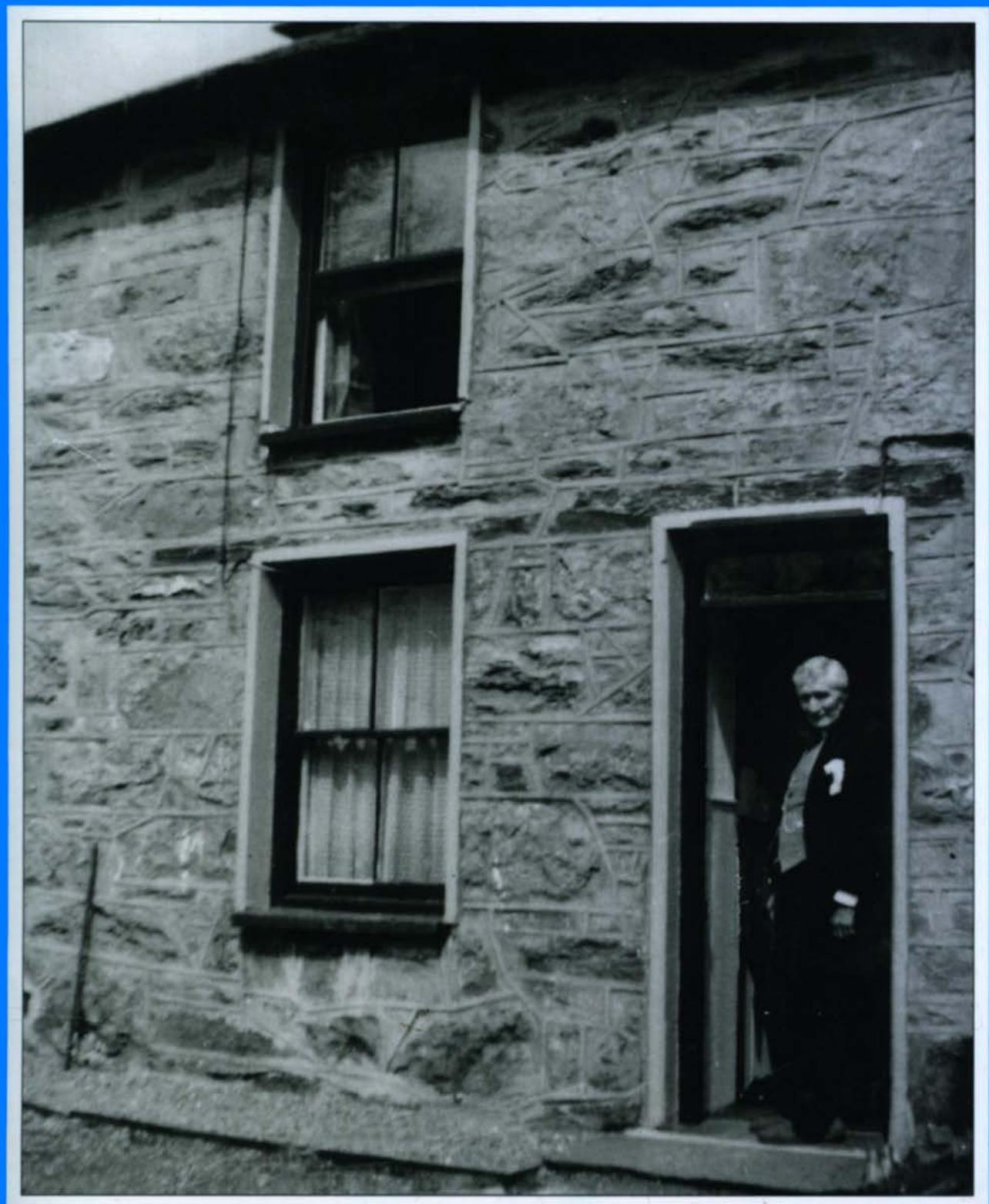


# The Powys Review

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# The Powys Review

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Cover photograph: John Cowper Powys in the doorway of 1 Waterloo, Blaenau Ffestiniog  
(Photograph: Raymond Garlick)

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## Editorial

In September 1996, the Welsh Academy celebrated the 70th birthday of Raymond Garlick in an evening which included readings of his poems and the launch of a book about him, elegantly-written by Don Dale-Jones, for the University of Wales Press, Writers of Wales Series. Raymond Garlick's parents were English and he was born in London. However, annual school holidays with his grandparents who lived in Deganwy, N. Wales, and some wartime evacuation there, gave him the dream, made reality, of becoming a student at Bangor and spending a life in Wales. His literary career and a consequent collection of literary friendships among the brightest and best of Wales started at university, the most impressive for him then being Brenda Chamberlain who rented him part of her mountainside cottage in which he lived until he moved south to Pembroke Dock County School as a newly married teacher in 1949.

The inspired and inspiring headmaster who appointed Raymond Garlick was the poet, historian and literary critic, Roland Mathias, known to readers of John Cowper Powys for his *The Hollowed-Out Elder Stalk: John Cowper Powys as Poet* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1979) among other Powys criticism. (The Welsh Academy celebrated Roland Mathias's 80th birthday in 1995 with an excursion to sacred literary sites in Pembrokeshire.) Through Mathias's arts society, the "Dock Leaves Group", Garlick at 23 was appointed editor of the only Anglo-Welsh periodical in existence, *Dock Leaves*, eventually renamed *The Anglo-Welsh Review*. (Roland Mathias took over this important editorship in 1961.) Garlick's editorship brought meetings with

writers like Dylan Thomas (1953), John Cowper Powys (1952), and friendships with others like A. G. Prys-Jones, Glyn Jones and R. S. Thomas. His editorials over 10 years "developed his view of Anglo-Welsh writing and helped him clarify important personal, national and literary issues" (DDJ); among much else these editorials led to his pioneering work, *An Introduction to Anlgo-Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: UWP, 1970, rev. 1972), which finds a tradition of Welsh writing in English dating from 1470, and to his editing with Roland Mathias the anthology *Anglo-Welsh Poetry, 1480-1980* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1984, rev. 1993).

In 1954, Raymond Garlick left Pembroke Dock for Ffestiniog County School. Here it was that he began his friendship with John Cowper Powys:

. . . really coming to know him dated from the moment when, early in 1955, I encountered him and his life's companion, Phyllis Playter, in a torrential downpour on the main street of Blaenau Ffestiniog, and they told me they had just bought a small cottage and were coming to live there . . . He said that . . . in 1935 . . . it was to Blaenau Ffestiniog that he wanted to come: it was James Hanley who persuaded him instead to live in Corwen. Now at last he was reverting to his original plan . . .

I knew JCP only in the last ten years of his life: he was nearly eighty when I first met him. I always called him Mr Powys, and that is how I still think of him (he was more than fifty years my senior) . . . There was nothing in the least distant or condescending, pompous or histrionic, about him: he was natural, open, spontaneous, warm and beautifully mannered.

In appearance he was immensely disting-

uished—tall, spare, with a slight stoop, ascetic of feature, his head crowned with a mass of tight curls (except when Phyllis gave him a haircut). The portrait head that Augustus John was to draw when he came to Blaenau is a good likeness and evokes his glowing vivacity, and yet there is something slightly feminine about it—which was wholly lacking in JCP. [Jonah Jones's fine bronze head of him, now in the National Library records] powerfully the almost primitive, Neanderthal strength which was also a dimension of JCP's face and character.

This quotation comes from the third of three vivid recollective essays which Raymond Garlick wrote later: "Powys in Gwynedd" (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, Cardiff: UWP, 1972, pp. 229-310); "Blaenau Remembered" (*Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, London: Peter Owen, 1980, pp. 238-241) and "Mr Powys and Miss Playter" (*Planet* 110, April 1995, pp. 52-58).

Closer to his time of regular visits to JCP, Raymond Garlick wrote poems about him, first published in 1957 and 1964 and including the long *Blaenau Observed*, broadcast (BBC Welsh Home Service) in 1956 and printed, with a dedication to Powys, by the Dock Leaves Press in 1957. These poems, and the editorial and contents page of a special Powys number of *Dock Leaves* follow this editorial.

In 1961 Raymond Garlick moved to the Netherlands to teach for six years before taking up a lectureship at Trinity College, Carmarthen. Here his own writing of poetry has flourished. When Herbert Williams's scripted film on Powys was being partly made in Dyffryn House Gardens (near Cardiff) a couple of years ago, it was a pleasure to see Raymond Garlick sitting in the sun holding forth beautifully about Mr Powys; it was a disappointment that so little

of his face and voice were shown in the completed film, but it is good that they are there.



Raymond Garlick

**DOCK LEAVES**  
**EDITED BY RAYMOND GARLICK**  
**VOLUME SEVEN NUMBER NINETEEN**

*A National Review in English of Welsh Arts and Letters*

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INCE the subject of this, the third Special Issue of *Dock Leaves*, and the writer of the Editorial that customarily opens on this page live within a few hundred yards of each other, it would — if only for that reason — be pretentious for the latter to attempt to write a formal introduction to the work of so celebrated and distinguished a neighbour. Those who do not habitually omit reading the Editorial might, in any case, hazard a guess that — had there been one on this occasion — it would have tended to underline the Welsh influences in Mr. Powys's life and work. It would have pointed out that the source of *Porius* is to be found in the *Brut Dinestow*, whose Welsh Mr. Powys has admitted to reading with greater ease than the Middle English of Chaucer. It would have suggested that the testimony of *Obstinate Cymric* deserves fuller consideration by critics outside Wales. It would have drawn attention to a paragraph in the Introduction to *Visions and Revisions*\*, the most recently published of Mr. Powys's books: "I also note with satisfaction the inclusion in this shelf of books, which might well be at the foot of anybody's bed, only two additions to the ones mentioned here, namely Horner in the Loeb Classics and the *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, in Welsh, with notes by Sir Ifor Williams. One book only, for it is too big to go into the shelf opposite my couch, is within reach of my left arm, namely the Bible in Welsh along with our own Authorized Version : for there is to me a peculiar interest in noting how the familiar words upon which I was brought up look as they appear in the language of my fathers as I read them in their land." But both editor and public are delivered, on this occasion, from an Editorial, and a further handful of pages is set free for the much more authoritative contributors who follow.

\* A Book of Literary Devotions (Macdonald, 1955: 151.)

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# Raymond Garlick

## Four Poems on John Cowper Powys

### BLAENAU OBSERVED (1956)

(This extract starts one quarter into the final part, 'Scene seven. Evening'. *Blaenau Observed* was first published by Dock Leaves Press, 1957, after a BBC Welsh Home Service Broadcast, 1956. It may be read in Raymond Garlick's *A Sense of Europe, Collected Poems 1954—1968* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1968). Ed.)

How do you see it, you whose lives unfurled  
upon this carven shore and bay of scree,  
you for whom this is an everyday world

—a place to be born in; worn, familiar ground  
—a heart's map known like the back of the hand,  
and not a place sought out, desired, and found?

Do you lift your eyes up to the hills  
—that gestate the slate and carry the sheep  
and pour the rivers that power the mills?

Do you see Parnassus in every peak  
and incense ascending in evening clouds,  
and praise the Lord that your town is unique?

And you, neighbour and friend, whose tireless pen  
has pinned to paper mysteries unseen  
and worlds unvisited by living men:

you who helped Glyndwr to his coat of mail,  
struck Porius from the enigmatic stone  
and gazed upon the Glastonbury Grail:

what do the thousand silent slates proclaim  
to you—preferring this empurpled town,  
and Gwynedd, to the princedom of your name?

Sometimes in school the children say to me:  
'We saw him walking with his mighty boots  
and stick, down in Cwm Bowydd.' And I see

the bland, incurious image of it climb  
back to their eyes—a rare and long-legged bird  
stalking the valley paths at breakfast-time.

Their parents whisper: 'Has he settled down?'  
—quite without faith that anyone might choose  
to make his home in our cloud-cushioned town

(four-taverned, but with thirty-six or seven  
commodious Bethels, and no Sabbath trains  
to tempt weak souls to Rhyl instead of heaven)

—that anyone might want to perch in peace  
upon our precipice, wrapped up in thought  
and mist: unless pursued there by police.

Thus, darkly infidel, and yet most proud,  
heads are upturned towards the window square  
that frames you writing, reading. Watch that crowd.

of cheeping children down below at play:  
see them look up, waiting the fluttered hand  
before they turn again and run away.

You make us pause; survey ourselves again  
—catching a glimpse not merely of a town  
notorious as the native place of rain,

but of a stage for human history  
superb as the theatre of Perikles.  
Poised amid peaks, we find our dignity.

(‘Seeing’, ‘Death of an Actor’ and ‘The Immortals’ published in *Landscapes and Figures* (1964), may be read in *A Sense of Europe* (1968). ‘The Immortals’ is about ‘a most memorable evening with JCP and Louis Wilkinson’. Ed.)

### SEEING

You lie on your couch  
like a Caesar composed  
on his cushioned litter.  
Calm and enclosed  
  
in an apse of books,  
right hand at rest  
on the Xenophon,  
you watch in the west  
  
the sky’s ceremonial.  
With Byzantine art  
the sun descends.  
On the dais of the heart

the images rise.  
Each licensed mast  
on the council-house roofs  
grows a ship at last  
  
and, taller than chimneys,  
explodes into sail  
on a violet sea  
beyond the eye’s pale.  
  
Serene as an ikon,  
the unseeing face  
stares through the window  
at Samothrace.

### DEATH OF AN ACTOR

Old man sailing,  
pillows your ships,  
out to death  
with Lear on your lips:  
  
too weak to climb  
to any prow,  
boards and public  
beyond you now.

You think of the thirties—  
your zeal to invent  
a passionate myth  
of Jewish descent.

You touch your curls,  
as tight as twine,  
as Celtic as twilight,  
and see a sign.

You call for reporters  
and swear with a flood  
of Falstaffian oaths  
you have negro blood:

then suddenly know  
you identify  
yourself with the victim  
most when you die.

### THE IMMORTALS

A room of sherry-coloured light, in Wales.  
Tall in their corners, two augustans sit  
calling the laurelled dead down from the walls  
  
and I, subjunctive future, watch the past  
imperative and purple rise and ride  
immortal tenses. Resurrection’s post

peals with a silver tongue in old men’s talk,  
rousing the dead who drowse within their skulls.  
The eager, easy voice that bids me take

the waiting wine was one that Hardy knew.  
The fingers on the glass took Yeats’s hand.  
I hear the voice, I touch the fingers now.

The shared experience of word and deed,  
fragile and slight, gives me their company.  
Three living share the senses with two dead.

---

# Joe Boulter

## John Cowper Powys's [De]construction of Welsh Identity in *Porius*

---

In July 1935 John Cowper Powys moved to Corwen, a tangible symbol of his tendency to identify himself as Welsh. He says "I have a strong affinity with the Welsh people. I seem able to enter into their feelings," and that Wales represents "that particular psychic 'aura' towards which [...] I have been groping my way for several years."<sup>1</sup> Later he claims he is Welsh: "I must be in fact [...] I know I am."<sup>2</sup> Powys's first two major works written in Wales deal with the two most important events in the history of Welsh identity: Arthur's reign (*Porius*, 1951) and Owain Glyndwr's rebellion (*Owen Glendower*, 1941). And yet in both of these works Welsh identity is more problematised than reinforced. This essay is an attempt to explain the apparent paradox of Powys calling himself Welsh at the same time as making us uncertain what "Welshness" is.

