughter as subject is a disadvantage. And the ‘limited’, inorganic knowledge of the daughter that the lover has is an advantage. Put crudely: the lover has the power to recognize the young lady as mineral. And by that I do not mean sex-object or platonic ideal: I mean a living thing outside the domains of the negotiations of objects and subjects.

All of Shakespeare’s late plays seem to be about this paradox: the father’s unpleasant, indeed traumatic, discovery, that the world does not obey the law of the privilege of the

subject; that knowing someone as subject is not the intensest way of knowing someone.

Powys, like Shakespeare, eventually discovered the superiority of the mineral over the subject, of the world over man, of being alive over life, of unimportance over importance, of miracle over language. What Powys's novels show us is what Shakespeare finally shows Lear: what the world looks like *as world*; what living means if you stop imposing subjectivity on it . . . and on yourself. What Lear finally sees when he sees flowers, insects, daughter, grass, and his own naked body is the world exactly as Powys saw it—what the world looks like if you are aware of the miracle of being alive *and nothing else*.

Unfortunately, much orthodox criticism fails to grasp this peculiarly elusive transcendentalism in Shakespeare and Powys. One sentimentalizes *Lear*, claiming that Lear in Christian fashion has to learn to lose this 'pride' and his 'egocentricity'. That is true, up to a point; but Shakespeare takes Lear (and indeed the spectator) into exorbitant regions of loss and negativity that exceed anything normally required to convince man of his error. What Lear in fact is made to lose is not his pride but his subjectivity. What the play forces him to do is to cease altogether to be a subject. Lear's mind has to become mineralogical. It is not enough, Shakespeare tells us in *Lear*, to fall. Instead subjectivity must lose all its attributes, including language. There is no such ready thing as salvation in *King Lear*. Fall and repentance achieve very little for the subject. That—to the horror of so many subjectivists—is why Cordelia must die. *King Lear* moves relentlessly towards an absolutely inorganic point of mineralogical purity where the annihilation of the subjectivity of Lear and the annihilation of the subjectivity of Cordelia are a single moment of transcendental solidity. Before that, Lear has to crawl in mud, exist on the level where stone and earth exist; he has to leave all the characteristics of subjectivity, including reason, language, mind, being and logic.

In this way Lear moves from subjective

love (the love that a subject is capable of) to mineralogical love (love of the world itself). When Cordelia re-appears to him at the end, she is no longer simply a daughter, but one of the miraculous objects of the world. This object—thing, mineral, daughter, woman—no longer belongs to Lear but to the world itself. Fathers think they are profoundly loving when they make of their child an *object of love*. What Lear has to learn, however, is that an appreciation for Cordelia that is absolutely pure cannot manifest itself as a relation between a subject and an object, a father and his objectified subjectivity. Cordelia's inaugural refusal to become part of the subjectivist scenario that introduces the tragic action is itself the origin of this shift. Like the Fool, she refuses to participate in the action of language as commerce between subjects and objects—or indeed subjects and subjects.

*

What I am saying here is not exclusionary or deliberately elitist; I am not saying that you have to be an expert on philosophical minerals to be able to appreciate Powys. What I am saying, instead, is that the West as an intellectual institution has for thousands of years created the illusion that subjectivity of a Western kind is all-important, the very essence of reality, as it were. Powys held the exactly opposite view. He did not think that the farmers and clerks and bus-drivers of England and America uniformly belonged to the subjectivism of the West. He believed that millions of people failed to recognize themselves in the narrowly subjectivist intellectuality of Western institutions. But in Powys this apperception does not remain, as in Wordsworth, on the level of intuition, an overemotional nostalgia for a soulful communion with the organic origin of man as a being in harmony with nature. Instead Powys made an extremely shrewd philosophic analysis of the conditions of the materialization of Western reality—and then he wrote philosophic manuals suggesting a

cure and novels introducing a new vision of human possibility.

Whether the category of people overlooked by the culture of the West has diminished or expanded through the further advances of the information-society and the diffusion of subjectivism in television, I do not know. What I do know is that some form of counter-subjectivity is going on everywhere, and that Powys identified this counter-subjectivity by demonstrating the superiority of the mineral over the object.

*

Powys's philosophy, as we know from the title of one of his works, is a philosophy of solitude. Yet Powys's solitude is not ordinary philosophical solitude, the realm in which subjectivity becomes one with its own truths. Powys's solitude is not based on thought's communion with thinking, but instead on thought's communion with the mineral. Powys's solitude is mineralogical solitude.

Ordinary transcendental solitude gives birth to the philosophy of the Ego. The more the male philosopher of the West thinks, the more he becomes sure of man's greatness. This greatness of philosophic man is established in the West by man's ability to be hostile to objects, to define them as his negations and to define truth as some form of overcoming of the object. Philosophy, theology, and science become increasingly anthropocentric. Most of the radical catastrophes threatening man at present may be understood as the long-term consequences of this philosophical man-centring idealized by the philosophic West. Western man looks upon the world as something outside him, calls it 'the environment', and says he is going to save it. For Western man, the world is a philosophic object.

Unlike pre-philosophic man, Western man views objects as oppositions, as negations of the subject. Western man then negates this negation (manipulates the object). Laboratories are filled with animals that are systematically tortured for the

benefit of the subject. Rainforests are turned into wasteland—again for the subject. And the places not quite perceived as the homeland of the subject are not defined simply as another world, but as the 'third world'. From this viewpoint, I am happy to say, all minerals belong to the fourth world. And by minerals I of course refer to all objects that have managed to situate themselves, by chance or by philosophical escape, outside the savage Western opposition between subject and object. Amazonia, or what we have left of it, is from this viewpoint a peculiarly large mineral on the geographical surface of this planet. The entire future of man might depend on our ability to recognize Amazonia as a mineral, as something other than an object.

*

Nietzsche, whose works Powys read in their first English translations, and whose influence on himself Powys readily recognized,⁷ came close to the un-European position of Powys and Baudrillard when he attempted to obliterate the great Western myth of the dialectical struggle between master and slave. But Nietzsche made the fatal mistake of concluding that the result of the collapse of subject-versus-object was a hyperintensification of subjectivity: Nietzsche's hysterically overinflated subjectivity became Overman, a ludicrously self-assertive, fascistoid ego, whose spluttering German proclamations in the final analysis only bounced back and forth inside the poor cranium of Friedrich himself. The ingenuity of Powys—and more recently Baudrillard—is that they have completely reversed Nietzsche's position: what happens after the collapse of the Western struggle between subject and object, master and slave, is that the *object* is liberated, and immensely so.

A mineral, you will have gathered by now, is the object in its state of emancipation: emancipation from the subject but also from the struggle between object and subject. Objectivity is free when it no longer

has to define itself as what remains over once the subject has defined himself.

No one, writes Baudrillard, has ever thought of championing the object.⁸ No one has thought of our destiny as the destiny of the mineral—as the destiny, in other words, of the world itself. All the splendour we have celebrated has been the splendour of the subject. The status-objects of commercial society are not free objects, but simply the objective contours of the subject's possessions.

What is it that is so strong and solid in the mineral? It is that it cannot self-reflect, divide itself. The mineral cannot come to know what psychologists call the 'mirror-stage', a phase of development in the child when it enters the subject/object contest—with others and with itself. Instead of belonging to the mirror-stage, the mineral is the mirror itself. (167) The mineral does not reflect the meaning of the subject; instead it seduces the subject.

There is no desire in the crystal, and there is no desire, ideally, in the women that Powys's fictions portray: Gerda, Curly, Tegolin, Christie, Wizzie. That is why the situation of the voyeur is erotically archetypal in the Powys world: what the voyeur enjoys most of all is that the erotic point seducing him is devoid of erotic subjectivity. The seducer is not a subject. A subject is something you have to understand if you want to love it (as subject). But you do not have to understand a mineral to love it. The great art in life, writes Baudrillard, is to be able to adore the world in the unintelligible quintessence of one of its details (169). To adore another being, for instance a woman, is not really to take in all her subjectivity (to "penetrate" her mind); instead it means appreciating how the simple fact of living incarnates itself miraculously in the form of an absolutely individual thing (169).

For ages subjectivist ideology has been frustrated by the hard, mineralogical quality of woman (her reluctance to fully participate in subjectivism), and for ages this hardened nature of woman has been viewed as a lack and a disadvantage. For

Baudrillard, by contrast, the privilege of being a point of desire rather than a desiring subject is no disadvantage or inferiority at all; on the contrary, it is a sovereignty (178). Powys's view is identical: he sees the so-called 'passive' quality of woman as something else than a lack of activity in woman; he sees the so-called 'passive' quality of woman as a mineralogical independence.

What, according to Baudrillard, gives woman a superiority over man in the field of seduction is that woman at any time can retreat into the hard, crystalline, indifferent, objective position of the mineral and still look erotic, still work seduction. Woman can always defend herself; can provoke whether she says yes or no. Man cannot do this; he is without defence (179). If he is treated as stony mineral, as if he were incapable of hot desire, he looks ridiculous. If he retreats from the erotic provocation, he loses his face, he seems impotent. The erotic situation becomes unilateral (179). The triumphant lack of subjectivity, which is the very secret of the mineral (182) in this way creates an inequality between man and woman on the level of seduction—no matter how equal the male tries to make himself on the personal level, no matter how superior he tries to be on the physical and philosophic levels.

These remarks are not forwarded, here, in order to convince you that Baudrillard is 'right'; they are forwarded, instead, for the sake of clarifying the literary and aesthetic consequences of two things: John Cowper's belief in the power of the mineral and the role played by women in his novels. Since there is, on the mineralogical level, an indissoluble bond between Powys's landscape of seductive crystals and his conception of woman as mineral, his creative originality never works properly without woman. That is why homosexual love between men (unlike the hint of the lesbian) is so unimportant in Powys's erotic fiction. And that is why the monumental *Autobiography* is no true monument to the thought, philosophy, originality, or genius of John Cowper Powys.

It is of course possible to go on pretending that a biographical and autobiographical approach to John Cowper Powys is all-important. It is possible to ignore Powys's entire philosophy of the crystal. It is possible to go on pretending that Powys is just one more subjectivist writer in the long line of masculine subjectivists. That approach, if it is exaggerated, is going to perpetuate the trivialization of his achievement. For as a subjectivist writer, Powys sports a number of fairly conspicuous limitations. As a counter-subjectivist, however, a Westerner always wanting to move and dwell to the west of the West, John Cowper Powys is one of the most brilliant writers and thinkers of our times.

Like Powys, I am adult enough to understand that stones don't think and that all human experience is subjective experience. But like Powys, also, I recognize a peculiar weakness in the classical, Mediterranean, so-called logical way of perceiving reality. This weakness of the West can distort not only the way we manage this planet of ours but also the way we manage our literary heritage. Powys is in my view not a European, Eastern or Western writer. His Celtic sense of magic, his Atlanticism, takes the West

beyond the West. That magic pushes the restlessness of Western man onward towards new limits and visionary possibilities. These mineralogical possibilities, summed up by the image of the Grail, are not monolithic. A mineral, precisely, is an absolute that is not a monolith. The pebbles and visions that the Cowperist carries through life are not there to dominate a world, not there to enslave objects or subjects. But these mineralogical absolutes are not there, either, as mere trivia—as mere innocent charms devised to entertain the relativistic ironies of the modern intellectual.

The purpose of the mineral is not to create weak eccentricity, which is merely the acquisition and recognition of oddness, but to create strong eccentricity, a radical reinterpretation of the entire world. The mineral, in such a context, is not innocent. It has power without limit, power that cuts through all systems and ideologies—including materialism, dialectic, and polyphony. Each mineral, however small, is a version of the tremendous. And to forget that, to actually stop feeling that, is to have abandoned the entire imaginative glory of a peculiarly original literary excellence.

NOTES

¹See my *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys*, Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck, London, Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986, p. 129.

²Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies and The Revenge of the Crystal*, London: Pluto Press, 1990.

³*A Glastonbury Romance*, London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1933, p. 982. The following reference is to the same edition.

⁴John Cowper Powys, *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, ed. Arthur Uphill, London: Bertram Rota, 1971, pp. 103-04.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶My most recent exposition of the difference between the monad and the nomad occurs in "The Battered Center: John Cowper Powys and Nonbeing," *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays*, ed. Denis Lane, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990, pp. 149-50.

⁷See *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, p. 142.

⁸Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, Paris: Bernhard Grasset, 1983, p. 163. Page references within my text are to the original French text.

Ernst Verbeek

John Cowper Powys: Tempting the Gods

My approach to John Cowper Powys is as a psychiatrist. Most of you here are not experts in this delicate kind of medical art. For psychiatry—and this holds for all the other branches of medical activity as well—psychiatry is decidedly an art. For my survey of Powys,¹ let us first have a look at his life. Paul Valéry once said that a biographer is someone who counts the holes in the socks of his hero. As you no doubt know, Paul Valéry has uttered sayings which were more intelligent. But all the same, what I wanted to imply, is that one ought to be very careful as a biographer, to try to take as sound a position as possible towards the person, that is: not too far away from him and not too close either, if one wants to tell others about the life and the personality of one's writer, painter, actor or fieldmarshal. So much for one's position as a biographer.