*Porius* is John Cowper Powys's version of the key event in essentialist constructions of Welsh identity. However, it is assumed, because he begins by saying there is no documentary evidence for the period,<sup>3</sup> that Powys simply filled in a gap in history with an ahistorical fantasy.<sup>4</sup> Lack of facts does not mean lack of history, however, and Powys's fiction still "criticizes our life upon earth."<sup>5</sup> Versions of the Arthurian period have been constructed from a variety of standpoints, and in *Porius* Powys deploys material from several of these versions. The difference of his version is not the result of his ignoring

history, rather it is the result of the fact that, while other historians are constructing essentialist ideas of Welshness, he is deconstructing them.

Peter Christensen says that Powys writes an "epic of the formation of the Welsh people and the development of a Welsh consciousness against the Anglo-Saxon invader as Roman rule falls away."<sup>6</sup> This is the traditional history of Welsh identity. In fact, *Porius* provides a critique of the traditional history, disputing its central assumptions, and showing instead a Welshness, like Robert Young's "Englishness", which has "always been riven by its own alterity."<sup>7</sup> As a revisioning of the key moment in the formation of an ethnic group it is as thorough and as irreverent a deconstruction as *The Satanic Verses*.

*Porius*'s title indicates his alternative vision: just as Rhisiart (the Anglo-Welsh secretary-lawyer) usurps *Owen Glendower*, the protagonist of Powys's Romance of the Dark Ages, the novel is not the Romano-Brythonic unifier of Britain, King Arthur, but a Brythonic Prince, "[p]lunged from infancy into the criss-cross eddies of racial and religious divergence"(11), with a Roman name and an ancestry which is part-Iberian and part-giant, who marries a half-Ffichtiad half-Brythonic girl. The novel comes to no definite conclusion as to what Porius's identity is: though "what [...] Porius] wanted above all was to keep his inner identity [...] intact [...] He wanted also to remember that he had the blood of

the aboriginal giants in his veins as well as of the forest-people!" (55) To Porius's "What am I?", we are forced to answer with Medrawd, "I don't know." (599) With Morfydd we are forced to recognise "how mixed-up everything is with us these days, in Edeyrnion, in this island, in the whole world!" (758)

Glen Cavaliero notes that in *Porius* "we find religious and racial forces all pulling against each other,"<sup>8</sup> and Christensen is accurate in saying Powys shows, "a multi-racial society trying to cope with very different claims, all of which seem to be legitimate."<sup>9</sup> However, such a picture of Edeyrnion itself undermines the traditional history of Welshness with which Christensen aligns Powys. Similarly when Cavaliero says that "The house of Cunedda stands for the civilized norm in a confused world,"<sup>10</sup> he underestimates the extent to which Edeyrnion's confusion is designed to prevent the reader constructing such a norm.

Such confusion is achieved firstly via the sheer complexity of the ethnic groups in *Porius*. The reader is confronted with Brythons, Romans, Gwyddylaid, Ffichtiad, Gwyddyl-Ffichti, forest people, Giants, survivors of Lost Atlantis, Coranians, even reincarnations of Greek gods, all living in the same region and preserving their ethnic difference, and yet intermarrying as well to create further variants. This complexity undermines the picture of the Welsh which essentialist constructions of Welsh identity require, that "they are the descendants of a great homogeneous nation called Cymry or Britons."<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth's etymology for "Cymri" prefigures the tendency to see the Welsh as part of a single British race: in Geoffrey, Brutus's son Kamber ruled Wales, "As a result the people of that country still call themselves Kambri today in the Welsh tongue."<sup>12</sup>

Geoffrey's use of etymology as rhetoric is maintained by later writers who stress the meanings of "Cymry", and "Welsh", in attempting to set up an opposition to Saxons in which the Welsh appear, by virtue of being not-Saxons, as a coherent ethnic group, as people who recognise each other and can be recognised by others as a people.<sup>13</sup>

Gwyn A. Williams is an example of a contemporary historian keen to preserve the idea of the Celts functioning as "one civilization".<sup>14</sup> Roger Loomis provides the image of such a homogeneous nation established before the advent of the Saxons, describing, "a general community of traditions [...] between Brythons and Goidels [...] due in large measure to their common Celtic inheritance."<sup>15</sup> Powys had read Loomis for *A Glastonbury Romance*,<sup>16</sup> and uses him for *Porius*: his Myrddin, with his shape-shifting, herdsman guise, and prophesies, corresponds to Loomis's Merlin.<sup>17</sup> But he doesn't subscribe to Loomis's version of Celtic history. Instead, he takes his cue from John Rhys's description of "Brythonic clans forming a tribal aristocracy superimposed upon Goidelic tribes, partly Celtic and Aryan in origin and partly Aboriginal."<sup>18</sup>

The difficulties such a model causes for Welsh identity is illustrated when Rhys extrapolates it to emphasise the "composite" nature of present day Welsh ethnicity, claiming that "the Welsh people of the present day is made up of all three elements: the Aboriginal, the Goidelic, and the Brythonic. And it would be unsafe to assume that the later elements predominate." Later Rhys says that the Celts formed only a ruling class in Wales, and that the present day Welsh are, "on the whole [...] not Aryan."<sup>19</sup> John Lloyd also emphasises the mixed nature of Welsh ethnicity, and observes it persisting in the

present, saying that "Welshmen have inherited neolithic blood and the neolithic civilisation."<sup>20</sup> This is clearly problematic for Welshness: if it turned out that the Welsh were mostly descended from a different ethnic group altogether from that with which they have chosen to identify themselves, what happens to their identity?

With the exception of Thomas O'Rahilly,<sup>21</sup> who sees the Picts as pre-Goidelic Irish-originating Celts, this is the limit of the support for Powys's ethnic model. For Lloyd the mixed nation began to be Brythonized; to adopt the Brythonic language; in the 5th and 6th centuries. He suggests this took place after the invasion of Cunedda.<sup>22</sup> This is the point from which Rhys dates the beginning of historical Cymri.<sup>23</sup> T. G. E. Powell subscribes to the story of Cunedda,<sup>24</sup> as does Gwynfor Evans.<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey gives Arthur Cunedda's rule as the creator of the Cymry. Having seen off the Saxons, Arthur turns his attention to an ethnic cleansing of his kingdom: "He cut [. . . the Irish] to pieces mercilessly and forced them to return home. Once he had conquered the Irish, he was at liberty once more to wipe out the Scots and the Picts."<sup>26</sup>

Although Rhys is the source Powys follows most closely, his model of layers of successive groups emphasises superimposition rather than coexistence. His model indicates the following stages of Celticisation: the aboriginal population is invaded by the Goidels, who subjugate them and make slaves of them. The aborigines are thus Celticised by the advent of the Brythons. Then the Brythons in turn displace the Goidels from power.<sup>27</sup> He accepts that there were "certain non-Aryan elements, which must be looked on as aboriginal," but says they were, "more or less completely assimilated by the first Celtic conquerors."<sup>28</sup>

Powys takes Rhys's layers, but assumes a lack of assimilation, and emphasises the difference and tension between the ethnic groups concerned. When it's remembered that Rhys's is the history which emphasises ethnic difference most, the radical nature of Powys's position, and the problems it poses for Welsh identity (given the threat of Rhys's extrapolation into the present), become apparent. Dealing with a post-Cunedda Wales in which the Brythons are established as rulers, Powys shows a plethora of ethnic groups which threaten the Welsh-Brythonic identity not only by existing as independent cultures, but also by challenging the Brythonic political hegemony. We learn, for example, at the beginning of the novel that the Gwyddylaid have "[f]or centuries [. . .] been a menace to the Peace imposed by Roman Law." (3) That *Porius* deals with a significant loss of control by the Brythons is indicated by Porius's absent-minded self-indulgence resulting in his breaking of the sword of Cunedda, the symbol of Brythonic rule (205, 146).

Powys's development of Rhys also undermines the idea of the Brythons being the original Welsh. Originality is central to Welshness: the arch-constructor of Welsh identity, Iolo Morganwg, included in his project the search for a tribe of Welsh-speaking Red Indians; the "noblest of all the noble savages". His colleague John Evans went to America to find them, and concluded that they didn't exist.<sup>29</sup> The same loss of origin is seen in *Porius*, where the search for the first inhabitants of Edeyrnion leads to a feeling of infinite regress. Not only are the Brythons the successors of the Goidels, but Goidels succeed Picts. If the Picts are the original Welsh, this leads back to our first difficulty, for Rhys associates the aboriginal Welsh with the Picts, who he says were probably not Aryans; the Celts,

on the other hand, were.<sup>30</sup> This issue is confused in *Porius* still further by the presence of other claimants to the land: the forest people, “Iberians from North Africa” (4). But in the novel even the forest people are not the first: when they arrive they “intrude on the solitude of the mysterious Ffichtiaid and the aboriginal giants” (4), which suggests the first inhabitants of Wales were not even of the same species as the present occupants. Gwythyr voices this sense of the loss of roots, exclaiming, “Foreigners? We were all foreigners once! Who are the true possessors of these woods and mountains, Nesta? *The Cewri!* And, if you go further back still, the wild beasts or the old gods!” (372) The death of the last Cewri can be interpreted as the end of any original claim to the land, but in hybrid form, the Cewri still have it. Edeyrnion itself is named after Edeyrn, who in marrying a “daughter of the Cewri” ensured that the Brython Princes who rule Edeyrnion are not entirely Celtic.<sup>31</sup>

Another version of the origin of Welshness dates it from the Saxon invasion. According to Gwyn A. Williams, “[b]y [. . . the time of Offa’s Dyke] they themselves were beginning to call what was left of the Britons Cymry or fellow-countrymen. Pretty soon there was nobody left to call Cymry except themselves. Their stronger kings started to hammer the whole bunch together and to make a country called Cymru: Wales.”<sup>32</sup> The idea of a Welsh identity developing via unified British opposition to the Saxon invasion is a common one; it’s seen for example in Geoffrey’s account of Merlin’s prophesies, where the Red Dragon of the British is placed in opposition to the White Dragon of the Saxons.<sup>33</sup>

The deconstruction of the British-Saxon opposition coincides in *Porius* with the displacement of Arthur as its symbol.

Arthur and the Matter of Britain are intertwined: it is precisely, as Leslie Alcock’s title has it, *Arthur’s Britain*. Geoffrey summarises the connection, saying that Arthur had “a claim by rightful inheritance to the kingship of the whole island.”<sup>34</sup> Arthur’s displacement in *Porius* might seem surprising given that Powys played on the myth of his return in *Glastonbury*, for example in his epigraph (which is probably got from Rhys).<sup>35</sup> We are also liable to be lead astray once more by the “Historical Background”, where Powys begins by referring to “Arthur’s powerful and prosperous rule” when “matters in this island were well under control.”<sup>36</sup> But even in the “Background” Arthur’s control is seen to be contested. Powys tells us, “The Picts (Ffichtiaid) and the Scots (Gwyddylaid) were the grand enemies of the Romanized Brythons in the province known then, as it is known still, as Edeyrnion.”<sup>37</sup> Powys’s own unreliability in the “Background” is also apparent here in his identification of the Gwyddylaid as Scots, which G. Wilson Knight and Morine Krissdottir accept.<sup>38</sup> Studies by Rhys and Lloyd used by Powys suggest they are the Goidels, who were from Ireland if they were invaders at all.

In the novel proper, Arthur’s displacement from the centre of the legend is obvious: Porius is the protagonist. Arthur appears for only a short while, and has “very little glamour”;<sup>39</sup> he’s a “man of pure undiluted generalship, realistic, practical, and competent.” (357) We also see “Powys’s refusal of conventional idealism [. . . as he] makes Arthur’s followers a set of effeminate young men out-of-place in their grim setting.”<sup>40</sup>

Most significantly for Welshness, although in *Porius* Arthur is fighting the Saxons, he’s not unifying Britain in doing so. Erim ab Uchtryd asks Brochvael if it

does't occur to him "—that our Roman masters are just as deeply our enemies and exploiters as any pirates from Germania?" (177) Accordingly, the forest people treat with the Saxons. (207) Arthur's opposition to the Saxons fails even to unify the Brythons, something which is most obvious in the imminent challenge to Arthur himself by Medrawd. Powys also focuses on the impulses of the other Brythonic nobles to step away from the Matter of Britain: Brochvael is typical, deciding that he lacks the "heroism and initiative" to "implore them all, Brythons, Romans and Iberians, for the sake of Ynys Prydein, their island-home, to follow the Prince of Edeyrnion against the invader" (500).

Though "Arthur's men make friends with the Druids under the new name of 'Cymry,'"<sup>41</sup> this cannot be seen as anything other than a provisional construct. The name is used elsewhere to identify a commonality which has nothing to do with the Brythonic struggle with the Saxons: Gwythyr says to Nesta, "if the whole lot of them, and all Arthur's Court too, battled with the Saeson till there wasn't one left, we Cymry would be no worse off!" (371) Later those who "*called themselves Cymry*" are actually defined in direct opposition to the traditional historical definition as precisely those who aren't the Roman-Brython rulers (543).

Gwynfor Evans adapts the idea of the Saxon invasion to promote a revised idea of the Welsh as the only really proud Brythons, saying that the Saxon settlement was permitted by a "selfish apathy" in Brythonic England, which is contrasted with the "healthier spirit in the hills of Wales, where the people were aware of their membership of their society and responsibility towards it."<sup>42</sup> This is hardly the case with Powys's Edeyrnions. Porius

is "in no hurry to join the emperor's forces," and pursues a "policy of drift" (the novel's plot depends partly on his prevarication). (705) Porius's outlook leans increasingly towards his father's. Einion seems "to care for nothing but hunting and light loves and listening to Indeg's three sisters talk of the heathen superstitions of the forest-people," and looks forward to a time when there is "no more of this 'Emperor of Britain' business."<sup>43</sup>

Powys's assault on Welsh identity is also carried out in his portrayal of Taliesin. Leslie Alcock affirms the historical validity of Taliesin, stating that "Taliesin's poems can definitely be dated to the second half of the sixth century."<sup>44</sup> Although other writers agree with Alcock, it is unlikely that Taliesin's poems were written in this period,<sup>45</sup> and his assertiveness shows an anxiety to establish Taliesin as a symbol of British consciousness at this time. As Emrys Humphreys says, the Taliesin tradition has "at all times [...] contrived to be a major factor in the maintenance, stability, and continuity of the Welsh identity and the fragile concept of Welsh nationhood."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Humphreys points out that the Bardic tradition was instrumental in creating the idea of Cymric loss of a unified Britain: "The Cambro-British seized on the pseudo-history [of Gildas] as proof positive that the whole of the isle of Britain once belonged to them." This is seen in the poems of Taliesin and Aneirin, which combine heroism with a sense of loss: "the peculiarly Celtic form of nostalgia known as *hiraeth*".<sup>47</sup>

Powys's characterisation of Taliesin proceeds via a typical Powysian demystification of history: he treats the bard as if he were a contemporary, whose work is "obscure" and "modern" (417), and gives him a second job (which of course most modernist poets had) as a

temperamental chef (421). Powys emphasises this nonlegendary side to Taliesin, spending as much time on his cooking as on his poetry. He also takes away from Taliesin's poetry its role as an elegy for a civilisation, writing new poems for him in a faintly Whitmanian style which replaces *hiraeth* with a celebration of pure sensation, "independent of love and religion and nationality and power and fame and glory and learning." (425)

It is Powys's "Welsh" identity, to return to the beginning, his thinking of himself as Jack Welsh, which is the key to discovering why he celebrates Welshness and yet deconstructs it. Because Powys also saw himself as a shape-shifter, like his Myrddin Wyllt, who is "a creature of mask and disguises,"<sup>48</sup> he very often refers to himself as an actor,<sup>49</sup> a pluralist and a pragmatist: someone who assumes roles as they are required, and who, whilst recognising the power of identities, did not believe in them as absolutes.

Powys identifies his ambivalence with his Welshness, referring to "that equivocal element in my aboriginal make-up that is at once heathen and christian, atheistical and polytheistic."<sup>50</sup> By "aboriginal" here, he means aboriginal Welsh. In *Obstinate Cymric*, he refers to the Welsh people's "innate and unconquerable polytheism, or, to give us proper philosophical due as born adherents of the Pluralism advocated by William James, our incurable habit of regarding the system of things as a *Multiverse* rather than as a *Universe*."<sup>51</sup> It is also this mixing of points of view which interests him in contemporary Wales: "Nothing could be more interesting to my particular kind of mind," he says, "than the subtle & complicated clashings of the various political, religious cultural schools of thought in Wales today."<sup>52</sup> This fits perfectly with the image of Welshness

provided in *Porius*. The Welsh are privileged precisely because they incorporate difference to the extent that they have no origin and cannot be unified.

This sense of plurality is represented by Myrddin Wyllt. Holding onto Myrddin, Porius feels that it's as if what he holds becomes "a multiple entity composed of many separate lives," animal, vegetable and mineral (65). Myrddin's plural identity is complemented with a failure to fight, to become involved in oppositional struggles for self-definition. This is most obvious in his tendency to lapse into fainting fits, absenting himself at moments of crisis, something he shares with Owen Glendower.

This idea of absenting oneself from oppositional definitions is seen as early as *Wood and Stone*, which Powys introduces with the idea of a different world: "In a universe whose secret is not self-assertion, but self-abandonment, might not the 'well-constituted' be regarded as the vanquished, and the 'ill-constituted' as the victors? In other words, who, in such a universe, *are* the 'well-constituted'?"<sup>53</sup> The danger of such a nonparticipation in oppositions is that it is effectively nonparticipation in history, which is oppositionally constituted. This problematic achieves an ironic playing-out in the history of *Porius*'s reception: "for Powys, who is about as undefiant a figure as one could imagine, the problem was not to overthrow or pass beyond traditions he inherited, it was to incorporate and metamorphose them." (According to Powys, the one is an Irish way, the other Welsh.)<sup>54</sup> Incorporation and metamorphosis did not secure the identity of *Porius* as separate from the novel conventions which cause its misinterpretation ("his books [...] seem to hover between a set of contradictory allegiances");<sup>55</sup> the book is generally

misunderstood because readers don't know what it is. Similarly, Welsh identity is fundamentally destabilized by its incorporation of English elements (most notably the language in which the need for an oppositional stance is reflected in the creation of Welsh-language media). Powys also shows the historical reality of oppositions in *Wood and Stone*, where we're told "the universal spread of board-school education [...] had begun to sap the foundations of the old local peculiarities."<sup>56</sup> And in *Porius* historical reality is such that the forest people are forced to join with the latest example of oppositionality, the Saxons, in a bid to save their civilisation. The idea that tolerance cannot tolerate intolerance, that pluralism rejects absolutism absolutely, that alterity defines itself in opposition to the self/other opposition, is a paradox from which Powys cannot escape.

It is possible, however, that it's through alterity that Welsh identity preserves itself. The use of different, provisional identities as guises, not truths, is a traditional survival mechanism for an oppressed ethnic group: "[d]on't give your right name"<sup>57</sup> was common advice in Black American pop songs. Gwyn A. Williams maintains that it is through such shiftiness that the Welsh have survived, that "The presiding spirit of Welsh history has been the shape-shifter Gwydion."<sup>58</sup>

*Porius* too indicates that freedom is preserved by quitting the oppositional game, in the way that Thomas Pynchon suggests in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Gwrgi tells us this, saying,

'the Romans can't live without the Sons of Cunedda, and the Sons of Cunedda can't live without the Romans; and neither of them can live without conquering the Saxons or being conquered by the Saxons. What have we to do with conquering people, Blackie? We never even conquered

the giants? [...] It's because I let you alone, Blackie, and don't put iron in my goad, to prod you with, that my soul's free of your soul. Conquering's a sweaty job, Blackie, and conquerors's souls [sic] are sticky souls, but ours are free and independent. They wander where they please. They have no desire to rule Edeyrnion. But Edeyrn the Brython can do no more than put his name on our land.' (163)

Later, Brochvael subscribes to this anti-oppositionality when he thinks "why should I love or hate anything or anyone? I am myself: they are themselves: an unfathomable multitude of creatures in an unfathomable multitude of worlds!" (241)

A key point of contemporary reference in *Porius* is the muting of Welsh nationalism in the face of the greater threat of Hitler: the parallel is whether Porius should fight for his own ethnic group or against the Saxons, and Powys gives us his contribution to the national cause in adapting Myrddin Wyllt's prophesy from Geoffrey of Monmouth to make it relevant to the Battle of Britain (107-9). (The section of Merlin's prophesies in Geoffrey's version from which this is taken makes it clear that his vision is of the three generations after Vortigern).<sup>59</sup> But it is through "its preoccupation with [the forest people's] 'non-Aryan' values," that *Porius* finds a political role as "a riposte to Nazi racial mythology."<sup>60</sup>

It is because of their lack of a socio-symbolic order that the forest people are privileged in the novel: "They've no laws [...] no customs, no traditions!" says Aulus (212). What the forest people offer is the possibility of difference which doesn't involve prioritisation. We see this early in Powys's fiction: Richard Storm is trying to express "England" in his poetry. Despite this, and despite a typical modernist polarisation in the novel of England as old

and individual and New York as new and mechanised, Storm can still say “*In France, [...] they do these things better.*”<sup>61</sup> Admission of Englishness does not involve its privileging. Storm’s embrace of difference is epitomised by his wished embrace of lovers: “what he really wanted was not some Nelly in England and Elise in America, but some wonderful ‘Elise-Nelly’”:<sup>62</sup> a hybrid.

In *Porius*, Welsh identity is seen as hybrid, including the other against which in alternate versions of history it has defined itself: the forest people are “othered” to the extent that Powys says they’re African.<sup>63</sup> Powys, following Lloyd, is careful to say that the Berbers are not black,<sup>64</sup> but the theory of the Welsh being non-Aryan and non-European has a parallel in the flirtation with the idea of *The Races of Britain* containing an element of “nigrescence” which became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, for example in John Beddoe’s book of that name.<sup>65</sup> Such flirtations were partially the result of “racialized cultural assumptions about the Irish as simian or black”<sup>66</sup> such as found in Robert Knox’s *The Races of Men*,<sup>67</sup> and partially the result of a fascination with the possibility of alterity at the dark heart of the civilised coloniser described by Stephen Arrata and characterised by Robert Young as colonial desire.<sup>68</sup> However, Powys’s relation with the other is not based on oppression of an other ethnic group or on repression of his own alterity. Latterly through his version of Welshness, he consciously avoids the construction of an identity founded on a hierarchized opposition of self and other.

The ability to include the other is given in *Porius* to Myrddin Wyllt, from whom Porius learns that “it was possible to enlarge a person’s identity till it embraced other identities, till it could escape at will

*into others*, till it could even discover that all the while beneath the obstinate opacity of itself, it was on the verge of becoming these others.” (66) Porius feels a similar fragmentation of self late in the novel (780). Similar qualities can be seen in Powys: he is proud of his negative capability,<sup>69</sup> and he tends to identify himself as an outsider, as other.<sup>70</sup>

So Jeremy Hooker is both right and wrong in saying that “Powys shows a weak sense of the ‘other’, [...] even to the point of colonising a whole people and their history with his ego.”<sup>71</sup> He is right because Powys does not identify himself with the Welsh, or perhaps does identify the Welsh with himself, but wrong because Powys privileges both in the Welsh and in himself a sense of alterity (although of course alterity does involve a weak sense of the other just as it involves a weak sense of self: it overrides that opposition).

Powys’s biographical embrace of otherness can be seen to reach its paradigmatic moment in his voluntary exiling to Wales, and identification with its minority culture: what in other terms is the culmination of his deliberate failure to take part in the internationalism of modernism, both personally and in his work. Powys also failed to sign up to modernism’s nostalgia for absolutes and the authoritarian sympathies it engendered: for Powys “[t]he worst weapon of totalitarian tyrants is always the syllogism,”<sup>72</sup> and in its thematic and stylistic hybridity, *Porius* tries to combat such ways of thinking. This reading of *Porius* as a political reaction against tyranny is confirmed by Powys’s comment that *Mortal Strife*, his response to the war, will contain “a lot of talk about Hitler’s world being Hegelian; and ours Pluralistic and even anarchistic.”<sup>73</sup>

Instead of shoring up an absolute position, *Porius*’s version of Welshness,

with its emphasis on the forest people, makes its political contribution in the sense that it offers, through critique of traditional absolutes, the potential of a space of alterity. Here again, in constructing a Welshness characterised by the embrace of the other, Powys has historical parallels: West Wales in the first half of the nineteenth century saw the destruction of toll-gates and toll-houses by bands of farmers and farm-labourers. These "Daughters of Rebecca" accompanied their transgression of these institutions of the socio-symbolic order by dressing up in women's clothing, blacking their faces, and quoting the Bible in Welsh in their proclamations: theirs was a threefold othering: sexual, racial, and linguistic.<sup>74</sup> Powys tells us that in Wales "every flock—and this interests me very much—seems invariably to have its one black sheep".<sup>75</sup> Powys's version of Welshness is clear: even the Welsh sheep include the other.

The Edeyrnian potential for other ways of doing things is created by the absence of a dominant discourse. Instead of Arthur's Britain, we are given an Edeyrnion ruled by the irresponsible Einion (15), who predicts a "return to the old free ways" under Medrawd (135), and says "All of us to our free choice is the word to-day." (465) Einion, through his absence as a ruler, allows a play of cultures, just as an absent father he allows Porius's role play, his investigation of a range of possible identities. Porius early in the novel recognises that "The human imagination must never be robbed of its power *to tell itself other stories*, and thus create a different future" (48). The representative of this possibility is Myrddin Wyllt, with his prophetic vision of "many worlds", and his identity as Cronos, whose Saturnalia is the festival of dialogism when "all masters became slaves and all slaves became

masters" (285). Porius, in the same way as he comes to feel the kind of fragmentation of self Myrddin represents, comes later in the novel to share his vision, finally telling Medrawd, "I don't believe in your eternal opposites!"<sup>76</sup>

In the play of ethnic groups lies the potential for other ways of life. In *Obstinate Cymric*, Powys says "a communistic matriarchy is our secret ideal of human life."<sup>77</sup> Again, "our" is linking Powys with his own construction of the Welsh as the forest people of *Porius*, whose way of life this is.<sup>78</sup> Gerhard Herm says that the influx of the Indo-European peoples in Europe resulted in the loss of the matriarchal society of the aborigines (Powys's forest people).<sup>79</sup> In *Porius* this society is still present, not only materially in the survival of the forest people as a separate ethnic group, but metaphorically in the upsetting of Brythonic gendering: the traditionally masculine opposition-based rule of the socio-symbolic order and potentially of Christianity is represented not by the father: Einion, but by the mother: Euronwy. "Porius", the masculine, civilising Roman-Brython name under which the protagonist wriggles, is not the name of the father, but the name of the mother's father, "Porius *Manlius*" [my italics].

Through critique of traditional constructions of identity, *Porius* clears a space for a utopian vision such as the communistic arcadia mentioned in *An Englishman Up-State*,<sup>80</sup> perhaps a more tangible one than that provided by the typical modernist trope of loss. It is in this sense that it is a "profound meditation on the twentieth century's abiding social sicknesses, and on fascism in particular, their emblematic form."<sup>81</sup>

Powys deconstructs Welsh identity in *Porius* to the extent that we begin to see

Welshness in general as we see Powys's own Welshness: as a name. He admits that part of the reason for going to live in Wales is that he has a Welsh name.<sup>82</sup> However, Powys stresses that naming itself is powerful. Referring to the invocation of famous names with which the Henog begins his histories, he says "the power which gathers round any visible, audible or tangible symbol that had—consciously or unconsciously—impressed the mind of many generations." (110) In an early letter to Llewelyn he admits that Frances Gregg is right to say that he gets "carried away" by the book of words and the bluff of words and the parade of words."<sup>83</sup>

Powys knows that it's a bluff which carries him away, even while he's being carried away. He is describing his own ambivalence towards words and fictions they construct when he says, "when I read what the shrewd old Goethe says about not destroying the essential Illusions, I feel a grim satisfaction in noting that that sly world-child knew well enough that they *were* Illusions."<sup>84</sup> Such ambivalence has been described as "incredulity toward metanarratives",<sup>85</sup> and in Powys as in postmodernism it necessarily includes an incredulity toward the metanarrative of incredulity. Though he knows he's being bluffed, he is still carried away.

It is because of this fundamental ambivalence about names, that just as in admitting the power of identity Powys privileges an identity which tends to fail to be constructed, Welshness as represented by the forest people, so in admitting the power of naming Porius sees the lasting name for Corwen as the one the forest people will choose, because it will be "disjointed, arbitrary, accidental", and because it is "outside man's control." (11) Similarly, the word to which Powys returns in both *Porius* and *A Glastonbury Romance* is the one whose meaning he has noted as being obscure: "Miss Jessie L. Weston does not know what the word 'esplumeoir' means".<sup>86</sup>

The more wide-ranging result of such ambivalence is that Powys attempts to write in a style which constructs a world yet reveals itself as a construct. He bluffs you, and he shows you he's bluffing. His fictions "break the spell of their own fictionality".<sup>87</sup> Powys's decision to write in such a way is a conscious one, a political one, and perhaps most of all a moral one, for, "[i]n the old days we oracular persons would have been ranked with rogues and play-actors and vagabonds, and so we ought to be for our souls' good".<sup>88</sup> What turns a God into a Devil, according to Myrddin Wyllt, is "power" (287).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-47* (London: Village Press, 1973), p. 55, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> John Cowper Powys, *John Cowper Powys: Letters to Glynn Hughes*, ed., Bernard Jones (Stevenage: Orc Publications, 1971), p. 12, 4.5.57.

<sup>3</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Porius: A Romance of the Dark Ages*. New Edition, ed. and foreword Wilbur T. Albrecht (Hamilton: Colgate UP, 1994), p. xvii. Subsequent numerals within my text refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Hooker, "Romancing at the Cave-Fire: The Unabridged *Porius*" (*The Powys Journal*, vol. 4, 1994), p. 220; and Peter Christensen, "The Marriage of Myth and History in John Cowper Powys's *Porius*" (*The Powys Review*, 25, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Pleasures of Literature* (London: Cassell, 1938), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Christensen, "Marriage of Myth and History", p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Christensen, "Marriage of Myth and History", p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> John Rhys and David Brynmor-Jones, *The Welsh People: Chapters on Their Origin, History, Laws, Language, Literature and Characteristics* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), p. xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. and intr. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Prys Morgan and David Thomas, *Wales: The Shaping of a Nation* (Newton: David and Charles, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales: A History of the Welsh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1927), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1930*, ed. Frederick Davies (London: Greymitre Books, 1987), p. 24, 5.1.30.

<sup>17</sup> Loomis, *Celtic Myth*, p. 125, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Rhys and Brynmor-Jones, *The Welsh People*, p. 120. This position is first stated more speculatively in John Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, Early Britain (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1882), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Rhys and Brynmor-Jones, *The Welsh People*, p. 13, p. 32. Again, this is first stated in Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, pp. 257-8.