After I had read most of John Cowper's works, I surmised that he had suffered from epilepsy. So when the late Mr Frederick Davies told his audience, at the Powys Conference at Bath, that Phyllis Playter had informed him, after the death of J. C. P., that the latter was afflicted with epilepsy² and had had seizures, this statement was of great importance to me, as it confirmed my ideas.

"See what, from the gods, I, a god, suffer!", wrote John Cowper. My God, he suffered dearly. His life was one continuous struggle with all sorts of psychical difficulties, harmless ones and dangerous ones. When one reads a writer like him, one inevitably comes across a remark like John Cowper made: "It is generally simplistic to look at a writer's personality and life for clues to his novels".³ Now I really think that the relation between an author and his

work is far from simple. His work is autobiographic, always. When a writer uses his fantasy, his memory, his imagination, his emotions and affections to create written art, he puts himself right in the middle of his work, consciously or—and there you have the essence of the poodle, as Goethe says in his *Faust*—unconsciously. Especially if he writes fast, as John Cowper did.

It is *his* doing, from the beginning till the end, and is closely connected with the creative process, wherein all sorts of problematical questions, solved or unsolved, *are* used to shape his characters. Frederick Davies has formulated this very concisely: "And to appreciate his novels more fully, one needs some understanding of Powys's complex personality and temperament".⁴

I am not going into this matter to provide links between John Cowper and his novels; this would take far too much time. What I have in mind is to introduce you to his very complicated personality. Let me add to this that it heightens one's respect and admiration to see the author cope with his handicaps and turn them creatively into art. John Cowper Powys was absolutely conscious of this as he wrote: "the important thing with any writer is his own soul; what he's got in his own head, in his own nerves, and in his own character and blood and temperament". "We cannot write a single sentence of adequate criticism of anything or anybody without giving ourselves away to the limit".⁵

After this introduction, let's turn to the diagnosis. But first, what is diagnosis? Diagnosis is an attempt to know how it all came about, to understand why someone *here, now*, at this moment, finds himself in such a condition. Therefore to diagnose is

*A talk (lacking its introduction) given at the Powys Conference. 1990



John Cowper Powys outside his house, Corwen [late 1930s].

the art to see the truth, to grasp the truth. If you don't see clearly, convincingly, how the situation of your patient has come about, then you must continue your investigations to find out all the pathogenic factors involved that brought forth this illness in this form and with these contents.

In the case of John Cowper, Phyllis Playter's information to Frederick Davies is important because epileptic seizures were mentioned. Secondly one reads about other symptoms and phenomena of epileptic disposition in his *Autobiography*, in his essays and in his romances where all sorts of people display very obvious, distinct symptoms of epilepsy.

But there is more to be said on this subject. We are informed that John Cowper, in his early youth, had delicate health. We don't get any more information about this but that "Johnny's diabolical colds"⁶ were to some extent alarming. But if we read *Wolf Solent*, we come across a curious passage where the hero of this romance shows short periods of absent-mindedness which Powys calls "tricks": "This was a trick he had of doing what he called 'sinking into his soul' ". The way in which this is presented, is rather misleading, as if *Wolf Solent* could produce his tricks deliberately. But we continue to read:

This trick had been a furtive custom with him from very early days. In his childhood his mother had often rallied him about it in her light-hearted way, and had applied to these trances, or these fits of absent-mindedness, an amusing but rather indecent nursery name. His father, on the other hand, had encouraged him in these moods, taking them very gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of infant magician.⁷

On itself this passage doesn't say very much; it is only striking to see that the *Solent* parents take very different attitudes. But we are warned by another point, namely that the word "trick" is replaced by the words "trance" and "fit". Those two terms give quite a different significance to the phenomenon: a trick is made very consciously, but a fit and a trance are not wilfully mobilized,

are not simply day-dreams. A fit takes possession of someone, and he has no choice, whether he likes it or not, wants it or not. He has to suffer its influence.

Do we have here before us attacks of so-called minor epilepsy or *petit mal*? Minor epilepsy is a term used for slight epileptic attacks, of which impairment or loss of consciousness are the most prominent symptoms. We know of different sorts of minor epilepsy. For a very short time, a few seconds, the epileptics are not conscious of what they are doing, they stop their activity, strike their tongue across their lips, stare before them and then resume their interrupted activity. They know nothing or almost nothing about what has happened in that very short period of absent-mindedness. We also happen to know of attacks of minor epilepsy where the person collapses for a minute, or at the most two minutes; and finally we know of attacks of minor epilepsy whereby the individual makes strange gestures or noises.

Let us be a bit more systematic. Let me give you a general view of epilepsy. We distinguish between four categories, convulsions, unstable consciousness, psychoses and deviation of character.

1. Convulsions (*grand mal*, seizures, fits)
These are only manifest when the motor area of the cerebral cortex is overstimulated. When other parts of the brain are overstimulated one gets other phenomena; for instance, when the temporal lobe cortex is the location of the overstimulation one gets: unciniate fits; pseudo-hallucinations; symptoms of alienation, such as *déjà-vu*, *jamais-vu*, depersonalization, derealization, heautoscopia, compulsion, phobias, and so forth.
One also has to take into account that projection of the stimulus can give other symptoms from elsewhere in the brain.
2. An unstable consciousness, easily disturbed by emotions and fatigue.
3. All sorts of psychoses, that is to say different forms of mental disintegration, to put it bluntly, forms of madness.

4. Changes of character, called the bipolar structure of the epileptic. On one side is the "viscous" structure (slow speech, excessive tenacity, perseverances, repetitions, excessive clinging to traditional and familiar values, dislike of changes and a peculiar manner of verbose, prolix, ample speech in a rather cumbersome way). On the other side or pole, explosiveness like excitability, fits of rage, of being out of temper, and impulsive acts. These characteristics can be seen with all the epileptics if they are not adequately treated with anti-epileptics, in the case of hereditary as well as in the case of acquired epilepsy, and therefore have to be considered as direct exponents of the epileptic brainprocess. But not every one of these symptoms needs to be present. The richness of epileptic manifestations is astounding and far more varied than one thought before the discovery of the so-called temporal epilepsy. Every type of excessive emotion or tiredness can provoke epileptic signs.

Epilepsy can be called forth by serious head injuries, by intoxications and infections of the brain, by disturbances of the cerebral arterial circulation. And epilepsy can be a hereditary constitutional disease.

After this very brief survey, let us turn now to John Cowper Powys. Typical for temporal epilepsy are the so-called uncinat fits, sudden sensations of a peculiar taste in the mouth, for a very short time, as well as sensations of déjà-vu, that is to say the experience of having been at a certain place before, knowing that one has never been at this place before. And then, sometimes, we meet with experiences of extreme felicity. John Cowper calls it ecstasy, probably because of the great intensity of the very brief state of felicity, of rapture. Now let me quote a passage from Powys's *Autobiography*; here he tells us about,

rare indescribable ecstasies that came to me from old fragments of masonry mingled with certain aspects of Nature. These usually occurred when there was suddenly conveyed

to me from the outside of some old building—any building that blent itself with the elements—a magical sense of having been there before, of having felt these feelings hundreds of years before. And it was when this sensation used to go thrilling through me that I tasted an unforgettable psychic taste in my mouth.⁸

In *Wolf Solent* a situation of towering emotionality and rage is created.

This mounting anger with the man he loved so well gradually grew so intense that he could hardly endure it. His mother and Gerda had lost their separate identities. They had become the point of a prodding shaft of yellow light . . . This shaft was now pushing him towards another misery which took the form of a taste in his mouth, a taste that he especially loathed . . . as the taste of salad and vinegar! But whatever it was, this taste was Miss Gault.

Here one sees the déjà-vu-sensation turning into an uncinat fit. The attack is not over yet and goes on, gets an expansive character:

Everything in the world that was lovely and precious to him was being licked up by a mustard-coloured tongue, while a taste of constricting, devastating sourness began to parch his mouth.⁹

This is a pseudo-hallucinatory experience: his imagination has become reality, but he can correct this sensation as to be not true, although still present in him. Such a correction is impossible for a person who hallucinates.

I would like to be clear here. It doesn't mean of course that *Wolf Solent* is one and the same as John Cowper Powys. It only means that John Cowper the author has lent one of his own experiences to *Wolf Solent*, his own creation, and therefore very close to him. This was deliberately done by John Cowper, very consciously. But there are manifestations of this kind which came unconsciously into being, without John Cowper Powys knowing about it.

But first let us return to the pseudo-hallucinatory tasting of Miss Gault. This

experience has not come to an end. Wolf yells three times the name of his mother-in-law: Mrs Torp! Mrs Torp! Mrs Torp! Parts of his brain work automatically, and other parts remain deliberately active:

that unclouded portion of Wolf's own mind, which, like a calculating demon perched on the top of his head, calmly, contemplated the whole scene: . . . he found it necessary to reply in nothing but patient monosyllables to what Miss Gault was saying. [He is still inhibited from talking freely!] By degrees, however, her discourse became so personal that these replies began to gather a dangerous intensity, although they still remained abrupt and brief.¹⁰

After a short time his fear has disappeared, and everything is at an end, so Wolf says "quietly": "I am afraid there is a must in this, Miss Gault". To the well-informed reader this expression 'a must' has a double meaning. Both Wolf Solent as well as John Cowper Powys couldn't escape this sort of situation and experience.

The counterpart of *déjà-vu* is *jamais-vu*, meaning "I don't remember ever having been here before, but I positively know that I have been here more than once". One can read sensations of *déjà-vu* and *jamais-vu* in *Suspended Judgments*: "you get the sort of subconscious 'expectancy' which is part of this strange phenomenon, and that curious sudden thrill, I have been here before! I have seen and heard all this before".¹¹ You find the same experiences in *Rodmoor* and in *Weymouth Sands*.¹²

Another queer phenomenon is called *heautoscopia*. It has certain connections with the motive of a double. It is a sort of optic pseudo-hallucination, in that the person in question sees himself outside himself, for instance walking on the other side of the street or something like that. (Mind you, it has nothing to do with the *bilocation* phenomenon, that curious out-of-the-body experience that took place between John Cowper and Theodore Dreiser.) In *After My Fashion* one comes across this phenomenon of *heautoscopia* when Richard Storm awakes, "with a feeling as though he had slept for not seven hours, but for seven

centuries; he wondered vaguely if he would ever sleep quite in that way again". This is no normal sleep, here's something else astir, something unique. To continue: "He had the queerest feeling as he washed and dressed [no question anymore of awakening, of sleepiness; no the peculiar condition persists further on] as though it were necessary to move very quickly, very stealthily and solemnly about the room". Now comes the *heautoscopia*-phenomenon: "Was some shadowy dead self, some phantom corpse of everything he had been before, actually lying on the bed he had quitted?".¹³ Evidently a disturbance of his identity has led to this *heautoscopia*-phenomenon, with evident sensations of fear and oppression.

Certain emotions are too strong, too powerful to cope with and result in fainting fits, in *syncope*s. We can read about such incidents in several novels, for instance in *The Brazen Head*; Tilton has fainting fits and also Roger Bacon.

His sensations of overwhelming felicity are frequently mentioned by J. C. P. In *Autobiography* he writes about the first phenomenon of this kind at Sherborne School, when he was fourteen years of age: "such a great wave of ecstasy rushed over me that I recall its subtlest essence even unto this hour".¹⁴ Those sensations are unforgettable, those apparently causeless transports as he calls them. This is of importance, as there is not the slightest reason for the emotional transports, which—I quote again: "seized upon me and caught me up into a sort of seventh Heaven".¹⁵ That is exactly the expression one always hears from epileptic patients. I quote once more: "when an ecstasy of happiness came over me so intoxicating that it was as if I trod upon air". These transports of happiness are *not* accompanied by images, they are purely sentiments.

John Cowper mentioned another one at Rome, "half-way up those stately steps from the Piazza del Spagna to the Pincian Hill". Another one happened during a walk between Old Shoreham and Lancing, yet another near Trumpington Mill . . . at the

rear of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge". And he also mentions one he had during his stay at Brighton.¹⁶

In *Weymouth Sands* Magnus Muir experiences such a transport of happiness: "This large piece of cork lay half-embedded in the sand. But no sooner had he caught sight of it than a rush of happiness, so intense, so overwhelming, took possession of him, that he was as one transported out of himself".¹⁷ But in *Ducdame* the experience is more complicated than other sensations of this kind. It begins with a transport of felicity, changing into a typical hallucinosis. Let me explain this. You have just heard from me about pseudo-hallucinations being different from real hallucinations. Someone who hallucinates doesn't correct his observations, he doesn't see or hear that they are not real. For example: sitting in a room, alone, he hears the voice of his mother. But his mother is dead. If the person in this room thinks "there is mother", then he is hallucinating. When he thinks that is the voice of mother, but that is not possible because mother is dead, then we say that he has pseudo-hallucinations.