<sup>20</sup> John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales: From the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1911), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas O'Rahilly, *The Goideles and Their Predecessors*. The Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, from the Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 21 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1935). pp. 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd, *History of Wales*, pp. 116-9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

<sup>24</sup> T. G. E. Powell, *The Celts*, Ancient Peoples and Places, vol. 6 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958). p. 174.

<sup>25</sup> Gwynfor Evans, *Land of My Fathers: 2000 Years of Welsh History* (Talybont: y Lolfa, 1984), p. 64, pp. 44-6.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 219, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> Rhys and Brynmor-Jones, *The Welsh People*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd, *History of Wales*, p. xxiv.

<sup>29</sup> Emry Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition: A Quest for the Welsh Identity* (Bridgend: Seren-Poetry Wales, 1989), p. 111, p. 113.

<sup>30</sup> Rhys and Brynmor-Jones, *The Welsh People*, pp. 13-15, p. 34, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. 537, p. 538, p. 693.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *When Was Wales?*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, pp. 170-185.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>35</sup> John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford: Clarendon P. 1981), p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. xvii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest: A Chart of the Prose Works of John Cowper Powys* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 76; Morine Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (London: Macdonald, 1980), p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys*, p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Christensen, "Marriage of Myth and History", p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, *Land of My Fathers*, p. 64, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. 38, p. 40, p. 9, p. 135.

<sup>44</sup> Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology AD 367-634* (London: Allen Lane-The Penguin Press, 1971), p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Those who accept the Taliesin myth include Morgan and Thomas, *Wales*, p. 178, and Evans, *Land of My Fathers*, p. 54. For the convincing evidence against this assumption, see Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition*, p. 6. Also Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms. History of Civilisation* (London: Caridan-Sphere, 1967), p. 270.

<sup>46</sup> Humphreys: *The Taliesin Tradition*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> See John Cowper Powys, *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson 1935-56*, ed. Louis Wilkinson (London: Macdonald, 1958), p. 286., 9.1.52. Powys, *Porius*, p. 113.

<sup>49</sup> For example, in one set of correspondence we find the idea repeated several times: Powys, *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p. 130, 25.12.43, p. 194, 21.1.46, p. 285, 8.1.52; p. 296, 2.1.53.

<sup>50</sup> Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> John Cowper Powys: *Letters 1937-54*, ed., intr. and notes I. C. Peate (Cardiff: U of Wales Press, 1974). p. 6, 3.3.42.

<sup>53</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Wood and Stone: a Romance* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1915), p. vii.

<sup>54</sup> Jerome McGann, "Marvels and Wonders: Powys, *Porius* and the attempt to revive romance in the age of modernism" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 1st December, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> McGann, "Marvels and Wonders", p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Powys, *Wood and Stone*, p. 501.

<sup>57</sup> Razaf, Waller, Johnson, "The Joint is Jumpin", *Fun With Fats* (E.E.C.: Charly Records, 1992).

<sup>58</sup> Williams, *When Was Wales?* p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 173.

<sup>60</sup> Hooker, "Romancing at the Cave-Fire", p. 227. See also Christensen, "Marriage of Myth and History", p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> John Cowper Powys, *After My Fashion* (London: Picador-Pan, 1980), p. 196, p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> Powys, *After My Fashion*, p. 129, p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. 207, p. 247, p. 321.

<sup>64</sup> Lloyd, *History of Wales*, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> John Beddoe, *The Races of Britain: A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1885).

<sup>66</sup> Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 72.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (London: Renshaw, 1850).

<sup>68</sup> Stephen D. Arrata, 'The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization (*Victorian Studies*, vol. 37, no 4, Summer 1990), pp. 621-645; Young, *Colonial Desire*, eg. p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> John Cowper Powys and Llewelyn Powys, *Confessions of Two Brothers*, intr. Malcolm Elwin (London: Sinclair Browne, 1982), pp. 23-4.

<sup>70</sup> Cavaliero, "Phoenix and Serpent: D. H. Lawrence and John Cowper Powys" (*The Powys Review*, 2, Winter 1977), p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> Hooker, "Romancing at the Cave-Fire", p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Rabelais* (London: The Bodley Head, 1948), p. 284.

<sup>73</sup> Powys, *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p. 86, 12.12.40.

<sup>74</sup> See Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>75</sup> Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 68.

<sup>76</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. 126, p. 632, p. 851.

<sup>77</sup> Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> Powys, *Porius*, p. 8, p. 269.

<sup>79</sup> Gerhard Herm, *The Celts: The People Who Came Out of the Darkness* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), pp. 80-1.

<sup>80</sup> John Cowper Powys, *An Englishman Up-State*, intr. R. L. Blackmore (London: Village Press, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> McGann, "Marvels and Wonders", p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Sven-Eric Täckmark* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1983), p. 37, 16.3.37.

<sup>83</sup> *Letters of John Cowper Powys to his Brother Llewelyn*, vol. 1, 1902-1925, ed. and selected Malcolm Elwin (London: Village Press, 1975), p. 153, 9.9.[14].

<sup>84</sup> J. C. Powys and L. Powys, *Confessions*, p. 125.

<sup>85</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Theory and Hist. of Lit., Vol. 10 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>86</sup> Powys, *Diary, 1930*, p. 26, 9.1.30.

<sup>87</sup> McGann, "Marvels and Wonders", pp. 5-6.

<sup>88</sup> Powys, *Rabelais*, p. 293.



Castell Dinas Bran, a photograph from the superbly illustrated guide for footpath walkers in Wales, Laurence Main's *In the Footsteps of King Arthur* (Cardiff: Western Mail & Echo, 1995, £7.95).

# Robin Wood

## Queer Attacks and Fits: Epilepsy and Ecstatic Experiences in the Novels of J. C. Powys

In 1986 Frederick Davies published in *The Powys Review* an essay of personal recollections which records that:

Until he was nearly sixty John Cowper suffered from attacks of epilepsy. For many years during his travels in America, Phyllis [Playter] told me, he had to carry on him tablets and written instructions in case he had an epileptic attack while on a train or walking along a street in a strange town. After she met him the attacks decreased and after about 1930 ceased altogether.<sup>1</sup>

The subject of Powys and epilepsy is then developed further, in an essay published in the same journal in 1991, by the Belgian psychiatrist Ernst Verbeek, who states that after “[he] read most of John Cowper’s works, [he] surmised that [Powys] had suffered from epilepsy”.<sup>2</sup> He further argues that epilepsy constitutes a significant element in Powys’s novels: “his works . . . [mention] a considerable number of individuals afflicted with epilepsy” (46). He also refers to “sensations of overwhelming felicity [that] are frequently mentioned by J. C. P”, “when an ecstasy of happiness came over [him] so intoxicating that it was as if [he] trod upon air.” Verbeek claims, “that [this] is exactly the expression one always hears from epileptic patients.” (44) Epilepsy can involve ecstatic experience, as in the case of Dostoievsky; however, this is not a generally held opinion. James L. Rice, for example, comments, with reference to the so-called

aura that precedes an epileptic attack, that an “ecstatic or pleasurable aura” is “extremely rare [though] not unknown in medical literature,” and furthermore notes that usually “these events are reported as negative in most patients [including] depression, fear, confusion, rage, paranoia.”<sup>3</sup> Although Powys never directly states in print that he was an epileptic, he does mention in his *Autobiography* “an attack of something uncommonly like an epileptic fit,” which occurred when he was a young boy on holiday on the Isle of Wight.<sup>4</sup> This seizure Powys suggests was probably caused by either “exposure to the sun” or “having my head thrust forcibly under water.” His comment on this is interesting:

Of this [experience] I have all my life been extremely proud, having discovered in my reading that such fits have been, throughout history, the peculiar ‘sacred sickness’ of persons endowed with messages from the gods.

This would seem to contradict the use of the word “like”, in the passage quoted above—“like an epileptic fit”—and thus to be an indirect acknowledgement by Powys of his epilepsy, but, however, for the infrequency of these fits. Later in his *Autobiography*, Powys refers to other “queer fits of unconsciousness” (370-1), that occurred between, at the earliest, 1902 and probably 1925 or 1926.<sup>5</sup> The first of these he describes as happening in

Gloucestershire on the way to Liverpool, when he “suddenly [fell] like a log”. He further comments that “these fits repeated themselves—but [that] all in all, [he didn’t] fancy [he’d] had more than four of them.” Powys further notes that “they acquired the power of obliterating [his] memory for as long as half an hour, and sometimes for more, both *before* and *after* [he] fell” (370). On another occasion he walked “at least a mile and a half in total unconsciousness,” and when he “awoke to consciousness [he discovered himself] caked in mud from head to foot” (371).

It is also significant that Dostoevsky, the novelist Powys most admired, should also have been an epileptic:

He approaches the ultimate mystery as no Western writer, except, perhaps, Shakespeare and Goethe, has ever approached it.<sup>6</sup>

The subject of Dostoevsky’s epilepsy has received some scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> What is useful, in the context of this discussion of Powys, is the view of some critics that Dostoevsky’s whole personal vision of life and his novels was shaped by his epileptic experiences. Jacques Catteau, for example, comments:

Whatever the scientific truth may be about the reality of the epileptic aura, Dostoyevsky was convinced that he experienced it as a form of intuitive and privileged awareness of divine or universal harmony.<sup>8</sup>

He also suggests that Dostoevsky’s epilepsy gave him access to another reality:

Illness is, “like everything which goes beyond the bounds” (to use another of Svidrigaylov’s expressions) a passage beyond everyday life to reach another reality, another side of the human mystery. (126)

While Powys does not entirely suggest in his book *Dostoevsky* that epilepsy was a

significant element in shaping Dostoevsky’s literary vision, he does suggest, in the earlier essay on Dostoevsky in *Visions and Revisions*, that “weakness and disease and suffering can become organs of vision” (189).<sup>9</sup> In *The Art of Growing Old* there is, however, a reference to Dostoevsky that suggests that epilepsy does offer something of special value:

It has fallen to me, as it fell to the neighbours of the great Feodor Michaelovitch, to have an epileptic friend, and I believe it is a peculiarity of this *sacred sickness* that it heightens, almost to a point of rapture, the smallest detail of the story of all persons and of all things that can possibly have a story.<sup>10</sup>

A number of major characters in Powys’s novels experience what are described by Rhisiart, with reference to Owen Glendower, as “queer ‘attacks’” or to use Owen Glendower’s own word “fits”.<sup>11</sup> For example, Geard in *A Glastonbury Romance* has a violent fit during the night he spends in King Mark’s Chamber. This follows a terrifying ordeal involving an encounter with the “Tremendum Mysterium” of Glastonbury, Merlin:

a relaxed shivering fit seized upon [Geard] and his head fell forward. His whole body drooped forward, bending at the waist, the arms limp. Had there been anyone to see his face at that moment it would have appeared like the face of a corpse . . . He was like a person who has been shaken by the convulsions of some terrible fit, till, in the ensuing stillness, his spirit seems to have gone out of him.<sup>12</sup>

In *Owen Glendower*, when Rhisiart first sees Glendower he is conscious of “a kind of paralysis of all animation,” as if Glendower’s “soul had left his body

altogether" (120-1), but, as no one else seems to notice, Rhisiart feels that "he *must* be imagining it." At the end of the first volume of the novel—when the point-of-view switches to Glendower—the reader learns directly that he does indeed suffer fits and that,

He would have been puzzled to explain in intelligible words . . . what happened to his conscious soul when these fits took him. (410)

Glendower's "own vague notion was", however, "that his soul 'went somewhere' at these times," and he is conscious that it returns "refreshed, strengthened, fortified" (410). There is a striking description of one of Glendower's fits when he is visiting the sacred site of Mathrafal:

His voice died away and a long, shivering convulsion seized him . . . The heavy lance fell from [his] grasp . . . But Owen's soul returned to him almost at once. (415)

This seems to suggest that Glendower suffers from epilepsy.

*Owen Glendower's* other major protagonist, Rhisiart, has an experience that resembles those of his relative Glendower. Rhisiart's fit occurs when he risks his life riding toward the archers' arrows, in his quixotic attempt to rescue Tegolin and Brother Huw. Rhisiart moves in an automatic, trance-like state:

And there fell on him 'like a clap of thunder and a fall of mist' a curious cessation of all movement of time. Time stopped; and something else, another dimension altogether, took its place; and in that deep time-vacuum . . . he drew his crusader's sword [. . . and . . .] rode forward. (45)

There is the suggestion of an involvement with another world, or level of reality in this passage, with the phrase "another dimension". Similarly Glendower refers to

the idea that human souls can "escape into Annwn [ . . . ] into the world *outside the world!*" (916-7). The allusion, in the previous quotation, to *The Mabinogion*—"like a clap of thunder and a fall of mist"—further emphasises the idea of another world or dimension, for in *The Mabinogion* this phrase is associated with the casting of a magic spell, and the intrusion of the Otherworld, or Annwn, into the world of normal reality (Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion* reads: "behold, a peal of thunder, and with the violence of the thunderstorm, lo there came a fall of mist").<sup>13</sup> Powys is also making use of the long established idea of a link between thunderstorms and epileptic attacks. After commenting on such a coincidence in one of Dostoevsky's novels, Robert Lord notes:

Already in the sixteenth century, Paracelsus had drawn attention to the relationship between the onset of a thunderstorm and the inner tension of the epileptic, and to the fact that the two phenomena often coincided.<sup>14</sup>

Such experiences of another dimension are also frequently alluded to in Powys's non-fiction writings. In *The Art of Happiness*, for example, he suggests that,

It is indeed likely enough, in spite of the modern tendency to lay all the stress upon the material world, that the highest part of our personality is already in touch, *is already part of*, a higher dimension of life.<sup>15</sup>

In the *Autobiography*, he speaks of his soul, as having "somehow blundered into a consciousness of something outside the astronomical universe" (323).

At the beginning of chapter XII (Mathrafal) of *Owen Glendower*, however, the reader learns that Glendower has somehow learnt consciously to induce fits—or what appear to be fits—by consciously detaching his soul from his

body. Epilepsy of course is normally seen as an involuntary disorder of the nervous system—hence the use of words like fit and attack. Addressing his own mirror-image, Glendower comments:

I can detach myself from you till my soul *isn't in you at all*, till my soul is there, or there, or *there . . .* till my soul's so independent of you that it can make you do anything—*perhaps even live after you are dead!* (392-3)

There are found in Powys's *Autobiography* and non-fiction works similar references to the idea of the soul leaving the body. In *The Art of Happiness*, Powys advises his reader to:

Project your soul from your troubled brain, or *pretend . . .* that you project it, and from its new position in the air by your side let it watch you and your misery! (45)

There is also reference in the *Autobiography* to the idea of the soul being able to transform itself into “inanimate objects”, and thus observing its own body from external, and profoundly different, points-of-view (528). Similarly while Glendower initially does not know where his soul goes, as the novel progresses he does send his soul to specific places, such as the hollow tree where he placed Hywel Sele (440), as well as hovering over his own body. Glendower, however, qualifies this: “a soul like this . . . could exteriorize itself, or at least could imagine it could” (440).<sup>16</sup> At the end of the novel, just before he dies, Glendower makes a significant comment to his friend Broch:

‘Our souls from the beginning . . . have been able to escape into—Annwn, into—into . . . into the world *outside the world!*’ (916-7) (Annwn is the Welsh Otherworld, or Underworld.)

In his book *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys*, Harald Fawkner argues for the central importance of such ecstatic experience or trance states, as those of Glendower, in Powys's works. But Fawkner is not speaking about passive experiences:

Ecstasy is believed [by Powys] to be of human-practical value only when it becomes a thing that can be manipulated through the controlling will-power of the individual.<sup>17</sup>

In A *Philosophy of Solitude* Powys in fact uses the phrase “premeditated ecstasy” to describe the elementalism, or psycho-sensual philosophy, that is a central concern in both his fiction and non-fiction.<sup>18</sup> Fawkner sees Powys's psycho-sensual philosophy as a conscious, willed process, a type of meditative practice. Indeed he suggests that one way of looking at this matter is to see,

Powys as a man writing within a very ancient tradition—a tradition, indeed, which has roots in Vedantism and ancient oriental schools of thought, most of them seeking truth through the enhancement of self-awareness. (17)

There is a variety of attacks and fits, or states of altered consciousness described in Powys's works—both fiction and non-fiction—some of an uncontrolled epileptic nature, and some self-induced and under conscious control. The physical state can range from something mild, a meditative state that might be mistaken for absent-mindedness, to something more trance-like in its intensity, or to something of a violent convulsive nature. It can also come unexpectedly, like epilepsy, as happens to both Rhisiart and Geard. On the other hand, it is also consciously induced by Glendower.

With regard to milder, meditative forms of ecstatic experience, Wolf Solent has a

mental device, “that supplied him with the secret substratum of his whole life”, and which involves, “a certain trick he had of doing what he called ‘sinking into his soul’.” This is something that developed in Wolf’s early childhood, and which involved “trances, or . . . fits of absent-mindedness.”<sup>19</sup> In connection with Wolf’s mental devices, Ernst Verbeek comments on what he feels is Powys’s “rather misleading” suggestion, that Wolf’s “short periods of absent-mindedness which Powys calls ‘tricks’” could be produced deliberately. Verbeek, however, quotes a passage where “the word ‘trick’ is replaced by the words ‘trance’ and ‘fit’.” His point is that “a fit and a trance are not wilfully mobilized, are not simply day-dreams” (42). This leads him to the conclusion that Wolf Solent is describing “attacks of so-called minor epilepsy or *petit mal*” (42) which is to ignore Powys’s statements in his *Autobiography* that he wilfully and consciously cultivated such tricks himself.<sup>20</sup> An additional point of interest is the idea “that epileptic attacks can be pretty convincingly simulated, and even self induced,” as suggested by Robert Lord in his book on Dostoevsky (93).<sup>21</sup> While I am not able to read Dr Verbeek’s book length psychiatric study of Powys *De Goden Verzoeken*<sup>22</sup> in Dutch, his article “John Cowper Powys: Tempting the Gods” does not consider the subject of self-induced trances, and reveals an incomplete reading of Powys.

In *Porius* there is another magician figure, Myrddin who when Porius first meets him, suffers “a physical collapse, [so] that Porius had to take him in his arms.”<sup>23</sup> Later, when Myrddin visits the cave of Mithra with Neb, he undergoes a similar collapse, and Gofran asks Neb, “Is he ill? Is he conscious? Is it one of his fits?” (302),<sup>24</sup> though there is also the interesting suggestion of histrionics in

Myrddin’s case.<sup>25</sup> Ernst Verbeek does in fact diagnose Myrddin as an epileptic (46). Furthermore Myrddin Wyllt is, like Geard, and Uryen and Glendower, identified with the corpse god:

The dark, enormous, unwieldy head of Myrddin Wyllt swaying a little from side to side as it uttered its mandate, as if it were the head of an inanimate automaton, or at least of a deus mortuus, or a “corpse god”, risen from its tomb.<sup>26</sup>

Powys, however, states, in the unabridged 1994 version of *Porius*, that the collapse Myrddin suffers when he first meets Porius is not the sacred sickness:

[Porius] had supported far heavier men of his own tribe in the throes of the sacred sickness; and the emperor’s counsellor was suffering, as far as he could make out, from no stroke or fit or seizure of any kind, sacred or profane.<sup>27</sup>

Why Powys originally emphasised that Myrddin did not suffer from epilepsy, and then deleted this passage is not clear. In the 1994 edition Porius diagnoses the collapse as not being a “stroke fit or seizure” but the “collapse of the life-force in [Myrddin’s] physical body,” which causes temporary blindness (64). In addition there is, as with Geard, Glendower, Uryen [in *Maiden Castle*] and other characters, a close connection between Myrddin and Annwn, though in Myrddin’s case there is the suggestion that he has at some time—and he is described as having lived for millions of years—actually been to Annwn.<sup>28</sup> This is part of a significant difference between Myrddin and the characters discussed previously, which is related to the fact that he is a god and has supernatural powers. Indeed the reason why Myrddin cannot suffer the sacred sickness is perhaps because this involves “messages from the gods” (*Autobiography* 72).

A third way of investigating ecstatic experiences in Powys's works, which links with his life-long dream of becoming a magician, and as well as provides a bridge between the ideas of Verbeek and Fawkner, can be found in Mircea Eliade's suggestion of a resemblance between the bodily infirmity of epilepsy, and the conscious manipulation of trance states by shamans: "The . . . difference between a shaman and an epileptic is that the latter cannot deliberately enter into a trance."<sup>29</sup> According to Eliade,

The shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld. (5)

The shamanic vocation manifests itself either in illness or, "progressive change in behaviour":

The candidate becomes meditative, seeks solitude, sleeps a great deal, seems absent-minded, has prophetic dreams, and sometimes seizures.(35)

Eliade makes a particular connection between illness, and this includes epilepsy, and initiation into the shamanic vocation. The self-curing of the illness is seen as part of the initiative process for some shamans:

Those [shamans] who had been ill became shamans precisely because they had succeeded in becoming cured. Very often in Siberia, when the shamanic vocation manifests itself as some form of illness or an epileptic seizure, the initiation is equivalent to a cure. To obtain the gift of shamanizing presupposes precisely the solution of the psychic crisis brought on by the first symptoms of election or call.<sup>30</sup>

Following the "external signs of a 'choice', an 'election'" the candidate in a traditional culture received "theoretical and practical instruction at the hands of the old masters" (*Shamanism* 32, 33).

For Owen Glendower the writings of dead Welsh shamans, or magicians like Merlin (Myrddin) and Taliessin, provide the source for instruction (389). The way that Glendower gives himself up to powers outside his conscious self—"I'm a medium of the gods for *something*" (448)—closely resembles mystical experiences in many religions, while his psychological "trick" of exteriorizing his soul, is a central aspect of shamanism (*Shamanism* 415).

Another aspect of Glendower's shamanism can be seen in the puzzling episode with the goosander:

Thus did Owen's thoughts . . . mingle with the thoughts of the goosander, and the goosander's thoughts with his (646).

This episode appears less strange if we know that a shaman is said to learn the language of animals, and to be helped by spirits in the form of animals. Birds, particularly sea-birds and ducks, are especially linked to shamans, because of the way they descend beneath the sea—that is into the Underworld.<sup>31</sup> Myrddin is another character who has an even more significant relationship with animals: "The creatures that you see are my creatures. They know me and I know them" (56, 1951 edn.)<sup>32</sup>

A further shamanic motif found in *Owen Glendower*, is that of crossing a very narrow and dangerous bridge:

'My life,' [Owen] thought, 'is like crossing the *Eel Bridge*—every step's between fatal alternatives!' (718)

Eliade's comments on this mystical and shamanic motif throw additional light on the nature of the quest that Glendower is undertaking:

The bridge [narrow as a hair] symbolizes passage to the beyond, but not necessarily to the underworld; only the guilty cannot cross it and are precipitated into the abyss. Crossing an extremely narrow bridge that

connects two cosmic regions also signifies passing from one mode of being to another—from uninitiate to initiate, or from ‘living’ to ‘dead’. (*Shamanism* 203-4; see also 482)<sup>33</sup>

Geard, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, is another shaman, or magician, though his powers seem to develop intuitively, in relation to the famous sacred site of Glastonbury, and it is the Welshman Owen Evans who is the conscious student of the old Welsh masters. Other characters, such as Rook Ashover [in *Ducdame*], Wolf Solent, Uryen, and Rhisiart are clearly at early stages in developing shamanic powers. Wolf Solent’s “mythology” which involves, as has been noted, some kind of meditative or trance state, develops in the course of the novel under the pressure of a personal crisis:

‘I’ve learnt that one can’t always get help by sinking into one’s own soul. It’s sometimes necessary to escape from oneself altogether.’ (354)

Myrddin, as he is a god, cannot strictly speaking be described as a shaman, even though his magical and spiritual powers are like those attributed to shamans.

Central to this discussion is the possibility that Powys suffered from epilepsy at some time in his life, and that this had a significant influence on both his novels and other works. A number of Powys’s major characters suffer “queer attacks” or “fits” that resemble epileptic attacks. Epilepsy, however, is a dysfunction of the brain, as the word “fit” indicates. A novel such as *Owen Glendower*, however, suggests the idea of consciously induced fits, or trances as part of a spiritual discipline.

It must, however, be acknowledged that there is a puzzling discrepancy between, on the one hand, Phyllis Playter’s comment to Frederick Davies that Powys needed tablets

to control his epilepsy, along with the importance of epileptic-like experiences in the lives of major Powysian protagonists, and on the other hand, the reference to just a handful of fits in Powys’s *Autobiography*—and no mention of the need for medicine. (The *Autobiography* does, however, record other states of altered consciousness, not involving fits, that Dr Verbeek considers to be examples of a mild form of epilepsy.) In addition there is the total lack of direct reference to epilepsy in Powys’s critical and philosophical works, or indeed the published diaries or letters (or, as far as I am aware, unpublished sources). Powys of course emphasises in his philosophical works, that it is possible—in theory at least—for anyone, through a willed mental process, to experience ecstasy. It would also have been out of character for Powys to keep something like this a secret, as the pride with which he records his various personal eccentricities in his *Autobiography* clearly indicates:

The deepest emotion I have is my malice against the well-constituted as compared with the ill-constituted. Dwarfs, morons, idiots, imbeciles, hunchbacks, degenerates, perverts, paranoiacs, neurasthenics, every type of individual upon whom the world looked down, I loved, respected, admired, revered, and imitated. (515-6)

Certainly, if Powys was an epileptic, the implication, from both his novels and non-fiction, are that epilepsy, far from being just “an excessive discharge of cerebral neurones,” or, as Freud would see it, a disease that is caused by a neurotic trauma,<sup>34</sup> is, for some gifted individuals, a doorway to heightened consciousness. Verbeek, while following a Freudian approach, does suggest that Powys was able, because of his talents, to sublimate his neuroses, amongst which he seems to include epilepsy,

and become “an impressive genius” (46-8).

Both Verbeek and Fawkner persuasively argue for the importance of trance states in the novels of Powys, but Verbeek on the one hand, in his article, ignores the possibility of self-induced trances, while Fawkner on the other hand ignores the

presence of fits, that is involuntary trance states. Mircea Eliade offers an intriguing third possibility: that Powys out of his experience of epilepsy (or maybe something resembling epilepsy) rediscovered an ancient shamanic pathway to spiritual insight.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Davies, “Recollections of John Cowper Powys . . . : Part 1”, *The Powys Review*, 19, 1986, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Verbeek, “John Cowper Powys: Tempting the Gods”, *The Powys Review*, 26, 1991, p. 40. Subsequent page references in my text are to this article.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), p. 83. Similarly Jacques Catteau refers to a study of Dostoevsky’s epilepsy by H. Gastaut:

Gastaut, after studying the medical literature devoted to the evolution of the aura through the ages, undertakes to show there is no reference to a joyful aura, let alone an ecstatic one, from antiquity until the end of the nineteenth century (on the contrary, the aura is always based on fear and anguish):

Jacques Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation* (1978), tr. Audrey Littlewood (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 133.

Gastaut also, according to Catteau, thought that Dostoevsky “invented the ecstatic aura and so led neurologists into error” p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (1934) (London: Macdonald, 1967), p. 72. Page references in my text are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Powys moved to Burpham in 1902, and the first fit of this group is described in the Burpham section of *Autobiography*, p. 370. Powys also states in his autobiography, published in 1934, that “the last of these curious collapses occurred about eight years ago” (371). Dr Ernst Verbeek refers to Powys suffering from epilepsy during the hectic years of making his lecture tours of the U.S.A. and Canada, and suggests that once Powys settled down to “an orderly, calm, regular life, with several hours in the open air every day,” and living with Phyllis Playter “his convulsions stopped”, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Visions and Revisions* (1915) (London: Macdonald, 1955), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Including a book with a medical emphasis by James Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation*, p. 125. A variety of spellings of Dostoevsky’s name will be found in the following pages.

<sup>9</sup> He discusses Dostoevsky in *Visions and Revisions*

(1915), *The Enjoyment of Literature* (1938), *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938), and *Dostoevsky* (1946).

<sup>10</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Art of Growing Old* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), p. 208.

<sup>11</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Owen Glendower*, 2 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), pp. 121, 410. Page references within my text are to this edition.

<sup>12</sup> John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) (London, Macdonald, 1955), p. 448.

<sup>13</sup> *The Mabinogion*, tr. Lady Charlotte Guest (London: Dent, (1906), 1927), p. 50; see also p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Lord, *Dostoevsky* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970), p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Art of Happiness* (1935) (London: John Lane, 1946), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps as a child, according to Johan Huizinga, Almost believes he actually is such and such a thing, without, however, wholly losing consciousness of ‘ordinary reality’:

*Homo Ludens* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), p. 4.

See Robin Wood “John Cowper Powys’s Welsh Mythology: Gods and Manias”, *The Powys Review*, 22, 1988, pp. 3-13; and endnote 25 below.

<sup>17</sup> Harald Fawkner, *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> John Cowper Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent* (1929) (London: Macdonald, 1961), p. 7. Jeremy Hooker notes that Porius’s cavosenargizing “has been likened to Wolf’s ‘mythology’”. *John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1973), p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> In *Ducdame* also there is reference to Rook Ashover’s tendency “to detach himself from things that happened and to enjoy them in a sort of inhuman trance.” John Cowper Powys, *Ducdame* (London: Grant Richards, 1925), pp. 110-111.

<sup>21</sup> Lord has an endnote to an article in the medical journal *Lancet* of 4 June 1960, by C. W. M. Whitty, “Photic and self-induced epilepsy”, pp. 1207-8 (Lord, p. 242). Blum and Golitizin refer to “an old fashioned ‘neurotic’ . . . whose epileptic-like behaviour stems from hysterical neuroses.” *The Sacred Athlete* (Lanham: University Press of America), p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Verbeek, *Der Goden Verzoeken* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Porius* (London: Macdonald, 1951), p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> There is also Porius's strange visionary experience when he holds Myrddin in his arms pp. 58-9.

<sup>25</sup> "Whether or not the whole thing, as he had at first suspected, was a subtle piece of play-acting and his own recent excursion through Time and Space an illusion" (*Porius*, p. 60). Play acting is not, however, something trivial to Powys; rather it is an important part of an approach to life, in which the imagination is of prime importance. In the *Autobiography* he states, "I have always been an actor in ideas—a charlatan if you will," and he dismisses "objective-minded 'truth-seekers,'" as "unconscious hypocrites of the deepest dye," referring "to the mad freakishness of real reality," in contrast to the "grave face of stolid common sense," p. 136. See also endnote 16 above.

<sup>26</sup> "Had there been anyone to see [Geard's] face . . . it would have appeared like the face of a corpse . . . He was like a person who had been shaken by the convulsions of some terrible fit" (448). With regard to Uryen, see *Maiden Castle* (London: Macdonald, 1966), pp. 55, 56, 166, 235, for examples. Powys took the term "corpse god" from John Rhys's *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891).