In the case of a hallucinosis we have a pathological condition characterised by extensive *massive* hallucinations, with quite clear consciousness, most often with an anxious frame of mind. Well, that is what happens to Rook Ashover. The transport of felicity has disappeared, what he experiences is—in his own words—"a paralysis of dizziness", and immediately upon that observation he sees a horseman who is strange to him, coming up to him and calling him 'Daddy'. You all know that famous scene of course. And as you know too, Rook Ashover has no children of his own! What happens next? After a certain time the horseman disappears, the state of hallucinosis ends and Rook remembers a scene out of his youth: "He remembered a wooden sword that he had played with as a child and he saw distinctly the grey dilapidated mane of a hobbyhorse he used to ride". The surroundings became normal again: "The face of the countryside had retaken its natural

colours from him now. The appalling grey-ness which had so mysteriously fallen upon it had completely vanished". So there was also derealization, the surroundings becoming strange, queer, and that means a slight lowering of the state of consciousness. At the same time "he (Rook) repeated mechanically", that is to say not quite freely and easily, not quite spontaneously and self-willed. "I must have worried myself into some sort of fit", Rook says to himself. Those situations are not strange to him; Rook continues: "I wonder if I fell down just now and have been lying on the road, as mother used to say I did when I was a boy".¹⁸ If this should apply to John Cowper too, then we know that he had had *petit mal* attacks, that is to say minor epileptic attacks in his youth. There is another *petit mal* attack described in *Ducdame*.

John Cowper told us a lot about himself in his *Autobiography*, but certainly not everything, if I may use this rather silly expression. He told us what he wanted us to read about him, and he didn't tell us what he didn't want us to know. But he told us more about himself in his novels and essays. Here I can give you another example, a rather speculative one, I'm afraid, but nevertheless a very important one. I mean the possibility of his admission to a psychiatric clinic. In *A Philosophy of Solitude* John Cowper Powys writes about a difficult period in his life, in 1915. One reads: "Undoubtedly fate *could* put you into so miserable a place that you would need to be a saint—indeed almost a god, certainly something more than an ordinary human being—to find any fragment of 'not-self' there with which it would be possible to get into this religious relation". What these utterances are to end in, can be seen in the next passage, which is directly connected with the previous one.

But I have seen Negroes—those most religious characters of the human race—who obviously were enjoying precisely and exactly the mystical rapture I am speaking of, whose business kept them all day in the gloomy pur-
lieus of a station latrine. Something they had—some little personal possession upon a chair

down there—the cover of a magazine, an old painted cigar-box with silver paper inside it, which served when they fixed their attention upon it, *the same purpose as was served by my northerly window in the mad-house*, and the flying leaves that were blown upon that melancholy wind. (my italics)

And ten pages further one reads: “Like the prisoner in the mad-house we are forced to use the pallid northern glimmer in the frame of a barred window”.¹⁹ This sentence could have a general meaning (like the prisoner in the mad house), if it were not explicitly connected with *my northerly window* in the mad-house and later on again: “the pallid *northern* glimmer in the frame of a barred window”.

Let me remind you of how J. C. P. introduced Adrian Sorio in *Rodmoor*, written in 1915-1916. On the first page John Cowper mentions Sorio’s “mental illness (that) had taken so dangerous, so unlooked for a shape, that it was only by the merest chance he had escaped *long* incarceration”. With an accent on long! Sorio tells Nance Herrick “about all the morbid sufferings of his years in America and his final mental collapse”.²⁰ This gives the impression that John Cowper’s mind was still full of this collapse. Michael Greenwald made the following interesting remark: “in many respects *Rodmoor* reflects in a more elemental way the same undermining tendencies he encountered in America”.²¹ Powys had been extremely busy, had written in a year and a half, *Wood and Stone*, *Visions and Revisions*, *Wolf’s Bane* and his *Confessions*. Let me remind you that he had lost his mother half a year before, a loss of great consequence for him. Was it too much for his vulnerable mental balance?

If we assume this to be the case, then his mental breakdown must have occurred in the first half of 1915. Can we get more evidence about that period? We can, namely in his letters. We see that in this period there is a singular gap in his correspondence with Llewelyn, namely between 20 February 1915 and 22 July 1915. It was an exceptionally long interruption of their regular correspondence, namely with an average of two or

three letters written by John Cowper monthly. Did that happen then? This will probably remain an open question, although it is quite possible.

In his works John Cowper mentioned a considerable number of individuals afflicted with epilepsy. Let me sum them up, without being complete, and only in a general way. In *Wood and Stone* there is James Andersen with evident epileptic disturbances of his consciousness. I have already mentioned Adrian Sorio in *Rodmoor*; there is probably Rook Ashover in *Ducdame* and in *After My Fashion* is described the epileptic state of Richard Storm when awakening. Wolf Solent too I have already mentioned. Porius has convulsive strokes, Myrddin Wylt has convulsions. Magnus Muir and Dud Norman suffer from derealizations and Caddie Water is an epileptic.²² (There are no women with epilepsy in all his novels.)

Then there is a whole series of pathological signs of which it is difficult to say whether they are neurotic or epileptic symptoms. As you will have understood by now, the epileptic patient is a personality with severe handicaps, and this gives all sorts of neurotic disturbances in his emotional development. As I presume that you don’t wish to be lectured upon the subject of how neuroses are structured, I will not expatiate here about the structural, the dynamic, the economic and the topical aspects of neurosis, nor about the interaction between the Id, the Ego, the Superego, and, opposite of those, the Self. I shall be as brief as possible about this matter. To understand this all one needs much more time than I have here today.

Neurosis is a disorder of the psychic development of the individual. Its origin consists of conflicts which are supposed to be unsolvable and are therefore eliminated out of the area of consciousness by so called inhibiting mechanisms and thrust into the realm of the unconscious. We call that repression. In the unconscious the neurotic conflict continues in the same way as if it were conscious, but as it is unconscious now, the individual has no knowledge about it. When the repression is not adequate and

does not submerge the conflict wholly into the unconscious, the conflict tries to become conscious, but this is prevented by other forces of the individual. This can however only be accomplished by compromise. This compromise goes along with a sort of metamorphosis of the conflict: the conflict declares itself now in a transformed way, in the form of neurotic symptoms. In this camouflage the conflicting parts of his personality are not recognizable for the neurotic person, although it bothers him a lot, because these are the neurotic symptoms like phobias, depressions, compulsions and so on.



A photograph used as frontispiece to H. P. Collins, *John Cowper Powys: Old Earth Man* (1966).

Everybody has conflicts and not only conflicts which are conscious, but also unconscious conflicts that he hasn't been able

to solve yet. That is not a neurosis. Only when someone's development is seriously hampered by the unconscious conflicts, if he can't do what he could do potentially, and only if he has considerable impediments on account of his symptoms, does he have a neurosis.

According to his own account in *Autobiography*, J. C. P. had lots of neurotic symptoms and he was hardly capable of maintaining his position amidst his fellowmen. He felt like an outcast at Sherborne, not accepted by his schoolmates and so not accepted by himself. He was a bizarre exception, not only at Sherborne, also at Montacute and all the places where he lived afterwards.

It was his great talents, like a heavenly gift, that gave him the opportunity to hold out through sublimation and to gain a certain freedom of existence. Sublimation stands for the unconscious process by which unacceptable impulses and drives, sexual or aggressive drives, can be expressed in some non-sexual, or non-aggressive, and socially acceptable activity. In this way a lot of tension is released and in a certain way the dead-lock between the drives and the unconscious conscience is solved. Without his talents John Cowper's life would have been a disaster. Lots of his narcissistic tendencies were sublimated, through his public speeches at first and later through his writing. The gods were very clement with him, I dare say.

Let me point out the ways in which he tried to free himself. He didn't spare himself when travelling crisscross through most of the United States of America. In those decades he had his epileptic convulsions. From the moment he lived the life one recommends to epileptics, that is, an orderly, calm, regular life, with several hours in the open air every day as was the case at Phudd Bottom, his convulsions stopped and his sublimating powers grew formidably: he became the phenomenal author.

Secondly, the acceptance by an intelligent woman, which Phyllis Playter was, did a lot to stabilize his mental life. Not only did she accept his quirks, his clownish manners, she admired him unconditionally, first as a

personality and in the second place as a great author. She loved him and that was another gift from the gods. With her, everything turned out well, save the earning of money. That remained a weak spot throughout his life. It was Phyllis Playter who more or less saved his life.

There is one argument left that I would like

to mention. I hope for one thing: that you don't think of me as a doctor who is only looking for symptoms in John Cowper Powys. With all his symptoms and quirks and magical tomfoolery, he remains for me, as for you all, one of the greatest writers of this century, an impressive genius.

NOTES

¹An extensive survey is made in my book, *De Goden Verzoeken*, Assen: Van Goram, 1989.

²See *The Powys Review*, No. 19, p. 63.

³C. A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 119.

⁴"John Cowper Powys and King Lear", *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. B. Humfrey, Cardiff: UWP, 1972, p. 117.

⁵J.C. Powys, *Dostoievksy*, London: John Lane, 1947 & Village Press, 1974, p. 171.

⁶J. C. Powys, *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, London: Village Press, 1975, Vol. 1, p. 151.

⁷*Wolf Solent* (1929), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, p. 19.

⁸*Autobiography*, London: Macdonald, 1934 & 1967, p. 434.

⁹*Wolf Solent*, p. 392.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 393.

¹¹*Suspended Judgements*, New York: G. A. Shaw, 1916 & London: Village Press, 1975, p. 340.

¹²*Rodmoor*, London: Macdonald, 1973, p. 10; *Weymouth Sands*, London: Macdonald, 1963 & Picador, 1980, p. 181.

¹³*After My Fashion*, London: Picador, 1980, pp. 97-98.

¹⁴*Autobiography*, p. 128.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 295, 219-20, 199, 219.

¹⁷*Weymouth Sands*, p. 478.

¹⁸*Ducdame*, New York: Doubleday, 1925 & London: Village Press, 1974, pp. 307-311.

¹⁹*A Philosophy of Solitude*, London: Cape, 1933 & Village Press, 1974, pp. 100, 101; 114.

²⁰*Rodmoor*, p. 1.

²¹"The Second Novel: *Rodmoor*", *The Powys Newsletter*, 3 (1972-3), p. 8.

²²*Weymouth Sands*, p. 373.

THE POWYS SOCIETY

President: Glen Cavaliero

The Powys Society exists to promote public recognition of the writings, thought, and contribution to the arts of the Powys family, particularly of John Cowper, Theodore and Llewelyn, but also including other members of the family and their close associates. The Society holds an annual weekend conference as well as informal local meetings. Members receive a regular *Newsletter* and *The Powys Review*. The Society publishes other Powysiana from time to time.

The annual membership subscription is £10.00 (U.K.) and £12.00 (abroad).

Further details may be obtained from:

Griffin Beale,
39 Church Street,
Bridgwater,
Somerset, TA6 5AT

Susan Rands

John Cowper Powys's *The Inmates*, an Allegory



John Cowper Powys when young (c. 1896) from a painting by his sister Gertrude. It seems likely that Powys had his own image as a young man in mind when he described John Hush as looking like an actor in the part of Jacques or of Hamlet, parts that Powys himself played. S.R.

It is now twenty years since Kenneth Hopkins remarked that *The Inmates* (1952) had not yet received very much critical attention and would “repay closer study”.¹ Since then John Brebner has given a brief and rather biased exposition² while Morinne Krissdottir despite her brilliant hermeneutics of *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius* dismisses *The Inmates* in a few sentences.³ Indeed it has not been easy to know how to take this “fan-

tastical story, a short, very modern one”, as Powys called it, “this modern pot-boiler about a thrilling and happy escape from a lunatic asylum”.⁴

The names of the characters in all John Cowper’s novels are odd and arresting but they do not quite sum up what their bearers represent so plainly and completely as those of *The Inmates*. We have John Hush who must hide from public gaze his mania for cutting off girls’ curls, and keep quiet about his other peculiarities also; Antenna Sheer, compact of sheer antenna-like sensibility; Betsy Squeeze who would squeeze the last drop of scandal and venom from any event or situation (16, 92, 310); Father Alan Wun, the Catholic priest, believer in the All-in-One, the Zeit-Geist or Spirit of the Times, and many others whose names will be more fully discussed.

The only form of literature with nomenclature of this kind is allegory, such as Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, or Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. But the irrefutable clue that *The Inmates* is indeed an allegory has been provided by Marius Buning who has thus interpreted T. F. Powys’s *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* and *Unclay* by applying to them a comprehensive and intriguing conception of the nature of the allegorical, derived from the work of Angus Fletcher.⁵ Interpreted in a similar manner, *The Inmates* can be seen as a subtle and convincing allegory, which has increased in significance and relevance since it was written forty years ago.