<sup>27</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Porius* (1951) (Colgate: Colgate University Press, 1994), p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> In Powys's novel *Morwyn* a group of characters travel to Caer Sidi, another name for Annwn or the Otherworld, where they find the sleeping gods Cronos, Merlin and Caridwen (the Welsh Mother goddess). Caer Sidi lies below Hell in this novel.

<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (1951), tr. W. Trask (New York: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 24. Page references in my text are to this edition.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (1958), tr. W. Trask (New York: Harper, 1975), p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, (1960), (London: Collins, 1974), p. 58 *et seq.*, and *Shamanism* pp. 293-4.

<sup>32</sup> See *Porius*, 1951 edition, chapter 3, pp. 50-64.

<sup>33</sup> Glendower's burial arrangements for himself also have strong shamanic overtones: the shaman undergoes a symbolic death and dismemberment in his final initiation (Eliade, *Rites*, pp. 90 *et seq.*). Glendower first instructs Broch to burn his body after his death, and then to break his bones into little pieces with his axe, p. 918.

<sup>34</sup> Catteau, *Dostoyevsky*, p. 99.

# Jacqueline Peltier

## Powys: The Pleasures of Proust?

It is significative that the very last essay of *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938), which is Powys's last volume of essays, should be devoted to Marcel Proust, because John Cowper Powys had for a number of years made clear his admiration for the author of one of the major masterpieces of our century. There are some curious similitudes between Marcel Proust and J. C. Powys, above all in their respective search for ecstatic experience, through sensation, 'the ultimate secret of life, its intellectual aim, its spiritual culmination'.<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer a few commentaries on that important appreciative essay which seems to my mind, while invigorating, sometimes difficult to interpret. These twenty or so pages offer quite a few highlights and judicious view-points but, at the same time, they are difficult to analyse because of a certain relaxed way of treating the several different subjects which particularly interested Powys in Proust. The style is close to that of an improvised lecture and we are launched straight away into the story and are taken inside *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* without any preparatory explanations. Nevertheless, the essay is brilliant and provocative and one cannot but wonder at Powys's profound knowledge of the whole of the work. One must bear in mind that *Remembrance of Things Past*<sup>2</sup> was translated from 1922 to 1932, the first six volumes by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and the seventh, *Time Regained*, by Stephen Hudson. (This was rather a feat, since in France the last volume, *Le Temps Retrouvé*, was only published in

1927, five years after Proust's death.) Powys had read attentively all the seven volumes.

We may find references to Proust in Powys's writings before he produced *The Pleasures of Literature*, some in his letters to Llewelyn<sup>3</sup> at the end of 1922 and early 1923 ("Proust—who is dead you know—will also have to be written of carefully by me some day, and come with *Ulysses* in a volume of new criticism, eh?"). At the time he is working on his essay on Joyce which will appear in *Life and Letters* in 1923 and which contains an appreciative reference to Proust. (Curiously enough, Joyce is often mentioned, as equal to Proust in importance, as in this essay, but—it seems to me—with less warmth and many reservations, particularly about his "obscurity".) Powys did write a short essay on Proust which appeared in *The North American Review* in 1924.<sup>4</sup> These few pages are written with genuine understanding and enthusiasm, and while some of his views on Proust's intentions are open to discussion or doubt, he already shows his interest in Proust's use of perception:

For us it has now become a case of 'before Proust' or 'after Proust', and fortunate indeed are those for whom this man has restretched the wind-harp of human receptivity till it is taut as it never was before: taut and quiveringly responsive to the very faintest of those wandering airs that blow in upon us from the far off shell-strewn beaches, where the sands of our senses slide down ledge by ledge into the deep ocean of our soul!

We also find quite a number of remarks or allusions concerning the “madeleine” dipped in camomile tea, sensations, immortality-proving ecstasies, scattered in *Autobiography* (1934),<sup>5</sup> and Proust is also discussed in *The Meaning of Culture* (1929) and *In Defence of Sensuality* (1930). In the Thirties, Powys always included a lecture on Proust at Conferences in Canada,<sup>6</sup> and, most surely, in the U.S. too. However, extended discussion of “Proust” in *The Pleasures of Literature* had to wait until 1938, between *Morwyn* (1937) and *Owen Glendower* (1940).

It was Llewelyn Jones,<sup>7</sup> literary Editor of the Chicago *Evening Post*, who recommended Powys to read Proust in 1922, at least *Swann's Way* which, in England, was published in the third week of September that same year. Prior to that date, Proust had already attracted the attention of the critics in Great Britain—probably the first foreign country to show interest—and this as early as December 1913, when a paper by Mary Duclaux was published in the *T.L.S.*, about *Du côté de chez Swann*. Then there was an article by Richard Aldington in 1920 in the *English Review*, another one by John Middleton Murry in the *Quarterly Review*, written in 1921.<sup>8</sup> We must also mention *An English Tribute*, published in 1923, thanks to Scott Moncrieff's insistence and which comprised about twenty names of personalities of Art and Letters, such as Joseph Conrad, Stephen Hudson, Arnold Bennett, Francis Birrell, Ethel Mayne, Compton Mackenzie, Reginald Turner, Clive Bell and J. Middleton Murry. Unfortunately, some of the commentaries were ungracious in their praise or full of scorn, as for instance Arnold Bennett's. It was, for most of them, an occasion to express their admiration but this was mingled with inexact appreciation, except for Middleton Murry, who had showed

exceptional discernment as early as 1921. But one must not be too severe. In France, at that time, only the ‘happy few’ knew and understood his work. Apart from a little group of clear-sighted writers who wrote intelligently about the *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* in the Thirties, this star of first magnitude was eclipsed by Surrealism first, and then Existentialism. The really important studies on Proust began to appear from the fifties onwards and the Société des Amis de Marcel Proust issued their first *Bulletin* in 1950.

Apart from an enlightened and ever present curiosity which made Proust as well as Powys inevitably go to the most valuable works of literature, there were between these two contemporaries some strong points of convergence, some strange similarities: the great influence and weight of the family, poor health from early life, a fairly late development of their literary powers, their oratory (Proust was most brilliant in conversation), a huge correspondence and, above all in the later parts of their lives, the yearning for a way of life which demanded reclusion and solitude in order to bring their worlds into being. In both cases the result is overwhelming and the work immense and challenging; a whole new universe to explore is given to us.

We shall now turn to this essay on Proust, the last of a long and rich series on great writers, the ones that Powys loved and admired all his life. It is impossible not to ask ourselves whether Powys did realise his aim, to compel his reader to reach, without losing time, for that “shelf of volumes” and lose himself in these “new avenues, new vistas, new horizons”.<sup>9</sup> To what extent will Proust's message be understood with the help or the incitement of Powys's analysis? What will be the reactions to that essay of a person who

would not yet have engaged in the discovery of the Proustian world? In the *T.L.S.* of 12 November 1938, we find a review of *The Pleasures of Literature* in which the reviewer, alas anonymous, seems to have a certain familiarity, or at least an affinity with Powys's previous works, and does not conceal his admiration for Powys's genuine response to literature. And he candidly compares him to a "very remarkable preacher of some curious religion," adding that "it would be interesting if he were to impose upon himself the task of theologizing upon the basis of his own sensations!" Interestingly the review begins and ends with excerpts from Powys's analysis of Proust,<sup>10</sup> thus suggesting that the Proust essay had outstanding impact for him.

In his essay, one of the very first observations Powys makes, which cannot be disregarded by the "dyed-in-the-grain" (as Powys says) Proustian, is his remark that *Remembrance of Things Past* has all the characteristics of the "rambling autobiographical essay", although he does make it clear it is only a supposition: "one feels as if . . .", "it seems", "this appears to make his job so easy." Yet Proust's constant and obsessive preoccupation until his death was to explain, ceaselessly, that his work was not rambling, that from the beginning he had known exactly how his work would end. For instance:

And when you mention cathedrals to me, I cannot but be moved by an intuition which enables you to guess what I never said to anybody and which I write here for the first time: I had wanted to give to each part of my book the titles: Porch, Stained Glass of the Apse, etc. to reply in advance to the stupid criticism made to me that I lack construction in books where I will show you that the only merit is in the solidity of the smallest parts.

..

I am afraid that the architecture in *Remembrance of Things Past* will not be apprehended more in this book (*Within a Budding Grove*) than in *Swann*. I see readers imagining that I am writing the story of my life relying on arbitrary and fortuitous associations of ideas. The structure is veiled and the less quickly apprehended as it develops on a larger scale . . . *Remembrance of Things Past* is so meticulously 'composed' that the last chapter of the last volume was written just after the first chapter of the first volume . . .<sup>11</sup>

And his friend Paul Morand, diplomat and writer, in his Paris Letter of December 1926, published in *The Dial*, observes:

If I may make a personal contribution to this debate ( . . . ) I should say that Proust when referring to the last books in his great symphony, *La Prisonnière* and *Le Temps retrouvé*, often said to me that these books should serve to clear up some attitudes of the author and aspects of some of the characters which might have remained obscure to that point. 'Wait for the end', he said, 'the spread of the compass is very great, this prevents one as yet from judging the whole, but never fear: that has all been traced out in advance'.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, Powys has been perfectly cognisant of the fact, for he acknowledges how, towards the end, "the picture sinks away into its predestined perspective". We must be aware, from the start, that Powys's introductory remarks about the impressions readers may have that Proust "having once established his characters", ( . . . ) lets "them live and love and hate and die at the un-interfered-with pleasure of chance and fate" (*PL*, 624), are to be taken as describing a misleading first impression. Indeed on the contrary, he wanted to underline the deceptive ease of the Proustian technique. He knows that many,

among the main characters, are shown as unstable, fluctuating, protean and that some aspects of their personalities will show extraordinary changes (personal and/or social) during the whole of the book, to the very end; but only later in the essay does he mention “the surprising development, sometimes a startling transformation, in the said characters.” So, in fact his first provocative definition of *Remembrance of Things Past* as a “rambling autobiographical essay” is wrong and could lead astray an inattentive reader, for it is neither an essay, nor is it autobiographical and it is certainly *not* rambling. And the comparison which is made with James Joyce to the detriment of Proust is not relevant because in fact two of the three characteristics apply to both. There is “enormous erudition, and symbolic architecture” in Proust’s book. As to the third characteristic “philological experimentation”, which, it is true, does not apply, it can be exchanged for “psychological experimentation” and the whole partakes of an immense labour. Powys, although not being adversely critical, remarks that Proust did not “bother about plot”. In the classical sense, there is no more and no less “plot” than, for instance, in *Ulysses*, but there is a precise scaffolding of structure and a careful construction: the Narrator, almost duplicating his parents’ old friend Swann, the wealthy, sophisticated and courteous man of the world, struggles through the various experiences of life, love, friendship, social success, and is going from disillusion to disillusion until he is granted the miraculous revelation in *Time Regained* which will enable him to start “accomplishing (his) work.” This oblique way of approaching Proust’s work, apparently so relaxed that it could mislead the reader, is, I should like to argue, demonstrative of

Powys’s unease with his subject, Proust, because his profound attraction to some of his views is qualified by disagreement (or displeasure) with elements of those views. This unease may explain why *The Pleasures of Literature* essay comes close to misrepresenting ingredients of Proust’s *A la Recherche*.

In his typical manner, cordial, eager but butterfly-like, Powys discusses one theme, then another, at random, going from main leitmotives to secondary ones, including snobbishness, homosexuality, jealousy, sadism, Time and the “intimations of immortality”. His analysis of these different themes, which would each require volumes, is perforce reductive and seems a little sketchy to a reader who is already familiar with the Proustian world; but will it bring enlightenment to a new reader and help him to become better acquainted with what is still a difficult work? For instance, what impressions will he be able to gather from Powys’s explanations about erotic jealousy in Proust, compared with “true love” in Hardy and James (*PL* 631)? Proust—like Powys—does not believe in love (except in the case of parental love) in its idealised form, but in desire. And that desire is not only carnal but includes the yearning to know who really is that being, multiple, contradictory, fluid, who eludes our investigations. Hence the acute dissatisfaction, made more vivid with each new discovery of some aspects of that mysterious being. It is an unending source of suffering, anguish, jealousy, first in the case of Swann for Odette and later of the Narrator for Albertine. Or, to choose another example, in the cryptic evocation of the young hero “unearthing the buried treasures of his favourite Bergotte” (*PL*, 625), how are we to guess that Bergotte is the great writer the Narrator has admired so intensely in his youth, who initiated him into the realm of

words, ideas and imagery through his books? He is the embodiment of literature, as Vinteuil of music and Elstir of painting. In *The Captive*, Bergotte catches cold after having been to an exhibition of Dutch painting to see Vermeer's *View of the Delft*, a picture he adores, to reexamine "the little patch of yellow wall" mentioned by an art critic which had escaped his memory; he mutters to himself, "That's how I ought to have written," comes home and dies. (Powys had made an allusion in his previous paper on Proust, in 1924, to the fact that Proust, who was here recounting his own experience, had worked on this passage until almost his very death.)

They buried him, but all through that night of mourning, in the lighted shop-windows, his books arranged three by three, kept vigil like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection (*RTP*, III, 186).

Powys's description of Françoise, a secondary but important character because she is present throughout the book, is not totally accurate. She is indeed a symbol of loyalty but she represents many aspects of the humble servant and apart from being faithful to the family, she shows also a certain independence of judgment, a primitive sort of cruelty towards her inferiors, and sardonic shrewdness for the people she serves which it is difficult to associate with the "feudal retainers in Walter Scott's books" (*PL*, 635). As is the case for the majority of the characters in the book, she is a composition made of many different persons (including Proust's last housekeeper, Céleste), besides being an emblematic figure of a Medieval France, in the same light that will shine on the ancient lineage of the noble family of the Guermantes.

On the subject of snobbery, which is one

of the important themes in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Powys is not, as we know, the best authority, apart from adopting De Kantzow's famous phrase "Powys, we must propitiate Magnates." But surprisingly he does devote a few pages to the subject and shows his interest through the two long passages he quotes, very well chosen for they give a real flavour of Proust's style, with his observation mingled with irony and his peculiar brand of humour (*PL*, 638-9). But on Proust's snobbery much has been said and written. Was he really a snob or was he a spy of genius? As a young man he was attracted to aristocratic circles, but perhaps more for refinement, glamour. Later, he was collecting material and could have answered, like one of his characters: "J'observe", "I am observing". The time really spent among the brilliant Parisian world started when he was a very young man, around 1890, and waned around 1910 when, after having written a small book, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which is important because it is certainly the nucleus of the future opus, he decided to launch himself on a much more ambitious project and started his life as a recluse, shut up in his cork-lined room, working as much as his ailing health and asthma would allow. From the few pages Powys devotes to 'botanical' specimens of Parisian high life, we gather the impression that it constituted a main ingredient of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Powys had a very impressive knowledge of French literature, of which, perhaps, too little has been said so far, and he is certainly right in invoking Balzac and Saint-Simon as two of the great influences on Proust. But in his essay, too much importance is given to the fashionable world and such preeminence distorts the perspective in the mind of the reader still unacquainted with the complexities of the Proustian vision.