Briefly, the chief ingredients of allegory are five; daemonic possession, cosmic imagery, symbolic action, magical causation, and ambivalent theme (B 49-53); the puzzles and inconsistencies of *The Inmates* can be understood when viewed in the light of this model. A sixth characteristic which

An example in *The Inmates* of a textual relationship which departs from its original, is the "prospect Tower". John Hush (like Porius later) takes stock of his position from a tower, and the views from it in each direction are related in detail which in *Porius* probably and in *The Inmates* certainly carries symbolic significance. To the south are the lawns where grows the tulip tree under which John Hush first saw Tenna (66), representing the possibility of future happiness; to the north is "the abode of Mesopotamia Cuddle, the woman destined to do his washing and who had already made him think of his childhood's nurse" (69) which represents the pains and pleasures of his own early life; note the 'label' name. To the east is a prehistoric camp representing mankind's past and to the west is Halfway House where the old ways of Europe represented by John's guardian, the diplomat, newly cohabit with the new ways of America represented by the diplomat's rich and beautiful American fiancée.

Powys's debt to Pater has been amply established elsewhere and these towers doubtless were suggested by the prospect tower of Marius's ancestral home,

where little glazed windows in the uppermost chamber framed each its dainty landscape—the pallid crags of Carrara, like wildly twisted snow drifts above the purple heath; the distant harbour with its freight of white marble going to sea; the lighthouse temple of Venus Specious on its dark headland, amid the long-drawn curves of white breakers. Even on summer nights the air there had always a motion in it, and drove the scent of the new-mown hay along all the passages of the house,⁷

—a breath-taking image of aesthetic delight. But Powys is more business like: both his towers are "squat", lowly and earthbound as if he is determined on a closer and realistic view, and both symbolize the hero's position vis à vis his environment whereas Pater's tower appears to be described for the sake of its beauty alone. The more one compares Powys with his influ-

ences the more one realizes his curious and passionate originality.

* * *

John Hush shows "the wide range of human behaviour" characteristic, according to Dr Buning, of "the conceptual hero of allegory"; he is mad enough to be unable to resist cutting off girls' curls yet sane enough to want to relieve his guardian of the embarrassment of having him in his entourage; he is both fond of, and jealous of his guardian and his guardian's "fabulously" beautiful and "incredibly" rich fiancée; it is the strength of the latter feeling that leads him to his antisocial exploits; as we read, however, it is revealed that these relatively trifling derangements are symptoms of a greater disturbance which could be described as "daemonic possession", another characteristic of the allegorical hero. The hero called Hush thus represents enormous repression, and what he is repressing is revealed in the latter part of the novel in the sort of struggle which is typical of allegory.

According to Jung insanity can be caused by a cultural hiatus as well as genetic and environmental disadvantages; a collective problem appears as a personal one in consequence of an insupportable change in social atmosphere. *The Inmates* was written immediately after the novel about Porius, a hero with numerous relations, known background and antecedents, and a substantial social position. John Hush is the opposite of this, as is immediately made plain; "he is an orphan with no relations at all" (14), brought up by his diplomat guardian and always moving about so that he has no firm or lasting ties to place or person. "Our well-trained diplomatic friend" is outwardly a "socially alert, polite young man, with a clever diplomatic mind.". Having trained his ward in Europe, John's guardian is now proposing to marry a rich and beautiful American and to stand for Parliament in England. John Hush is thus characterized by all the disadvantages described by Jung, and his fragility is plain from the beginning;

he follows Dr Echetus "like a human dog", and "dragged his steps after his guide and moved mechanically as if his guardian and the beautiful American had carried his soul away in the luggage of their smooth-running car." (13) Well-trained and polite as he is, he also looks like a hollow-eyed actor who has been rehearsing the part of the melancholy Jacques, presumably the Jacques of *As You Like It*, who begins his song "Ducdame! Ducdame!", and later, like one who would like to play Hamlet. Suspicion is strong that this is how Powys saw and felt himself to be when young, indeed probably was. John Hush is well characterized at this early stage by being likened to Jacques and Hamlet but unlike them; yet, like Powys himself, he is ultimately saved and healed by his interest in and devotion to a girl.

Throughout John Hush's psychic struggles on the day of the escape, the motives which keep him pressing towards his goal are his fear of losing Tenna (270) and a sense of responsibility towards the other inmates (264). But he is psychotic with worry; he wants to leave off his boots so as to make less noise but he has a horror of treading earth with his bare feet; he feels that he is becoming feminine in a grotesque fashion. Finally he makes the cowardly but less maddening and therefore therapeutic decision to put on his boots (251). In contrast to this horror of the earth *before* Gewlie's dispersal as dust, *after* it, and free from what Gewlie stands for, he actually crawls upon the ground, and,

it seemed to him that he had become a medium for the secret wisdom of all those creatures of the earth, animal, vegetable and mineral . . . who live by the ultimate illusion of free will . . . he was able to observe quietly and closely, and free from the fever of self-sadistic reasoning, not only all the unpredictable twists and turns of the living stalks and filigree foliage of the fragile bed-straw, not only the globular curves and shell-like foliations of the shadowy self-heal but all those fascinatingly casual shapes and positions of shapes, forming spear, swords, shields, gibbets, triangles, pikes, sceptres, squares, gates, hoops, spirals, jig-saws, crosses, rakes, horns, harps, trumpets, into

which the indiscriminate litter and spin-drift of the tiny microscopic wood-sticks and straws and grass blades of dead vegetation had been led or driven. (281)

He is seeing the detail of what is actually there instead of the vague horror he feared.

* * *

Dr Buning's allegorical model does not provide for a 'conceptual' heroine, nor is one necessary in the work of Theodore Powys; but all John's novels include heroines drawn in wondrous detail who, like Bunyan's Christiana, exist quite independently of the hero although, sometimes, but by no means always, in close relationship with him. Like all the inmates, Antenna Sheer has plenty of reason to be deranged; "her mother had been drowned in the over-turning of a solitary canoe, and her daughter's balance of mind, like the balance of that canoe, only in a more gradual decline, had been tilted still further on the sinister side by that event." (51) One should, perhaps, note in passing the play on, and elaboration of the old adage, "Paddle your own canoe", so often addressed by heartless persons to helpless ones, which here vivifies the relationship that evidently obtained between the three members of this family, and is a minor example of allegory's use of pretext. One may confidently assume that Sir Warden's wife died of hopeless unhappiness; he is later portrayed as a thick-skinned, unloving, ambitious, snobbish man who "believed more strongly in daughters looking after those to whom they owe all than in successful builders humouring the fancies of spoilt young women." (50) Fragile and sensitive Tenna may be, but she has will and gumption and, driven to grief and fury beyond bearing, she attacks her father, for which he, not unnaturally, has her confined. He never bothered with her after her mother died and doesn't want her back now. (297)

Although several of the inmates annoy Tenna to the point of aggression she twice saves others from the attentions of the sadistic Gewlie, and once saves the Com-

mander from the straight-jacket and the Punishment Wing. She retains both the sensitivity to know what is going on and the presence of mind to do something about it. As a personification of sensitivity Tenna is superb; and that it is the companionship of sensitivity and his devotion to Tenna that enables John Hush, representing repression, to achieve a semblance of normality makes perfect and remarkable, psychological sense.

The minor characters of *The Inmates* fit Buning's description of personified agents who "represent and reveal aspects of" the hero to the extent that they personify the pains and problems of the human predicament and ways of responding to them which are not so unusual and far-fetched as they may at first appear. Several of these modes figured largely in the life of the young John Powys, here called Hush, since so much of the experience now personified he has hitherto "hushed up". These characters display in the words of Powys's introduction "a shameless exploitation of my own manias". One suspects, for example, that Toby Tickle is a synthesis of the manners, mores, and modi vivendi of the Sherborne masters of Powys's youth. With his "weather-beaten, leathery face", (63) "whose good-natured little wrinkles seemed chirping like grass-hoppers," (238) he has "the firm and quiet authority of an experienced moral leader," (75) but nevertheless has "wrestled all his mature years with a tendency to paederasty" (76). His sermons are so boring that, according to his wife, they have the same soporific effect as hot chocolate. (236) It is plain that his effect on the hero is negligible. According to Buning the behaviour of the "sub-characters" of allegory is "constricted and compulsive", words remarkably apt for the inmates of an asylum, both in reality and in this novel.

The oldest of the sub-characters is Pantamount (which being interpreted is surely "all it amounts to"); not only is he the oldest occupant but he has been there the longest; he has endurance of all kinds (195, 198, 200, 202, 239). We are reminded of the alternat-

ives, repeatedly posited by Powys, especially in *Porius*, "endure or escape". Enduring seems thankless; Pantamount is liked neither by the institution's priests nor by the attendants who put him in the punishment wing at the slightest excuse (193). In their terms of reference he is the maddest and most difficult of the patients; but he also expresses the most exciting and Powysian philosophical concepts (201, 203, 205, 207, 209), and John Hush is "the only person attracted to him". (227) The irony is delightful. Another inmate who expresses many of Powys's ideas is Commander Serius-Ocius (145, 150, 153, 162, 164) whose name means "sooner or later" for no one listens to him now.

The sub-characters whose significance it is most difficult to grasp are Dr Echetus, and Gewlie, his close attendant. One has to assume that in order to avoid depicting a sadist Powys has created two characters, one representing the man devoid of the sadistic nerve, and the other representing the nerve without the man. Dr Echetus is completely bland, polite and unimposing like "the competent manager of a country club" (15) or "the general supervisor of a well-kept public garden", both of which Glint Hall in many ways resembles. He has some quite accurate ideas at a superficial level about what partly causes and can help to cure insanity (217) and he is never seen to treat any of the patients sadistically; he has "that equanimity [with] which temperament or training or some queer vacuum in his sensitivity had endowed him". (299)

The queer vacuum is filled by his horrible, yet pathetic servant Gewlie with whom John Hush has such a long struggle. Gewlie is shunned by all the inmates but, like Dr Echetus, is not shown behaving cruelly; he simply represents the sadistic impulse in the human psyche, and gives utterance to some of the delusions with which it has tried to justify its behaviour throughout history.

At first baffling, the inmates of Glint repay the most careful study; because they are so articulate it is easy to overlook how representative they are of specific qualities;

in the manner of allegory they imply even more than they say.

A very different group of sub-characters, less articulate, easier to understand and absolutely beyond the pale, is the group who visit Glint Hall on the day of the escape—Lord Tom Tiddler, Sir Warden Sheer, and Colonel Cochineal who represent powerful obstacles to human understanding and sympathy in the form of Preconception, Preclusion and Colour Prejudice. Lord Tom Tiddler's children are called Hither and Thither—for that is where they must run if the ground is all his; further, if they have no ground to go on they can but chase shadows and reflections (186) in a psychological sense. The insensitive posturing of these three outsiders contrasts with the complicated introspective philosophizing of most of the inmates; palpably those "inside" are introverts, those outside, extroverts. By extrapolation, to be "outside" when the inmates do escape will not be entirely desirable; but the book ends there and no violation is done to the metaphor.

* * *

The second requirement of allegory, cosmic imagery, is answered by Glint Hall and all its appurtenances; the fact that it is an undeniably pleasant place in which to be and not at all a bleak, bare asylum, should alert us at once to the probability that *The Inmates* could not be a straight tale. Set in what would now be called "unspoilt country", Glint is almost surrounded by a river full of fish—quite a rarity in modern Europe. It is "half an expensive school and half a luxurious hospital"; there is a reading room, well stocked, a smoking room with games and a grand piano (218); the inmates have bedrooms to themselves (63) and "a substantial stick of chocolate on their toilet tables every night" (62), the "food was . . . good and . . . well cooked" (86, 87), and "attendants carried round the tea" (33). Outside there are flower beds, shrubberies, rock gardens, lawns and orchards, even well-weeded gravel paths, separated from pasture land by

old-fashioned iron railings. Sleek cattle graze the meadows, and when brought in, the two that John Hush looks after at least, are kept in an airy shed and a couple of capacious cow stalls. Everything has a place and a purpose and is well-tended. Glint Hall has all the delightful adjuncts of a well-run country estate and the inmates are free to participate in all the soothing activities on which its upkeep depends. It is a model of old-fashioned orderliness and productivity. As such it makes more sense as a "cosmic image" than as a modern reality. Indeed, as John Hush is shown round by Toby Tickle he feels as though he were being "conducted through the intricacies of a scene more seductive than anything in real nature: a scene like an ideal print in some old romantic masterpiece; a Holbein illustration, for instance, of More's 'Utopia'." (67) Glint is explicitly presented as a world within a world; outside the house are the gardens; outside the gardens is the wall; outside the wall is the river; beyond the river are the alder marshes; and the four horizons visible from the tower room "become four infinite recessions of uninterrupted space". (73) As a place in which to be, Glint Hall compares very favourably with a travelling circus or a tightly crowded helicopter on its way to America, the alternatives before the inmates after the escape. Should we not infer that freedom is not a matter of place nor necessarily of leaving the past behind?