It is equally difficult to estimate the importance, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, of homosexuality and sadism, from the evaluation Powys makes here, although we do know his abhorrence from but also his recurring fascination for the second theme, to which he often returns in his own work. The scene he refers to takes place early in *Swann's Way* (*RTP*, 173-180), when the Narrator is still a young boy, and it is related in a few pages, in a quiet and objective way, with the cool precision of the young voyeur and the added comments of a far older man. Proust brought a certain delicacy of touch in treating this shocking episode; there is no coarseness, no brutality, no incitement to sadism in the way it is told. It seems, nevertheless, to have made a strong impression on Powys who discusses this passage with intensity and, one could say, with the fussy preciseness of a specialist. It can reasonably be objected that he devotes too much attention to this episode, making it appear appallingly pitiless, whereas Proust shows on the contrary a rare tenderness for poor Mlle Vinteuil's craving for pleasure mixed with evil. For the Narrator, this incident will have some disquieting and painful consequences in relation to Albertine later on and will contribute to his important study of Lesbianism. Proust, in his private life, knew what sadism was, if we are to believe George Painter's biography, but in his work it is only a component, among many, of the "aquarium-gestures of human society" and if some attention is given to that "most dangerous of human nerves" in his work, he usually links it with the more general theme of cruelty.

There is one important subject of discussion which might perhaps help us to understand Powys's fascination for Proust. It is the problem of sensation and ecstasy, which for both of them, is at the core of

their respective preoccupations. In fact, it is also a problem for us, readers, as we ponder on the weight, the place given here to this central problem. I sense, perhaps wrongly, a certain unease when Powys deals with what he himself calls "the grand secret of Proust, that sacred message." At the very beginning of his essay Powys draws our attention to the fact that,

its *real theme*, its inmost essence, has to do with the most evasive element in our secret life, namely, with those obscure feelings of delicious ecstasy which are as hard to arrest or analyse in their swift passage as it is hard to explain why such small, slight, trivial and casual chances are the cause of their rising up out of the depths (*PL*, 625).

Here is the appeal of those "obstinate questionings" ( . . . ) as to the relation between the individual soul, incarnated in Time and *that* which lies beyond Time". Who, better than Powys could reach the profound significance of the incident of the "petite madeleine"? And had not he found long ago something similar in his own experiences (that "laurel-axe from that garden spinney at Shirley" mentioned at the beginning of *Autobiography*), or in his dear Wordsworth when he evokes Proust's authentic "intimations of immortality"? So far no objection can be made and these lines convey to us a genuine understanding of the curious phenomenon described by the Narrator. There is a truly Proustian flavour as he evokes the magic titles and the impression of "escape from the importunity of time" he feels as they invade his memory. Very soon, though, Powys starts questioning the process by which these "intimations of immortality" appear and here, I think, we begin to sense a certain dissatisfaction with Proust. He gives us, consciously or not, a clue to his reservations and doubts, and that is the

expression “the curious thing” applied to the intimations, followed by another underlined expression: “*they come by chance*”. When we turn to *In Defence of Sensuality*, written eight years before, we can read:

True enough it is that moments of thrilling happiness mysteriously come and go, evoked apparently sometimes by one circumstance, sometimes by another, almost always by small external things, apprehended in certain lights and under certain physical states of bodily condition (*DS*, 14).

And he goes on to say:

But these floating vapours gather, as a rule, round very primitive external objects. At all events, the original motion of the mind, where our will and our attention are focused upon the gesture of receptivity, is absolutely clear-cut, definite, solidly of one piece, and simple. And this is essential: that the ultimate gesture of the individual consciousness, faced by the mystery of life, should be extremely simple. We must be able at any second and almost automatically to reproduce it (*DS*, 17).

One of the pillars of Powys’s philosophy is surely his faith in man’s will power to get control over his mind and emotions, an idea he had already proclaimed in, for instance, *The Meaning of Culture*:

This power of the will is limited in its control over outward events; but it is almost unlimited in its control over the motions of one’s own mind. The more often one uses it in this direction the more formidable does its strength become. It would seem that the grand-master-effort of the will would be directed—such, at least, appears to be the tendency one gathers from animals and birds and plants—towards keeping clearly before one’s consciousness the idea of a certain thrilling calm of mind.<sup>13</sup>

The difference of approach is therefore crucial and Powys cannot agree with Proust’s reliance on chance, coincidence,

related to occasions which are completely out of reach of our will power. For him, an attitude of patience, a preparation is necessary in order to be ready when or if the ecstatic movement invades us:

There will arise, be it noted, at the worst, even if those mystic flood-gates remain shut, a certain faint degree of grim satisfaction in the mere recognition that, in spite of hindrances, distractions, discomforts, and even serious suffering, we have adjusted the machinery of our mind into what might be called the ritualistic posture (*DS*, 15).

Powys relies heavily upon memory, the voluntary kind, to help us recover some happy sensations of the past; it sometimes has close resemblances with the “rêverie” à la Rousseau. Nothing can be so different from Proust’s very definite refusal of that memory which for him is like turning the leaves of an album of photos:

For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which it is possible for us to extract (*RTP*, III, 912).

One of the conclusions Proust draws towards the end of *Remembrance of Things Past* is precisely that there are no laws, whether of the moral or philosophical order, that are not violated by distortion, error, falsehood. The only salvation possible is achieved only if one can rent the veil of pseudo-reality, breaking through habit to attain Truth, and this is only given to some by chance.

Towards the end of *Time Regained*, about to go to the reception at the Princesse de Guermantes’, the Narrator, dispirited, tired, discouraged, feeling quite

useless, is about to be confronted with a chance, several times in succession in fact:

But it is sometimes just at the moment when we think that everything is lost that the intimation arrives which may save us; one has knocked at all the doors which lead nowhere, and then one stumbles without knowing it on the only door through which one can enter—which one might have sought in vain for a hundred years—and it opens of its own accord (*RTP*, III, 898).

For Proust, salvation comes through involuntary Memory, “provided by the physical world, by some immediate and fortuitous act of perception” as Beckett comments in his clear-sighted and valuable essay on Proust.<sup>14</sup> *In Defence of Sensuality* is a vigorous counter-attack on this idea:

Certain sensations of the past are cunningly blended then with certain sensations of the present. It is just here that I differ very widely from the elaborately worked-out conclusions of Marcel Proust. He seems to arrive at his intricate proof of the existence of an Eternal Being in us, nourished upon temporal nourishment while Itself remains timeless and deathless, from an intense contemplation of a series of adventitious and accidental happenings, over the occasions of which he has no control. The way of life I am advocating here makes the bold initial plunge of assuming that it possesses within it the power of arbitrarily summoning up these various temporal sensations which, by reason of their strange identity, feed “the Eternal Being” in us with its required nourishment (*DS*, 108).

This long passage in its directness and open criticism is important for it shows the abyss between their approaches on this primordial problem of Memory and its consequences on their philosophical way of life. But Powys in the “Proust” essay concentrates on representing his subject and does not comment on his differences.

Powys only sighs for more of these “intimations”, “that sacred ‘message’ which (Proust) as a good Lollard of literature seek(s) for,” but to which, strangely, he only makes vague allusions in a desultory way. Proust, in *Time Regained*, in a magnificent meditation, after the final series of revelations has at last brought him the enlightenment for which he had been searching all his life, unravels under our eyes the complexities, the riddles, the enigmas which had thronged his path, like the investigator of a metaphysical detective story:

So often, in the course of my life, reality had disappointed me because at the instant when my senses perceived it my imagination, which was the only organ that I possessed for the enjoyment of beauty, could not apply itself to it, in virtue of that ineluctable law which ordains that we can only imagine what is absent. And now, suddenly the effect of this harsh law had been neutralised, temporarily annulled, by a marvellous expedient of nature which had caused a sensation—the noise made both by the spoon and by the hammer, for instance—to be mirrored at one and the same time in the past, so that my imagination was permitted to savour it, and in the present, where the actual shock to my senses of the noise, the touch of the linen napkin, or whatever it might be, had added to the dreams of the imagination the concept of ‘existence’ which they usually lack, and through this subterfuge had made it possible for my being to secure, to isolate, to immobilise—for a moment brief as a flash of lightning—what normally it never apprehends: a fragment of time in the pure state (*RTP*, III, 905).

We are made witnesses, here, of that miracle, a revelation brought out of chaos by *pure chance*, what Powys defines, with a twinkle in his eye, as “the Miracle of the Mass in the Natural World”. The Narrator

is suddenly dazzled by the evidence of the interrelation of three elements which had been present in his life all along but disconnected: impressions, reminiscences and art. In the "Hotel de Guermantes", he has been subjected to a shattering series of "visitations", as Beckett calls them. It is a mystic experience:<sup>15</sup> the terms Proust uses when describing the effect of these "intimations" on him are: "A profound azure intoxicated my eyes, impressions of coolness, of dazzling light, swirled round me" (*RP*, III, 899). It makes him suddenly feel he is—physically—in the baptistery of St Mark's in Venice; it gives him "a joy which was like a certainty" and makes "death a matter of indifference" (*RTP*, III, 900). Another intimation transports the Narrator to the seaside, in Balbec, through the touch of the napkin, the sensation causing him "to swell with happiness"; his "appetite for life was immense" (*RTP*, III, 905). And he also admits that he would have lost consciousness if the sensation had persisted:

But the contemplation, though it was of eternity, had been fugitive. And yet I was vaguely aware that the pleasure which this contemplation had, at rare intervals, given me in my life, was the only genuine and fruitful pleasure that I had known (*RP*, III, 899).

There are, therefore, vast differences between Proust and Powys in the very apprehension of the phenomenon, and in the meaning, of the word "ecstasy", its nature, its force, its implications. For Proust these resurrected impressions which rise out of the depths several times in succession towards the end of the book lead him to re-examine his past life and to understand at last how he will be able to break the solitude of the human condition, and attain some sort of communication of souls: "Through Art alone are we able to

emerge from ourselves . . ." Powys has a very different point of view which he clearly states early in *Autobiography*:

There is some secret, and a secret far more valuable than the revelation of that impersonal-personal Eternal Being which came to Proust, to be found in the feelings of a young boy as to the nature of the Universe. This queer expression, 'having an ecstasy', what does it really mean? What are the ingredients that compose them, the atmosphere out of which such ecstasies arise? The following is my own analysis of these precious moments. I think they always come, just as everthing living does, *out of duality*, out of the energizing of opposite poles of existence, poles of substance, poles of being, poles of electricity, if you prefer that scientific word. I think these moments of ecstasy are apt to come when, as you contemplate some particular scene or object, you suddenly recall some *other* deep cause of satisfaction in your life, but a cause totally independent of the one you are now regarding *and not in the same plane of feeling*.<sup>16</sup>

That is why, when we come to the last pages of the essay, we are made aware of the fact that Powys is feeling uneasy as he tries to give us his interpretation of the curious Proustian phenomenon, which "happens by chance" and could occur to anyone. Some elements of the Proustian alchemy puzzle him, such as the importance of music for Swann as for the Narrator, or the metaphysical implications included in the "madeleine sensation of Immortality". The fifty-page monologue towards the end of *Time regained* is scattered with expressions and considerations verging on the mystic ("my spiritual renewal", "contemplation of the essence of things", "a supraterrestrial presentiment", "like the seed, I should be able to die once the plant had developed") and some critics have been tempted to think that, perhaps,

Proust had, in some mysterious way, come close to a Zen satori. But I think we must be cautious and leave the question Powys asks unanswered, and let each reader be judge. On the other hand, we know what Powys thought of the First Cause; that is why he is so reticent.

Yes, I learnt from this moment (...) that our deepest pleasures strew behind them—even when at the time they are not consciously enjoyed—leaves of delight that become enchanted with the passing of time, like petals gathered in an ancient *pot pourri*.

And if they are always in that storehouse, why cannot they be summoned up at will? *And* they can! Proust, with his impersonal Eternal Being, stops short at this point, leaving it all to the accidents of our way. But when I think *now* of that Euclid something comes back! Not in any thrilling rush does it come. It comes quietly and *prepense*.<sup>17</sup>

Powys was not interested by aesthetics as such; he must have felt doubtful as he read the conclusions the Narrator extrapolates from his lengthy meditation about the consequences of the revelations brought to him just before the matinée Guermantes. He could not in the least share Proust's rather elitist judgement that salvation can only come through Art:

Whether I considered reminiscences of the kind evoked by the noise of the spoon or the taste of the madeleine, or those truths written with the aid of shapes for whose meaning I searched in my brain, where—church steeples or wild grass growing in a wall—they composed a magical scrawl, complex and elaborate, their essential character was that I was not free to choose them, that such as they were they were given to me. And I realised that this must be the mark of their authenticity.

And he adds:

I had arrived then at the conclusion that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means

free, that we do not choose how we shall make it but that it pre-exists us and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature, that is to say to discover it (*RTP*, III, 913, 915).

Powys's philosophy is humbler, more democratic so to say, it applies to every one of us. In all his books he has had in mind to advocate a way of life which would help man in the terrible trial of living, hinting at some technique which in some ways is close to Eastern philosophy. *In Defence of Sensuality* could be read possibly as Powys's *Contre Proust*!

Here, with its 'I am I' detached and aloof from all other identities, with its central being separated from all traditions except the simple power of consciousness, this detached and lonely soul, sinking down into itself, contemplates the huge, dim, obscure mass of the external world. (...) Alone, and confronting the unknown, it cannot hinder these waves of impression from washing up against the 'little hard crystal' which is its conscious core. Here it is then, a potential god, a potential shell-fish: just simply a consciousness, confronting the abysses of Time and Space (*DS*, 19).

There is another interesting problem concerning their 'existential' beliefs. Proust, except for the last two hundred pages, shows his main character as most unsure, most hesitant about his vocation as an artist. He has no confidence in his powers and as soon as he has achieved or possessed something, he despises it. Self-distrust, self-doubt, what R. Shattuck calls, after Montaigne, *soul error*: "the imagination falls victim to soul error and seeks its object for ever elsewhere".<sup>18</sup> It is certainly not the case for Powys who tells us how, very early in his life, he felt he was endowed with the powers of a Magician

which entailed an “enjoyment, half-mystical and half-sensual of this bewildering Universe”.<sup>19</sup> His philosophy is full of defiance towards the First Cause, the “little, hard crystal” within himself helps him to accept his loneliness in the Cosmos and he is not so much preoccupied in saving “a fragment of time in the pure state” as saving his own individuality, otherwise lost in Space:

Our ego is an indiscriminate cosmos-enjoyer. It embraces and ravishes and devours any sort of universe. In the matter of universes it doesn't pick and choose or bother whether the shapes and colours it beholds are what our experts call ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’, ‘absolute’ or ‘relative’. It's enough for our humiliated self, for our purged, winnowed, stripped, and *reduced-to-pure-perception self*, if it can embrace, swallow and enjoy.<sup>20</sup>

The last page of Powys's “Proust” in *The Pleasures of Literature* is difficult to interpret in relation to Proust, for Powys suddenly introduces a quotation from his beloved Rabelais about Folly and Wisdom along the centuries, which appears as an anti-climax to what preceded, and Powys turns to the “art of writing”, with a severe judgement on the “long-winded struggles to find the secret of the Eternal in our Memory”. But curiously enough and

paradoxically, the last long sentence is obviously an homage to Proust, acknowledging his debt to him in the matter of techniques and vision:

I have learnt from him a certain trick of taking the unpoetic details of daily life as if they were just as extraordinary, and just as significant of the Méséglise way of our soul's planetary sojourn, as any Venetian palaces or Alpine peaks (*PL*, 651).

It is a little sad and disappointing that this controversial but rather favourable and challenging essay should end on such a flat note, since we know Powys's aversion for palaces and high mountains! I think he must have greatly appreciated “the richness, thickness, solidity and orbital independence” of the Proustian world, even if he could not share certain elements of the message Proust imparted to us. So we may on the whole say with confidence that they were kindred spirits in many ways, adventurers in “unearthly exultation”.