The fly in the ointment at Glint is of course the laboratory where Dr Echetus is said to torture dogs to discover in the words of Betsy Squeeze, "the dog pearl that'll bring us all long life and a lordship to him that found it" (16). But this too comes to seem more an image than a reality; to Powys and to most of us some realities are too horrible to be faced other than as images. A tortured dog seems to be the image or metaphor for acute mental suffering. It is when he is feeling most unhappy at "the emotional strain of the separation from his friends" and the "implications of his consignment to Glint Hall" that John Hush sees in a hole in the ground the "dog with its expression of

unutterable loneliness". Similarly Tenna Sheer when she feels a great urge to violence towards Arabella Bolster finds that she has no escape from her murderous feelings except towards "the very pit for dead dogs that had shaken John so". (109) Of all animals the dog is the most dependent on man, and the most devoted to him, which makes his pain both more poignant and more analogous to many causes of mental pain in humans. After John and Tenna have left Glint, and have been for six months in their new life together, they are given a dog, the symbol of pain, domesticated, as it were, and made bearable; they call him Mr Lordy after the inmate whose patient sufferings reminded John of Christ.

Another image of emotional pain that recurs in the work of Powys is that of "jaggedness". Tenna, intensely irritated by John's meticulous determination to find in a whole herd the exact cow that he had milked that morning "flung one thought at least against such a jagged block of blue-black ice in the sluice of her consciousness that it broke into sharp-edged bits of ice." (100) The concept of jaggedness is similarly used to describe the emotional pain of Mrs Renshaw in *Rodmoor* and of Porius and Myrddin Wyllt in *Porius*. Ice, too, is often a symbol of pain; for example, "John felt as if there was an excruciatingly thin, sharp, high-pitched ice-edge in the centre of his heart, along which two distinct selves, each of them giving vent to a piercing soprano-shriek were skating side by side and each endeavouring to thrust the other over the ice-edge." (313); again he hears "the shrieking, cutting ice-edge of his indecision." (314)

If ice represents feeling that is stifled, water represents feeling that can express itself. When Dr Echetus is showing John round on his arrival they come to a small stream "which had been allowed to flow under the wall; and John couldn't help noticing with a certain grim interest that there was a row of enormous and most threatening-looking spikes adhering to the base of the wall and descending into the

weeds and mud at the bottom of the flowing water." (14) Here the jagged image of pain pierces the flow of feeling. The symbolism is very neat, for to escape from Glint Hall, "we'll have to get those real spikes out and we'll have to slip in some artificial ones," John tells Tenna. (91) Crawling away from the dog-pit, the winner but still weak from his intensely private psychotic battle, "John did not rise to his feet till he was in sight of the stream flowing under their prison wall where the iron spikes had been changed into wooden ones." (282) His feelings can flow without painful obstruction; he will not be confined in madness.

Water plays the same part in the much larger symbol of Glint Hall itself: looking further afield, from the tower room to which Father Toby takes him,

John realized now that the whole landscape round and about Glint Hall was dominated by the river. The importance of this river was a surprise to him. He had grasped with an odd satisfaction, the nearness of that ancient heathen camp with its two Scotch firs that lay east. He had been thinking all the evening, save when too stirred by Tenna's presence to think of anything else, about the massive stone manor called Halfway House that lay west; and where his guardian and the American girl were now with their American friends.

But of the river he had taken no thought. Now, as he surveyed the whole southward stretching landscape, he noticed how, although the lawns and flower-borders and shrubberies and the railed off green meadows and vegetable gardens of Glint were enclosed by the institution's towering prison wall, the height of the wall itself seemed considerably reduced from this observation point. (67)

The undeniable physical fact that walls look smaller when viewed from a height is surely emphasized for its symbolic meaning that viewed from a different angle, the inmates are not so insuperably walled in by their condition as they probably assumed.

The passage continues:

Thus reduced, however, it served rather to accentuate than to diminish the peculiar

charm of the unusual river. John realised, indeed, that the natural protagonist of the whole scene in this particular place was neither Glint Hall nor Halfway House, nor even the prehistoric camp with its monumental pines, but was simply and solely the winding river.

And, moreover, there was, he suspected, some mysterious link, perhaps in the very act of being created, between this monstrously walled-up citadel and the river that so nearly surrounded it. (67)

The "mysterious link" is symbolized by the fixed iron spikes which are soon to be changed into movable wooden ones so that the inmates may escape beneath them; but how or by whom the spikes are changed is never revealed. The change is symbolic, the *causation magical*. The spikes, mentioned frequently (244, 250, 260, 263, 282) are symbols only, of the link between being imprisoned by agonizing feelings and being free from them. Feelings likened to flowing water is a frequent image in Powys's work as it is in that of many others, notably, for example, in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*.

* * *

By far the most important of the visitors to Glint on the day of the escape is Morsimmon Esty, the Lama from Thibet. His role is that of a magical force for good, a veritable *deus ex machina* of the kind which instead of probability governs the plot of allegory (B 51). We first hear of him when Glue tells Glum that he has come to Glint for Dr Echetus to see "whether he's a real miracle man like Merlin or Moses or just a lunatic like the ones we've got here." (255) Morsimmon Esty relieves John Hush of Gewlie, the sadistic nerve, reduces him to dust, and disposes of him in the pit for dead dogs, so he must be "real" indeed.

The Inmates is like other Powys novels in that one does not have to look very far into the personal and public events of the months immediately before and while they were being written to find some of the facts that were the springboard for his imagination

and the cornerstones of his plots. For *A Glastonbury Romance* it was the contemporary pageants, the local Arts festivals, and the great flood; for *Maiden Castle* the libel suit that suggested the name Dud-Noman, his own residence in Dorchester at the time of Mortimer Wheeler's excavation, and the great interest in circuses in the early 1930s which found expression in the widely known paintings of Laura Knight and Edward Seago. When *The Inmates* was written, "a friend had been shut up pro. tem. in an Asylum", and the Communists had invaded Thibet putting the Dalai Lama at risk; news of this mysterious personage caused considerable excitement in the Western World and extraordinary powers, possibly supernatural, were attributed to him. In *The Inmates* Powys asks of him the most important tasks he can conceive. Some sort of reflection, often deliberately obscure, of current political and social conditions has always been a characteristic of allegory, and made it difficult reading for later generations.

* * *

The action of allegory usually takes the form of progress punctuated by combats and struggles of one kind or another; as in *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Faerie Queene*, and is always symbolic. Apart from John Hush's prolonged struggle with Gewlie which is finally decided for him by Morsimmon Esty, a magical force, action as combat features little in *The Inmates*; several fights, however, are avoided. Old as he is, Pantmount moves swiftly to prevent Tenna from throwing a water bottle at Rumpibus (233); Father Wun saves Mr Lordy from being taken to the Punishment Wing, and Mr Lordy saves the Commander from it by at last remembering the words which had calmed him before; and Tenna twice saves other inmates from the attentions of Gewlie by mentioning Mr Frogcastle of whom Gewlie is so terrified that the mere mention of Mr Frogcastle's name has the effect of an "occult bomb".

The more we consider what each of the characters involved represents, the more we realize the subtle psychological significance of these encounters.

Throughout there is a sense that "the bomb" has made physical battles obsolete, that the real battles go on in the mind, and that the outcome is subject to the coincidences of chance. "There do arrive," explains the Zeit-Geist, "moments when matters come to a head. It may be only a speck of dust that does it. A speck of dust lodged in a wind-bag can blow a world sky high. Explosions, you know, can be extremely unphilosophical. They can even be unscientific." (237) The attendants at Glint are constantly on the look-out for explosions among the inmates who in their turn have become adept at modifying their voices and conversations when attendants approach, and so escaping confinement in the Punishment Wing. "It has always been a battle," says John Hush, "whether I can enjoy life or not. I've got to hold my soul in readiness for battle after battle . . . and if I enjoy the battle to enjoy life nothing else need come into it" (80). The relatively small part in our lives played by action as opposed to contemplation is discussed at length by Pantamount (209).

Progress in *The Inmates* is towards escape signified symbolically by the turning of the fixed iron spikes into removable wooden ones (244, 250, 260, 263, 280, 282, 291, 293, 303) by some unspecified agency. *The Inmates* resembles *Pilgrim's Progress* in that it is not so much a questing journey as a transportation from one world to another, in *Pilgrim's Progress* from a state of sin to a state of blessedness, and in *The Inmates* from inside to outside, from a state of madness to a state of sanity. The way of achieving these ends is, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, to overcome the temptations of the Devil, and in *the Inmates* to evade the onslaughts of Gewlie or the sadistic nerve.

The inmates are escaping from family pressure in the case of Hither and Thither, and Seth; from disgrace, varying from John Hush's and the Commander's socially

embarrassing peccadilloes to Tenna's attempts to murder her father, and from fear, disgust and horror. The provenance of their madness is, in each case, entirely convincing, and they display a salient characteristic of the personae of allegory: "the mixture of dramatically opposed feelings of characters who are tempted by what is forbidden". (B 52)

When we consider their circumstances the question arises whether or not it is odd to be as odd as they are; whether indeed they are any odder than is normal. This is just one example of "philosophical ambivalence" which, in Dr Buning's words, "would seem to relate to the author's own ambivalent attitude to his work and manifests itself chiefly by means of irony and paradox which add tensions and calculated obscurity to the text and elicit an interpretive response from the reader". (B52) This is such a precise description of *The Inmates* as to leave no doubt of its mode. It is just possible that Powys may not have deliberately written an allegory; that he was aware that he may have written something different from what he had intended seems to be fully indicated by the first sentence of his prefatory note:

I think that any book or picture or composition of any sort, once out into the world, so to say, produces a different effect on each person who tries seriously to follow it. I certainly do not think that the author has any monopoly of its interpretation.

The final irony of *The Inmates* is what awaits them "in the real world": the alternatives are a flight to America on a shape-shifting specimen of technology, variously and carelessly termed, as though it really did not matter, "an airplane" (299), "a new American invention, a Titanic helicopter" (285), "an American air vessel" (312), or life with a travelling circus as astrologist and palm reader. As the helicopter leaves the ground John felt as if "where it stood the air ought to be wet with blood" and that to see it rise was "horrible as well as beautiful". (316) The ghastly death of the

cattle-woman Nancy Yew, who falls backwards from the plane and breaks her back and crushes her skull on a six foot iron spike, is surely symbolic of the agony of being parted from her son, and of seeing him borne away to such an alien world.

In classic allegory, Buning tells us, "the central cosmic metaphor is affirmative and reflects an ideal order or cosmos". (B 51) Except for the laboratory and punishment wing, and these are symbols rather than actualities, Glint Hall is just such a metaphor of cosmic orderliness. Neither laboratory nor punishment wing is more than mentioned, neither is described, but they stand for aspects of life that indubitably exist. The rest of Glint, on the other hand both inside and outside, is described in great detail. It is a picture of man's refuge from the wilderness in Edwardian days; when he leaves it now he is out in a different wilderness from the one from which it protected him. His choice is now between an

older culture (witness how John and Tenna find themselves "just before that ancient camp with the two Scotch firs"), or a new one of unknown implications; between following his stars and personal fate, or being carried by technology.

In thus undermining its own ending *The Inmates* is all of a piece with other modern allegory which in Buning's words "became an increasingly ironic mode of writing, sceptical of any publicly shared cosmic or collective system of thought or values, and concerned with highly subjective and fragmented presentations of reality and the self." (B13) Its strength is not in its cosmic imagery or magical causation but in the extraordinary concepts of personality which often react to one other like animated aphorisms; and above all in the intensely alert relationship between John Hush and Tenna Sheer, Repression finding expression, and Sensitivity finding strength to bear its perceptions.

NOTES

¹Kenneth Hopkins, *The Powys Brothers*, London: Dent, 1967, p. 226. Page references within my text are to *The Inmates*, London: Macdonald, 1952, and Village Press, 1974.

²John Brebner, *The Demon Within*, London: Macdonald, 1973, pp. 194-202. He mentions "quasi-allegory" but treats the book as "a series of tirades and diatribes".

³M. Krissdottir, *The Magical Quest*, London: Macdonald, 1980, p. 175. Krissdottir's description contains two errors of fact. She says that Tenna has murdered her father whereas in fact her attack left him apparently unscathed, and only resulted in her being confined in Glint Hall; certainly she often feels murderous towards him, and dreads his annual visit for fear of how she will feel when she sees him, but he remains very much alive, his objectionable personality strongly presented, and with unusual distaste (for John Cowper). Further Krissdottir states that the inmates *except* Pantamount are rescued whereas in fact

Pantamount is *also* rescued, in a significant and individual manner suggestive of nuances of further meaning.

⁴*Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson*, London: Macdonald 1958, and Village Press, 1974, p. 278. Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys, Novelist*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1973, gives *The Inmates* two pages as the first 'fantasy . . . in a contemporary setting', pp. 131-33.

⁵Marius Buning, *T. F. Powys: A Modern Allegorist*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986. Page references within my text, prefaced by B, refer to this edition; A. Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, New York, 1964.

⁶*Porius*, London: Macdonald, 1951, Ch. 1, The Watch-Tower; in *Porius* the detail of the views is less clearly symbolic.

⁷Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, London: Macmillan 1901, Vol. 1, p. 14.

Carys Richards

Recollections of Phyllis Playter*



John Cowper Powys outside 1 Waterloo, Blaenau Ffestiniog, with Gilbert Turner [?1958] (For Gilbert Turner, see *Recollection of the Powys Brothers*, ed. B. Humfrey, Peter Owen, 1980, pp. 211-221.)

It was late summer 1975 when I drove with my friend, G. from Porthmadog, which is in Gwynedd, North Wales, across the sea wall, known as the Cob and up into the mountains, following the River Dwyryd, until we reached the quarry town of Blaenau Ffestiniog. We were calling on Miss Phyllis Playter to take her for an afternoon drive.

We stopped outside a small house, stone built, with slates on the roof, of course. This is No 1, Waterloo, the left-hand house of a pair of semi-detached houses. My companion left me sitting in the car and knocked at the door. Shortly, a neat, small lady, dressed in black clothes, came out and was ushered into the front passenger seat of the car. We were introduced. She had a quiet voice, with a faint American accent.

We drove around the more spectacular roads nearby, talking of this and that; I think we went down the valley and then drove around the lake at Trawsfynydd. I had noticed a waterfall very close to 1, Waterloo, towards the back, in the Manod direction. I

enquired if the constant rush and splash of the water was distracting? "No," Miss Playter replied, "Mr Powys found it essential."

We stopped at a lay-by to admire the view. My companion offered cigarettes; Miss Playter took one, eagerly, and I saw, as I sat behind the neatly-hatted lady, that the fingers of her right hand were heavily stained with nicotine.

My friend had become acquainted with Miss Playter when they both took lunch at the North Western Hotel, Blaenau Ffestiniog. The power station at Tan-y-Grisiau was being built and many of the engineers ate their lunch at the hotel, so people were seated three or four to a table. G. noticed at once that Miss Playter cut up her food then ate her meat with a fork, in the American manner. John Cowper Powys did not appear there, he was already an old man when, in due course, my friend was invited to call. The house had only one tiny room downstairs and upstairs was filled with papers. J.C.P. was accustomed to rest a lot and when my friend met him he was usually sitting or lying down with a rug over his knees. He looked craggy and tall, with a shawl over his shoulders. Miss Playter always spoke of him as "Mr Powys", never "John". She was always dressed in black, from top to toe, and wore J.C.P.'s gold watch chain around her neck.

On another excursion, to Capel Newydd, "New Chapel", one of the oldest Non-Conformist chapels in Wales, near Aberdaron, according to Miss Playter, J.C.P. had commented "If a thing is called new, it's sure to be very, very old." She occasionally mentioned the Powys family; they called by appointment and did not stay very long. Her attitude to the Kennedy family came up in conversation and her attitude to Joe Kennedy my friend found surprising. She obviously didn't care for Kennedy because he had said we would lose the 39-45 war. This was the only time when G. found her manner a little strange.

When G. met Mr Powys, he never spoke of his work. G. was wearing a Celtic ring with a design on it, of a skull and cross-bones. He was interested in that, looked at it carefully and asked where it had come from. "Scotland". G. thought that Miss Playter was devoted to J.C.P. and felt it an honour to serve him and care for him. After his death, she kept in touch with his family, for the younger brothers and sisters

*This account comes unamended or annotated, as a script interesting for the record. Ed.

survived J.C.P. As far as G. knows, they did not visit the house in Blaenau after his death. There were masses of books and papers in the sitting room and landscape paintings on the walls, and one or two plants in pots, but no animals as there was really no room. During his last illness, a bed was taken downstairs for him and, eventually, Miss Playter used that, too.

In about 1970, after his death in 1963, Miss Playter inherited some money and went by cargo ship to South America. She returned to Blaenau instead of going to the USA as one might have expected. While G. knew her, she seemed settled in Wales, looking after J.C.P.'s affairs. She interviewed all his many visitors while he was alive, she mentioned "a publisher" and "poets". When J.C.P. died, she was old, too, and lived in one room. She looked after his papers and did not mix much with the people in the town. She tried to find a place in an old people's home but was never successful. Mrs Roberts of the North Western Hotel helped her to the end of her days. As far as G. knew, neither J.C.P. nor Miss Playter attended church or chapel, and G. thinks she died in the hospital at Blaenau Ffestiniog.

She is remembered as a very poetic person; G. took her out for many drives in her car and remembers how she enjoyed seeing light and shade in the clouds and on the landscape. She loved to move about the district, going on the bus to Portmadog for instance. Miss Playter and G. discussed contemporary affairs at their lunch table at Blaenau; she was very liberal in her ideas, a keen anti-vivisectionist; she loved the theatre and occasionally went to plays in London. G. found her very companionable and interesting.

At the time I write, December 1990, No 1 Waterloo stands empty and is for sale. There is a plaque on the wall which reads—

"John Cowper Powys
Author and poet, 1872-1963
lived here for the last nine years of his life
with
Phyllis Playter
his faithful companion
for over forty years."

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

London

Dear Editor,

I wonder if other readers were as dismayed as I was by Desirée Hirst's speculation in *PR* 25:

"It is ironical to consider now that if the side they [i.e. Sylvia Townsend-Warner and JCP] had supported had won, Spain today might be in the same situation as Czechoslovakia, a country striving for freedom from a Marxist tyranny, rather than a prosperous member of the European community . . ."

In the first place, John Cowper Powys was, of course, a supporter of the *Anarchists* in the Spanish Civil War—a very different

grouping to the hard-line Communism Sylvia Townsend-Warner espoused.

But much more worrying, Ms Hirst seems unaware of the events that followed Franco's victory. Between 1939 and 1942, more than 2 million Spaniards went through the prison system; some twenty thousand were executed; and, in one of the great fiascos of modern times, many hundreds of thousands went into exile. Franco's tyranny lasted more than twenty years, and has left deep wounds in the entire fabric of Spanish society.

If that is the price of entry into Desirée Hirst's smugly "prosperous" Europe, it seems rather high.

Yours sincerely,
Timothy Hyman

Richard Aldington: A Biography,
CHARLES DOYLE.

London, Macmillan, 1989. xxx 379pp.

I can hardly be alone among readers of my generation in having been far more familiar with the name of Richard Aldington than with the full extent of his writings. The cupboard of my reading is not entirely bare, for *Death of a Hero* stands on the shelf solidly enough, as does *Portrait of a Genius . . . But*. In the shadows there is also a memory of time spent browsing through *The Religion of Beauty*. But I am almost more conscious of the dust at the bottom of the cupboard, of some of that multitude of fragments which have worked to keep Aldington's name before one's eyes: his signature on *Blast*; his cameo appearances in so many literary memoirs and narratives of the *Blasting and Bombardiering* kind; his burning celebration of D. H. Lawrence in that letter to Frieda which prefaced the Penguin *Apocalypse*, reviews and introductions, editions and revaluations. He has seldom been wholly out of sight as one has read around Eliot or Pound or Lewis or Lawrence, and yet equally seldom entirely in focus. He has been a familiar short-term presence on the page and in the scene, an attendant lord as he himself once put it, always—curiously—at one remove, even from that phenomenon of Imagism of which he, rather than Pound, was arguably the centre.

Inevitably I then find it a strength of Charles Doyle's biography, part of its candour, that while at last presenting Aldington not just as a satellite but as the centre of his own life, it should implicitly explain such a partial experience of Aldington's writing as my own, in effect contextualizing that experience as a commonplace. Clearly, Aldington deserves no less than a biography, and yet what here emerges are the distinct trajectories discernible in his life and career, often impelled by personal and financial considerations as much as by artistic ones, which repeatedly deflected him from the literary centre he half-occupied: the spinning off from the vortex of Modernism and eventually from poetry; the shakings-off of the dust of first England and then Europe, the Second World War spent in Hollywood. Doyle further high-

lights Aldington's neglecting to cultivate any network of friendships in any formal way, though long-standing and reciprocated friendships and loyalties (particularly to H. D.) there most certainly were. Yet living for the day can make the years difficult and perhaps lonely, although there were also new friends, such as Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell. However, Doyle's final, most powerful and somewhat ironic pictures are of a seventy-year old Aldington considerably moved by, and grateful for, his standing and entertainment not in England, France or the USA, but in the Soviet Union of the 1950s and early 60s. Whatever the force of the critical realism of *Death of a Hero* and his subsequent fiction, it was an extraordinary milieu within which Aldington should find his apotheosis among both readers and the academy—not to mention enough roubles to constitute a significant part of the slender income of his last years. It was the most distant and unforeseeable point along that tangent flung out from the vortex of modernist London so many years before, a course in turn typically marked by periods of overwork, astonishing productivity, and limited financial rewards.

The texture of Doyle's narrative, in the main an even-paced record of meetings, correspondence, negotiations with publishers and the turns of personal relationships, makes for informative rather than riveting reading. The controversy surrounding the publication and reception of Aldington's biography of T. E. Lawrence perhaps understandably generates most energy and excitement within the writing, and indeed, in dealing with the demythicization of a national hero, reflects interestingly on the tensions of British culture in the era of the Angry Young Men. If one could wish for a more strongly defined interpretation of Aldington, or even for the presence of a more enlivening evangelical stance towards the importance of Aldington's writing, Charles Doyle makes clear his own position about the duties of the biographer towards the presentation of evidence as he evaluates the more subjective stances of Aldington's own biographies, and provides a measured assessment of Aldington's achievements over the range of his literary activities. Yet in demonstrating how much there was in Aldington that made him his own man, it is also fascinating that

even at Doyle's most perceptive, the insights into Aldington still have often to be phrased in terms of triangulations involving those other literary figures from whom he can not, and perhaps should not, ever be entirely freed:

Lawrence, by precept and example, had rooted him out of his Berkshire cottage into a life of travel and wider cultural contact. If Pound had led the way in despising London intellectual life, Lawrence had shown how to stand apart from it. Above all, Lawrence was the great instance of intuitive engagement with life and commitment to sense experience. As an epicurean, Aldington too desired to pursue life with spontaneity and gusto, without being dominated by the staleness of second thought. But another part of his nature sought detachment, objectivity, the scholar's distance, and in any event was wary and sceptical. (249)

Yet in the face of trajectories that led to early death or the asylum, it was perhaps that wariness and scepticism which protected as much as it limited him.

PETER MILES

Echoes,
GERARD CASEY

Rigby and Lewis, 1990, 130 pp., £

In *Echoes* Gerary Casey brings together a sequence of poems: *Visions*, a set of translations (or 'echoes') from other sources; *Between the Symplegades*, likewise echoes of a sequence of poems by George Seferis; and *South Wales Echo*. Poetry for Casey is a shifting, restless medium, constantly looking to escape too close an association with a particular time or place. Truth lies not in the objective, tangible world of the historical fact or current event, but in the echoes which link such things over the ages, echoes which merge to create and sustain the myths that point to a human condition outside, and ultimately beyond the realm of historical process.

South Wales Echo is a substantial poem first written many years ago and since revisited and revised. Although an 'original' work, the text

effectively requires us to read it as a series of echoes, revealed through many different voices. There is a continuity with the previous poems here in that *South Wales Echo*, with its stated location in time and place (a paper boy in Cardiff hawking the 'South Wales Echo' outside a pub on the night before All Souls' Day), as soon loses that fixity in a medley of historical, geographical, cultural and of course religious echoes.

Sensing society in a state of fragmentation, dying if not dead, Casey's intention to provide a vision of a wholeness beyond the ruins inevitably calls to mind T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There too we have precise location repeatedly dissolving in a whirl of cultural, religious echoes born from a vision of organic wholeness and order uttered in a multiplicity of voices. In common with *The Waste Land* also we have 'notes' to help guide us through the wide range of references.

The point of contact with Eliot is important; the diagnosis is a shared one, and Casey is clearly a poet who still identifies closely with the Modernist school of which Eliot was a central figure. Gerard Casey's response, however, is in many ways a very different one, even if at times his imagery of broken bones and aridity, his use of incantatory lines and even more specific echoes ("come on lads it's time") does bring *The Waste Land* strongly to mind. *South Wales Echo* is an altogether more passionate work; its roots are firmly in its south Wales location; this poet has an experience of belonging that Eliot desired but patently lacked. Casey's different voices operate with equal force, unlike Eliot's medley, where the cultured Tiresian voice is invariably discernable behind the mask.

Throughout the work there is a spirit of genuine playfulness as Casey shifts the voices, explores 'public' myth alongside private remembrance and fancy. Here the point revolves around "hear him"; do we "get the Echo"?

there's the paperboy there
can't you hear him?
get the Echo . . .

old bones at the fort of Didius
where the seaway crosses the river
have no ears . . .

Taken back in time, we are asked repeatedly to listen, to have "ears". We must listen for the echo that takes us beyond the deadening anxieties of everyday life, "of iron and coal and bank

accounts/and then of course there's silicosis". The richness of south Wales community life pulses through the lines, and yet it is a broken hearted requiem, interpolated with fragments of popular song, suggesting in the end a vision of a community, if not a culture, succumbing at last to the choking dust of silicosis:

aye won it up the valleys
 on a ticket in the raffle
 for the cracked chapel bell
 but 'e won't last long
 'e'll soon be with Dai central-'eating'
 mutton for 'Arry the boxer
 it's the dust they say that does it
 let's drop in at the Anchor.

South Wales Echo is a remarkable poem. It charts an heroic voyage towards the nameless state of peace that lies for ever beyond, "beyond bright . . . beyond still . . . beyond utter"; a voyage into the redeeming presence of nothingness:

a little farther
 see

the almond flowers
 the stone sparkles
 the wave breaks

a little farther
 look
 there . . . no
 a little higher

("almond flowers", Seferis)

JOHN WILLIAMS

Tongues in Trees: Studies in Literature and Ecology,
 KIM TAPLIN.

Green Books, 1989, £9.95 (paperback)

Like the Duke in *As You Like It*, Kim Taplin finds 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything'. Everything, that is, which is a product of the earth or the imagination, rather than the human hand. She believes that "most of us make now too great a separation between the physical and the spiritual", and the central thesis of

Tongues in Trees is that "human health, physical, psychological and spiritual, is wedded to that of the earth". For Kim Taplin, the most telling indicator of this health is our attitude to trees. Through examining the occurrence in English literature of 'the tree' as symbol and substance she observes how fourteen English writers and poets have viewed their changing native countryside.

The emphasis throughout is on the observation of change in the landscape, which is generally viewed as 'a bad thing'. Whether in the Autumnal mood of Keats's lyrics or the uneasy beauty of Frances Horowitz's poetry, there is a strong sense of loss running through Taplin's choice of subjects: of lamenting for a past time when mankind was supposedly in closer communion with primal nature. Her concern that our relationship with the natural world has gone dangerously wrong is certainly justified—as we are all too well aware by now—and *Tongues in Trees* will certainly appeal to the newly, and sometimes naïvely, 'environmentally-conscious'. Is it just another title to add to the ever-growing compost heap of 'green' books? I believe not. Certainly the publisher's name is discouraging to those suspicious of such newly-found zealotry, and the term 'ecology' in the title clearly derives from the rather fluffy usage which attempts to encompass 'all things green and beautiful', rather than any definition which would be recognized by a professional ecologist. These are superficial matters, however, and not indicative of the book's contents. *Tongues in Trees* is a serious and worthwhile work which should appeal to anyone interested in the English rural landscape and its evolution.

Each chapter is prefaced by a selection of poetry and prose from the works to be discussed, and, in general, this arrangement works well. Where the writers are familiar to one—Gerard Manley Hopkins or E. M. Forster, for example—Taplin's interpretations ring true. Where less commonly-known poets are discussed, though, a wider knowledge is assumed and Taplin's comments may have to be taken on trust. William Barnes's "Meäple Leaves", for example, is said to remind us "more effectively than direct exhortation that life passes and we must live it as well as we can". The unfamiliar poem is not quoted, however, and it is at such moments that a tension is discernible in the book between popular discussion, anthology, and critical study. On the whole, nevertheless, the mix works, and I found *Tongues in Trees*

enjoyable and thought-provoking, and was also grateful to be introduced to the poetry of Frances Horovitz for the first time.

The central theme of trees works surprisingly well, in no case did it seem to be contrived or strained. Initially I assumed that the volume would not be about actual trees at all, but about 'the Greenwood', the projection of human sentiments onto the trees, and about anything but the living organisms themselves. This is not the case, however. In addition to musings invoked by woodland, many of the selections do deal with the palpable, independent existence of trees. As well as the impressionistic voice of Keats who "never beheld an oak-tree without seeing the Dryad", there is also Hopkins's minute observation of the form and "inscape" of oaks: "the determining planes are concentric, a system of brief contiguous and continuous tangents, whereas those of the cedar would roughly be called horizontals and those of the beech radiating but modified by droop and by a screw-set towards jutting points". Perhaps at the heart of the book is that great mystic of the English countryside, Richard Jefferies, who embraces at once the spirit and reality of trees: "Leaning against the oak's massive trunk, and feeling the rough bark and the lichen at my back, looking southwards over the grassy fields, cowslip-yellow, at the woods on the slope, I thought my desire of deeper soul-life".

Kim Taplin's deft handling of the diversity of arboreal references in her chosen writers, melding them into a single coherent theme—"our need to remind ourselves of the primal relationship which contains the possibility of living with trees"—makes this work far more successful than the trivial, fashionable survey it might have been. *Tongues in Trees* is a worthwhile study which can be thoroughly recommended.

MICHAEL BELL

Between History and Literature,
LIONEL GOSSMAN.

Harvard University Press, 1990, 412pp., £31.95

"We do well to remember", says the author of this urbane and learned volume, "that our present disciplinary boundaries are neither necessary nor eternal". They are, in fact, remarkably recent in origin and their separate, mutually ex-

clusive categories would have been unrecognised by earlier generations. Writers of fiction and history in the eighteenth century both contrived to establish an ironic distance between narrator and narrative and maintained a clear distinction between *discours* and *histoire*. Nineteenth-century fiction and history on the other hand relied on a new-style covert narrator to produce narratives that seemed real, binding and inescapable. In these two periods "the work of the literary artist and that of the historian were intimately connected, even ... indistinguishable". Gibbon was the Fielding of eighteenth-century historiography, Thierry and Michelet the exact counterparts of Balzac and Hugo in the nineteenth century.

Gossman's book explores different aspects of the changing relationship between literature and history over time and places its nine component essays in three sections entitled "History of literature", "Literature of history", and "History and literature". All previously published, the essays appeared at various points between 1971 and 1989; six of them date from the 1980s. In its wide-ranging discussion the book draws in writers as varied as Matthew Arnold, R. G. Collingwood, Voltaire, Lionel Trilling, and Hayden White. It also rescues relatively obscure figures such as Prosper de Barante and Alexandre Vinet.

For Gossman himself—Professor of French at Princeton University—it is "second nature for me to take a historical view of everything and anything and to regard texts, aesthetic and rhetorical codes, and theories old or new, as moves in a political, social, and cultural struggle which it is my job as a critic to identify and elucidate". All the essays here are shaped by that central conviction though, it has to be said, it never hardens into dogma. "In more than thirty years of teaching and writing about literature", Gossman concedes, "I have not succeeded in developing a single, consistent theoretical position of my own or, for that matter, in embracing anybody else's. Competing arguments only too often strike me as equally compelling ... My loyalties are also divided". The stance adopted in the final essay on "The Rationality of History", apparently, is one which Gossman earlier opposed.

The longest and weightiest section of the book is the central one which offers extended appraisals of France's two most eminent historians of the nineteenth century. First, Gossman demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that "the

premises and ideals—and contradictions—of liberalism in early nineteenth-century France inform every aspect of Thierry's work: his philosophy of history, his idea of the function of historiography, the dominant themes of his work, and, most directly, the problems of composition he encountered as a writer of history". Michelet's *resurrection* of the past is next considered, "honouring it and easing its pain, in order that the present might be relieved of the burden of guilt". For Gossman, indeed, Michelet ranks as "one of the great historians of all time", a writer whose "wild imagination" could not be contained within the safe, conventional categories of nineteenth-century historiography.

Those already familiar with Gossman's earlier books on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and on *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment* will approach these essays with great expectations. They are unlikely to be disappointed. Although invariably in a collection of this kind there is some repetition, the essays abound with insights, sound scholarship and temperate judgements.

R. C. RICHARDSON

Edgell Rickword. A Poet at War,
CHARLES HOBDDAY.

Carcanet, 1989. 337 pp.

The Carcanet Press has served Rickword well with a collection of his poems (a definitive edition is still lacking) and, still more important, the two volumes of *Essays and Opinions*. This latest addition, 'a biography rather than a critical study', is essentially a literary biography. Thus no attempt is made to penetrate that opaque early relationship with his first wife. The laconic abruptness with which we are told of 'Peggy's madness' matches that with which Thackeray announces George's death at Waterloo 'with a bullet through his head'. The war, acknowledged as an important formative phase, is also sparsely treated, since Rickword's unpublished memoirs are said to be defective in this area. They appear to be impressionistic, like the memories of many veterans who found one patch of Flanders mud indistinguishable from another. So Mr Hobdday ekes out with background information (not always accurate: there was no *Royal Army Service Corps* in 1915).

Rickword's training with the Artists Rifles at Gidea Park began about four months after Wilfred Owen had left. It is suggested that 'the peculiar nature' of this 'smoothly-running machine for turning out Officers' (as it was described soon afterwards), 'gave him a better chance of finding congenial company . . . than he would have had in another unit'. This remark jars like Mr Hobdday's eager joining with those who find it important to demonstrate a macho spirit amongst war poets by insistent reference to awards of the Military Cross (the decoration is actually indexed in Johnston's *English Poetry of the First World War*). He might have recalled Sassoon on the fortuitous distribution of decorations, or indeed the arbitrary change of rules governing awards during the Falklands 'dispute'. It is pleasant to find that in Rickword's memoirs, 'the episode in which he won his M. C. is not even mentioned'.

These matters are not trifling since they point towards larger deficiencies. Rickword was one of those young intellectuals radicalised by pre-war labour unrest who graduated to the Communist Party in the thirties. But it is difficult to get any sense of the man's political profile during those crucial 1920s from this book. There is a remarkable moment recorded when, concerned to help the strikers in 1926, Rickword travelled to London by blackleg-run train. The irony prompts no comment from Mr Hobdday. Only towards the end, apropos of his place in Sisson's *English Poetry 1900-1950*, do we glimpse the anti-humanist element, 'influences of Wyndham Lewis and de Sade, the contempt for "the loutish mass"—which he later repudiated'. Otherwise, we must turn to Rickword's own writings for enlightenment. The anxieties of his class found expression in Masterman's conception of *the crowd*, that same crowd flowing over London Bridge in Eliot's *Waste Land*. Rickword engages with Eliot's dazzling technical innovation, not with the way that it abets a gratingly unsympathetic caricature of a working-class pub. Nor is he disturbed that, in the aftermath of the carnage (which had cost him an eye), the poem peddles the same old vitalist doctrine which had fed pre-war madness. Rickword's generation, unlike the next, was apt to maintain an artificial gap between politics and aesthetics. The passage quoted from Rickword's important reappraisal of Sade is significantly based on wartime observations, the gong-hunting masochist in the line and the sadist who is part of the base-camp organization. But this sticks at witty paradox,

with no hint of grand-sadist puppet-master twitching the strings of both.

The biography is curiously evasive about Rickword as Russophile; curiously since it is made plain in the discussion of 'Incompatible Worlds' that it is an idealized USSR which is held up in contrast to Nazi Germany. Yet still Mr Hobday would dangle the alternative of 'the Western democracies' (another ideological slogan), or perhaps both. Objective appraisal of the USSR hardly existed; it was forever idealized or damned. But a land of the free is always more a matter of aspiration than reality. To see Stalin's domain as a place 'Where people are accounted wealth/And liberty society's health' may seem outrageously naïve; but at least it was a naïveté which shied away from fascist *Realpolitik*. However, it is doubtful whether Rickword was naïve. Belief in the Popular Front was a powerful motive for keeping the Russian myth intact. Whether the end justified the means was a key topic of debate amongst the thirties intelligentsia. Its left-wing element was notably international in outlook, Russia and Spain being the twin foci of attention. This is very apparent in *Left Review*, edited by Rickword in 1936-7, where the miseries of domestic unemployment never distract from momentous events abroad. Further, British deaths reported from Spain will hardly include the likes of Scotty King, whose gun-running ended when he was blown out of the water, or any of the thirty Welsh miners lost with the International Brigade. *Left Review* set a pattern whereby a roll-call of the honoured dead is apt to read like some Pen Club membership list. But it had its justification; Ralph Fox, John Cornford, Charles Donnelly and Christopher Caudwell, the latter posthumously, were all contributors.

One of the most useful things in this biography is its account of Rickword's editing activities, beginning with *The Calendar of Modern Letters* (1925-7), spiritual parent of *Scrutiny*. London-based magazines like *Left Review* had a special importance in the thirties when the lights were going out in so many of the great journalistic centres of continental Europe.

GORDON WILLIAMS

EDITED BY BELINDA HUMFREY
JOHN COWPER
POWYS'S
WOLF SOLENT
Critical Studies



John Cowper Powys's Wolf Solent: Critical Studies

Edited by BELINDA HUMFREY

University of Wales Press, 1990, 238pp., £26.50

It is a matter for wry comment among non-specialist readers that an age of pre-eminently academic criticism often produces books of essays about a single novel that are longer than the novel itself. Although this collection does not approach the length of *Wolf Solent*, it is a sizeable, handsomely produced volume; and it bears conclusive witness not only to the resourcefulness of Powys's critics and commentators but also to the apparent in-exhaustibility of this particular author's mine of ideas and imagery. Even so, one feels that the thirteen essays it contains have not covered everything that can be said about this multi-faceted masterpiece of introspective fiction.

And yet how introspective is it? The designation is called in question by a number of the contributors, and those readers who have found themselves awestruck to the point of bewilderment by the sheer complex density of Powys's imagination will have this response enhanced by a collection which deploys a variety of critical methodologies to confront what is in some ways John Cowper's most enigmatic text. *Pace* H. P. Collins, *Wolf Solent* is Powys's equivalent to *Hamlet*—the play rather than the prince. It is the least easy of his novels to sum up or describe, always appearing to subvert its own apparent emphases and directions.

The longest and most instructive of the essays is contributed, suitably enough, by the editor. Based on research in the archives of the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, it provides a scholarly account of the book's composition, taking into

account also Ben Jones's work on the cancelled chapters about the disfigurement of Gerda, as well as unpublished letters to Phyllis Playter. It is particularly interesting to learn that Chapter 19 was written as a bridge chapter to make up for jettisoned material (an activity John Cowper was to get accustomed to). Humfrey's conclusion is that the book "challenges our belief in anyone's ability accurately to see, understand and represent other people", and that one is "warned away from any autobiographical readings of *Wolf Solent*". The third section of her essay invites a closer look at the novel's ending, about which the later contributors have a variety of, occasionally conflicting, things to say.

Both John Hodgson and Peter Easingwood emphasise the comedic aspects of the book. The former's "A Victim of Self-Vivisection" stresses Powys's deflationary technique, his anti-dramatic stance, his being "no teller of marvels". Hodgson sees *Wolf Solent* as a study in the interpretative powers of the human imagination, and as a freeing of Powys's own self from the restrictions of the 'Powys-hero' as portrayed in his previous novels. In "The Face on the Waterloo Steps" Easingwood, an authority on Powys's literary criticism, insists on the fortifying nature of the human capacity to interpret and thus to shape reality. "The excellence of Powys's art lies in his ability not only to show the struggle to defend the inner life from brutal invasion, but to make it the ground of a passionate resistance to the spectacle of suffering . . . that otherwise threatens to become universal and intolerable." This surely is one of Powys's chief credentials for being considered a great writer.

The essays by T. J. Diffey and Ned Lukacher are more directly philosophical. Diffey relates Wolf's mythology (of which he takes a more positive view than do some of the other contributors) to *The Meaning of Culture*, a book more or less contemporary with *Wolf Solent*. He also relates it, more perceptively, to Christie Malakite's own novel, 'Slate'; and this concern with fictiveness is taken further by Lukacher in a closely argued examination of the metaphorical patterning of the book. Some readers may find this essay hard going, but it rewards close attention, even from those to whom the strategies and vocabulary of contemporary critical methodology are unfamiliar.

Ian Hughes, Charles Lock and Ben Jones are more pragmatic in approach, concerning themselves with the way in which the story is told and with the technical problems presented by Powys's

choice of a single narratorial consciousness. Hughes sees the novel as concluding with the protagonist's release into a sense of an objective world about him, a view that is unfriendly to the "mythology". So too is Lock, but he stresses that the break-up of Wolf's dream world is in the nature of things less important than other critics make out, being "completely irrelevant to the story, for it had existed only in Wolf's mind, and was quite independent of external historical events, the events of the story". Lock emphasises the importance of the story both as being a pattern of external events and also as highlighting the myth-making powers of the imagination, which alone can render random happenings meaningful. Ben Jones likewise emphasises the sense of narrative progression, but this time, as his title declares, through Powys's handling of "The Look of the Other". He makes interesting use of the thought of Sartre, a writer with whom I do not recollect Powys to have been compared before.

Four of the essays introduce a feminist perspective. Carole Coates (whose chapter on *Wolf Solent* in *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape* still strikes me as one of the best accounts of the book that I have read) here discusses Powys's attraction towards androgyny as it affects his portrayals of Gerda and Christie; while Penny Smith's concluding essay deals with the stoicism implicit in the novel's outcome. (In this collection Wolf's concluding "cup of tea" is discussed so exhaustively as almost to empty the pot.) Smith looks ahead to the development of Powys's philosophy in *Porius*, a novel which receives more extended treatment in Elizabeth Tombs's discomfitingly entitled essay, "Prodding the Female Substance of the Earth".

This is the most contentious and genuinely critical article in the collection, and it is refreshing to find a very specifically human scrutiny brought to bear not only on *Wolf Solent* but also on the conclusion to *Porius*. "We are left with an almost gratuitous sense of complacency, a state of solitude which is perhaps not quite what was expected, a man devoid of passion and anger who, once he has emerged from the battle, always seen to the end in sexual terms, is a curiously reduced figure." Powys himself would have been swift to advance a propitiatory assent to that. His use of the imagination was partially self-protective, and in "Creative Lies" Margaret Moran examines that myth-making activity. In doing so she conveys a good sense of what the process of reading John Cowper Powys is

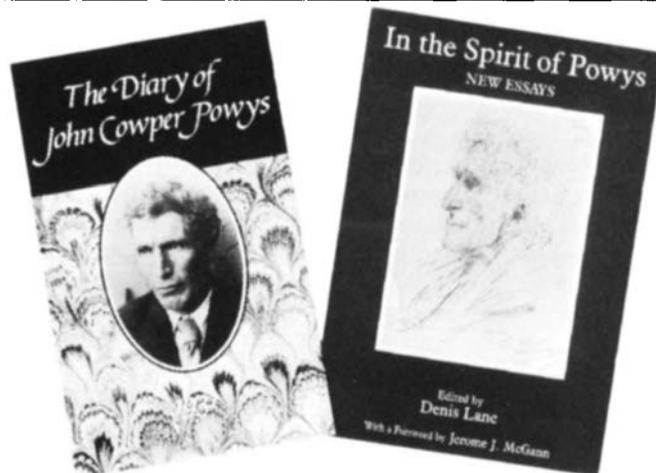
actually like. I enjoyed this essay especially. Moran makes an apt observation that I had not come across before, noting that “an oddity about modern reading habits is that a high tolerance for extraordinary phenomena in the depiction of the inner world exists alongside the demand for authenticity in the presentation of the outer one.” In that phrase the peculiar character and contribution of John Cowper Powys’s major novels receive a genuine illumination.

The odd one out among these essays is Peter G. Christensen’s discussion of Jason Otter’s poems. He chooses to treat them contextually rather than analytically, an approach that has its uses. However, I wish that he had said more about them as instances of Powys’s own artistry, and thus remedied an omission in Roland Mathias’s *The Hollowed-Out Elder Stalk*. Their haunting, outlandish and very disquieting beauty is an integral part of the total atmosphere of the novel, just as Edward Athling’s poems are integral to Powys’s *Glastonbury*.

Three of these essays have already appeared in shortened form in *The Powys Review*; but that

still leaves a wealth of new material—material, however, which could do with an index rather than a bibliography which is available elsewhere. The frontispiece shows John Cowper’s own sketch map of the region; it compares amusingly with the very ‘period’ one provided for the one-volume American edition. The question raised by this collection as a whole is, of course, that of multiplicity of interpretation: do all these different viewpoints cancel out? Only if they are read one after the other and too fast. It is the novel which puts the critics to the test. What one is left with is a novel whose diversity of interpretative strands are realised and harmonised in the happenings of the plot. Wolf himself is like a novelist, and the balance between external reality and imaginative creativity which the book achieves is the object of the protagonist’s quest as well. This multiple investigation into the imaginative procedures of one particular text vindicates that confidence in Powys as a major novelist which obviously prompted its inception.

GLEN CAVALIERO



1990 brought a considerable weight of publication of J. C. Powys material and critical studies of his work. There was the uncut *Maiden Castle* (UWP), reviewed in *PR*, 25, the several collections of letters from Powys, published by Cecil Woolf, and the *Diary* of 1931, published by Greymitre. In criticism there was the collection of G. Wilson Knight’s essays, entitled *Visions and Vices: Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cecil Woolf), “*Wolf Solent*”: *Critical Studies* (UWP), reviewed here, and mainly from the USA, *In the Spirit of Powys*, a collection of articles edited by Denis Lane (London & Toronto: Bucknell University Press). We look forward to publishing reviews of those books so far not examined in *The Powys Review*, Number 27.

Critics and editors have been productive recently, but where are the further reprints of Powys’s major novels? Why have there been no more paperbacks since the great sales successes of Pan Picador in the early 1980s? Is the general reader of the 1990s to be deprived of easy access to J. C. Powys? Many academics would like to introduce their students to his novels but, except for the Penguin *Wolf Solent*, they cannot find ready and cheap copies for their course lists.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

MICHAEL BELL, a Research Scientist at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, is currently completing a doctoral thesis in Marine Biology for the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.

GLEN CAVALIERO, a member of the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, is the author of *John Cowper Powys, Novelist* (Oxford, 1973), *A Reading of E. M. Forster and Charles Williams: Poet of Theology* (Macmillan, 1979 & 1983).

HARALD FAWKNER, a Reader in English at Gothenburg University, has published books on Dickens (1977) and John Fowles (1984), *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (1986) and in 1990 *Deconstructing Macbeth and Anthony and Cleopatra* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press).

TIMOTHY HYMAN, artist and critic, had a one-man exhibition most recently at the Austin/Desmond Gallery, Bloomsbury, November 1990, and appeared at length on the BBC 'Late Show', March 1991, discussing Stanley Spencer.

PETER MILES, lecturer in English, University College of Wales, Lampeter, recently Reviews Editor of *The Powys Review*, is co-editor of *Cinema, Literature and Society . . . in Interwar Britain* (Croom Helm, 1987) and author of *The Critics Debate: "Wuthering Heights"* (Macmillan, 1990).

JANINA NORDIUS is engaged in doctoral research on John Cowper Powys at the University of Gothenburg.

SUSAN RANDS, sometime employed by *John O' London's Weekly*, now farms and engages in geneo-logical research in Somerset.

CARYS RICHARDS is the author of three Welsh language novels; in 1988 she won a Welsh Arts Council prize for an autobiographical essay published in *Ar Fy Myw* (Honno, 1990).

R. C. RICHARDSON has been Head of the Division of History and Archaeology at King Alfred's College, Winchester since 1977. His publications include *The Debate on the English Revolution Revisited* (Routledge, 1989) and *Freedom and the English Revolution* (with G. M. Ridden) (Manchester University Press, 1986). He has been co-editor of the journal *Literature and History* since 1975.

ERNST VERBEEK, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Ghent, has published a book on the personality and works of John Cowper Powys, *De Goden Verzoeken* (Van Gorcum, Assen, 1989).

GORDON WILLIAMS, Senior Lecturer in English, University College of Wales, Lampeter, publishes on a range of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and twentieth century war literature; a recent work is a study of *Coriolanus* (Macmillan, 1987).

JOHN WILLIAMS, Senior Lecturer and Head of English, Thames Polytechnic, has published books on twentieth century British poetry (Arnold 1985 & 1987) and *Wordsworth: Romantic Poetry and Revolution Politics* (Manchester University Press, 1989).

JOHN COWPER POWYS EXHIBITION: UPPSALA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, 6 November - 1 December 1990

This splendid exhibition of more than 140 items, publications by or about John Cowper Powys, with manuscript letters, the collection of Powys's correspondent and translator, Sven Erik Täckmark, was in fact so successful that it was extended into 1991.

To accompany the exhibition, Uppsala University published a 48 page booklet, with sixteen photographic illustrations, which itself must now be a collector's item. Its catalogue is introduced not only by articles in Swedish by Thomas Tottie, Sven Erik Täckmark and Ingemar Algulin, but by two English academics, Charles Lock and Cedric Hentschel. Cedric Hentschel recalls his travelling from "blitzed London" in 1941 to Uppsala University, "a beacon of light and enlightenment". He sees Uppsala as initiating European studies of Powys in that year and so, appropriately launching the first major Powys exhibition. Charles Lock, providing information about Powys scholarship in Britain and America, within the confines of his six introductory pages provides some neat literary associations and some challenging declarations for Swedish/European readers:

Wolf Solent is both a pastoral story with many elements of romance, and an extremely modern novel, addressing the problems of consciousness, the futility of emotions and the insincerity of motives, that we associate with the fiction of Kafka, Hamsun and Camus.

Powys's reputation will be secure only when people start to *pretend* that they have read *A Glastonbury Romance*. Tolstoy provides an appropriate standard of comparison, as does Dostoevsky, Powys's favourite of all novelists.

B.H.



Lyckans Väsen *The Art of Happiness*, Stockholm, 1937.

ISSN 0309-1619