A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy, one can understand that the word ‘death’ should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future? (*RTP*, III, 906)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Powys *In Defence of Sensuality* (London: Gollancz, 1930; Village Press, 1974), pp. 15-16. Page references in my text (*DS*), refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*. All quotations are taken from Penguin Books in 3 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1989) based on the Pléiade text of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, NRF, 1954. Page references in my text (*RTP*) refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, 2 vols (London: Village Press, 1975), vol. 1, p. 329. See also p. 310 and in vol. 2, p 146.

<sup>4</sup> "Marcel Proust", *North American Review*, March 1924. Vol. CCXIX, No. 3, pp. 408-412. Mentioned by D. Langridge in *J. C. Powys: A Record of Achievement* (London: The Library Association, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934), pp. 41, 113, 129, 405.

<sup>6</sup> *Powys Notes*, Fall 1994-Winter 1995: A Special Issue on the Canadian Lecture Tours of J. C. Powys (1914-1915, 1930), pp. 91 & 93.

<sup>7</sup> Llewelyn Jones is also mentioned, with gratitude, in J. C. Powys's Essay "Lecturing on Books", p. 68 in *Elusive America*, ed. P. Roberts (London: Cecil Woolf, 1994) and in *Autobiography*, pp. 567 & 648.

<sup>8</sup> *Cahiers Marcel Proust*, 11—Études proustiennes, IV. "Proust & la critique anglo-saxonne", 1982.

<sup>9</sup> *The Pleasures of Literature* (London: Cassell, 1938), "Proust", p. 624. Page references in my text (*PL*) refer to this edition.

<sup>10</sup> "A Sensationalist Critic, Mr J. C. Powys's Literary Pleasures", *T.L.S.*, 12 Nov. 1938. See Annex I.

<sup>11</sup> *Proust par lui-même*, C. Mauriac (Paris: ed. du Seuil, 1957), p. 138, trans by J. Peltier.

<sup>12</sup> "Paris Letter" from Paul Morand, Dec. 1926, in *The Dial*, Jan. 1927.

<sup>13</sup> *The Meaning of Culture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930; Village Press, 1974), p. 208. Page references in my text (*MC*) refer to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> S. Beckett, *Proust* (London: Calder & Boyars, (1931) 1965), p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> S. Beckett, *Proust*, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Shattuck, *Proust* (London: Fontana, 1974), pp. 96-102.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *In Spite of*, (London: Macdonald, 1953: Village Press, 1974), p. 72.

## A SENSATIONALIST CRITIC

### MR J. C. POWYS' LITERARY PLEASURES

THE PLEASURES OF LITERATURE. By JOHN COWPER POWYS.  
Cassell. 12s. 6d.

One might almost imagine a touch of malice in Mr. Powys's title—not inappropriately, for what might be called the higher malice is a motive with which he is much concerned, and of which he is a sensitive expositor. At any rate, the pleasures of literature is a very urbane and Augustan description of the experiences he generally seeks to communicate to us. The emotions he awakens are more strenuous, the apprehension more religious. Even Proust is—very justly—the occasion of a deeper perturbation.

If I find lapses in Proust's handling of "the most dangerous of human nerves," I am reduced to astonished awe at his perfect insight into the heart of a selfish aristocrat. We need never, I think, have known such persons themselves to feel the delicious shock of absolute truth in what he reveals about them.

"The delicious shock of absolute truth": that perhaps is as good as any brief definition could be of what Mr. Powys means by "the pleasures of literature." All people who are genuinely responsive to literature know what he means; few, if any, would describe it in exactly those words, which bear witness to Mr. Powys's idiosyncrasy. In the last resort he is an unabashed sensationalist, in the sense that the physical predominates in his psychophysical temperament. "Sensations of literature"—if the word were not debased—would be a truer title for the book than the one it bears.

One can hardly speak, therefore, of Mr. Powys's method: he seems rather to fling himself at his subjects. There is no technique in his wrestling with them; but it is fairly certain that somewhere and somehow the embrace will be massive and direct. If Mr. Powys has no patience with intellectual discipline, he has no truck with intellectual prejudices. He is willing, nay eager, to expose himself completely to the writers who perturb him; they may have their way with him to the uttermost. He seems to set himself, instinctively, to experience more and more of the unique sensation that they arouse until he reaches the point of an almost physical incapacity to absorb more of it.

He can be terribly prolix. Yet it is always perilous to begin skipping; anywhere, at any time, he may start hitting the nail on the head with a speed and accuracy that are astonishing. No better example of this could be found than in his essay, or diatribe, or soliloquy upon St. Paul. Having due regard to the fact that Mr. Powys does not care about "writing" at all, we cannot but reckon this of a very high order.

There are passages, indeed, in his writings where his trust in his crucified Prometheus mounts up to such an ecstasy of victory that the dark horrors of that ultimate arbitrary will are swept away, and a huge wave of universal reconciliation tosses up the

very silt of the abyss into the light, and Christ with the whole creation in his heart loses Himself in the cosmic mystery into which he is diffused; till "God"—but a very different "God" from the one who "has mercy on whom he will have mercy and hardeneth whom he will harden," and a still more different "God" from the Johannine Love-Circle floating on the black waters of the Abyss—"becomes all in all."

Mr. Powys is indeed a very remarkable preacher of some curious religion which it would pass our wit to define. It would be interesting if he were to impose upon himself the task of theologizing upon the basis of his own sensations; and the effort would shed some very necessary illumination on many of his tantalizing dicta; for example, that Proust's progressive clarification of his hero's principles of art affords

a convincing proof of the subjectivity of all great art as against the noisy and aggressive heresy, so tempting, so plausible, so obvious, that Beauty, like Truth has an objective reality in the cosmos, before which the business of each artist is to reduce his personal imagination to a blank.

One would like to know what Mr. Powys means by "subjectivity" here, and to what heresy he is noisily and aggressively referring. But that is only one of a hundred things we should like to know about this tumultuous but genuinely inspiring book.

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# Susan Rands

## The Glastonbury Libel

In *In My Own Time*, Nina Bawden relates a story that Sir Arnold Goodman told her of

a novelist who had written a novel set in what she claimed was an entirely fictional village in the south of England. Her publishers suspecting that she might be deluded if not actually lying called in their lawyers, who employed Hartley Shawcross to question her. Even the ex-Attorney-General was unable to shake her fixed belief that her novel was entirely a work of imagination. But when the book came out thirty writs for libel were received within the first fortnight.<sup>1</sup>

Thus we see that having chosen to write about the real place of Glastonbury John Cowper Powys could consider himself lucky to receive only one writ. Probably the Mayor, the vicar and the doctor of Glastonbury, had they been as like to their fictional counterparts as the owner of Wookey Hole was to Philip Crow would also have sued. It appears that Gerard Hodgkinson only did so when people were actually pointing him out as the character in the book.

Powys began *A Glastonbury Romance* on Easter Day, 20 April 1930.<sup>2</sup> He finished it on 11 October 1931.<sup>3</sup> After publication in America where it was generally well-received, it was published in England by John Lane in April 1933 and immediately reviewed disparagingly in *Time and Tide* by the Mayor of Glastonbury, Harry Scott Stokes.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Littleton Powys, John wonders "whether the local people will make any protest about my description of them,"<sup>5</sup> which indicates that he must have

been well aware that there was something to protest about. In view of this it is odd that he should entertain the idea that his book would be on sale at the gates to the Abbey ruins; nor is the Nobel Prize, for which he expressed a hope, often awarded to work that plainly offends popular opinion.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the book was written entirely in far away upstate New York must account for Powys's lack of awareness and of sensitivity to the strength of small town sensibilities. He had last been in England in the summer of 1929 and did not return till June 1934. We know that in July 1929 he spent two days in Glastonbury but there is little record of how well he knew it in his youth and young manhood, nor is there any external evidence that he kept in touch with events in the area, although the similarity between the fictional events and the real ones is remarkable.<sup>7</sup> The only evidence we have that he had any factual information is the letter to Littleton in which he says that he has maps of Glastonbury and the adjacent areas;<sup>8</sup> he asks for any pamphlets about them that Littleton may pick up but there is no evidence in his unpublished letters to Littleton, or anywhere else, that any were ever sent. Although Powys determined to, and did, use only real place names, he tells Littleton when the book is finished that "everything is invented which is the truth most literally for my rule in this book has been to invent every character and not take a single one from real life. I've never done this before and it has interested me a lot doing it."<sup>9</sup> If this was

the complete truth and we are bound to accept it as such, the libel case against Powys did indeed, as Lord Birkett said during the announcement of the settlement, arise "in a rather remarkable way out of a rather remarkable book"; in fact "rather" is something of an understatement.

Hodgkinson felt the need to sue because of the damage the novel could and probably was doing to his credibility as a well-known public figure and promoter of Wookey Hole Caves. It is unlikely that he was much of a reader but, as Lord Birkett says, "people were actually pointing him out as the character in the book." Loyal Powysians tend to think of him as a self important Philistine who unnecessarily did Powys great harm but this is far from being the complete picture as will gradually emerge. There are ways in which Crow differed notably from Hodgkinson and it is just possible that a different advocate for the defence could have made more of these.

Not only has Philip Crow many characteristics in common with Captain Hodgkinson but Philip's activities and the events of his life mirror the recent past, the present and even more strangely the future of Captain Hodgkinson's; of these future events one began at about the time of the announcement of the settlement of the libel action and the other six years later.

The most notable of the characteristics that Hodgkinson and Crow share are that they own Wookey Hole Caves, light them with electricity and encourage the public to visit them. The newly lit Wookey Hole Caves were first opened to the public in 1927. A long, lyrical passage in the *Wells Journal* of 4 April 1927 describes in detail the wonderful effect of this and remarks that "a word of praise is due to those who have carried out this transformation without spoiling the natural beauties of the

site but rather adding to them." On the 8 July of the same year appears a similar article with a photograph and the caption, "A Spectacle of Awe and Grandeur, The Dwelling Place of Primitive Man". On the 8 July 1928, the *Journal* reprints a long article by E. V. Lucas which had appeared in *The Times* and which ends:

It is a workshop of Nature. For here Nature sets in motion the Axe. Here Nature shows the tools and implements with which, through aeons of unceasing toil, she fashioned the caverns of the Mendips. She has unsealed this workshop as many another in the bowels of the hills she keeps closed in everlasting secrecy.

The guides will tell you much more than this—ever so much more, in ever so much shorter a time. They are particularly fertile in their descriptiveness of things which they say the stalactites and stalagmites resemble. And sometimes you may see the likeness they declare is present. And sometimes you may not—nor are you to be blamed for such blindness.

Something else you would not be blamed for not seeing is the resemblance that Powys sees of the stalactites and stalagmites to "frieze after frieze of gigantic phalluses," "of cyclops and herds of behemoths". This perfectly apt description, though the shapes are biologically speaking somewhat unusual, could have been what upset Gerard Hodgkinson most of all for in a pamphlet entitled *Wookey Hole: the Cave of Mystery and History* he writes:

When I was 8 to 10 years old, I used, with two friends, to spend hours exploring the upper chambers, inaccessible to visitors, and the main part of the cave now seen by the public and I was so thrilled and enthralled by the grandeur of the chambers, the beauty of the silent, mysterious, subterranean river, and its glorious stalactite formations, that I told my father that one day I would show it

to the world. His reaction was definitely negative, so I never broached the subject again. Some time after he died, however I decided to illuminate it and show it to visitors. I started by installing electric flood lighting, an idea I got from seeing quarries working at night, and Wookey Hole was the first cave in the world to be floodlit.

It is not hard to see how outrageous and hurtful Powys's use of the caves in *A Glastonbury Romance* would seem to one who had thought and felt as this paragraph describes.

Throughout the early 1930s, according to accounts in the *Wells Journal*, Wookey Hole Caves were continually appreciated in the ways which Hodgkinson hoped for and expected. For example in January 1930 a party of school teachers came from London to hear violin solos played by Mr Paul Mason in the lofty 75ft high hall of Wookey and were much impressed. "Beachcomber" of the *Daily Express*, however, comments with dry humour:

A violinist recently gave a recital five hundred feet under the ground, to demonstrate the acoustic properties of a certain cave. If the experiment was as successful as I hope it was, I see nothing to prevent almost all our concerts from being held under the ground, at even greater depths, in remote caverns.

One wonders whether Hodgkinson noticed the occasional note of mockery. On 12 September 1930, the *Journal* describes a grand choral and verse concert broadcast from the caves, and in June describes a visit of the New Zealand cricket side. Perhaps it should be noted here that Hodgkinson himself was talented both as a musician and a cricketer, characteristics which do not belong to Philip Crow.

An interesting short article on 12 July 1930 relates how Captain Hodgkinson acted to save Ebbor Gorge from a quarry

company. "Wellensians in particular are greatly indebted to Captain Hodgkinson whose efforts to preserve the beauty of Somerset are legendary for his unselfish gesture to save Ebbor Gorge." Obviously it was in this role, rather than as such an exploiter as Philip Crow that Hodgkinson would wish to be known. Moreover the article continues, "it is certain that by his financing of the Wookey Hole Caves he has provided Wells with a steady source of revenue. Visitors to the caves are generally visitors to Wells." Hodgkinson provides local work and local revenue unlike Philip Crow who imports workers from Bristol. Further, Hodgkinson's family had long been benefactors in the area. In 1848 his grandfather William had bought the run down paper mill at Wookey, "and generations of Hodgkinsons built not only magnificent mill buildings but a church, houses, a school and a whole way of life for a newly revived population." So Hodgkinson's family had already done for Wookey what Philip Crow plans, with his factories, to do for Glastonbury. It is no mean co-incidence. But in contrast to Philip who dislikes and would destroy the ruins and mystique of Glastonbury, Hodgkinson admires and means to preserve the beauty of Wookey Hole.

As Lord Birkett pointed out at the announcement of the settlement, "He is quite a distinguished man in the County of Somerset, taking part in all public activities, major and minor. He has been a member of the Somerset Cricket Team for many years, he has hunted with all the best packs, and indeed takes part in every kind of activity, public and social throughout the area." Almost Birkett seems to be pointing out what the other side could have said to show that Crow was not Hodgkinson. A further difference is where they lived: until his money began to run out Hodgkinson lived

in the large three-gabled Victorian Gothic mansion called Glencot between Wells and Wookey Hole; and later in the smaller Bubwith Farm near Wookey Hole, whereas Philip lives in the suburban "Elms" on the Wells Road from Glastonbury.

Another difference is that Crow is an inventive and eager industrialist whereas Hodgkinson left all the work of running the family paper making business to his cousin. Whereas Hodgkinson inherited the wealth that financed his schemes when his father died, Philip Crow does not get the legacy he expected on the death of Canon Crow. With hindsight it seems that John's representatives could have made a much better case for Philip not being identifiable with Hodgkinson.

During the early months of 1934 the *Wells Journal* gave ever more space to the activities at Wookey Hole. A severe drought had caused falling water levels which made possible an expedition reported on 19 January thus: "accompanied by a company of film camera men, journalists and photographers, Captain W. G. Hodgkinson, the owner of the cave, Mr H. E. Balch, M.A., F.S.A. and Mr H. J. Brown manager of the caves, rowed in a boat along the river Axe through an opening unsealed by the falling of the river level, to caverns never before explored." Apparently it was a dangerous, dramatic, revelatory and well-witnessed expedition, a far cry from Philip's secret seduction of Persephone though, for those who see things thus, not without metaphorical parallels.

On 9 February of the same year the *Journal* prints a lengthy report of Hodgkinson's application for a licence to sell intoxicating liquor at his restaurant by Wookey Hole Caves, and on 11 May there is a full page article about the water polo and swimming and diving displays accompanied by the band of the Somerset

Light Infantry at Hodgkinson's new swimming pool by the caves. The architect's drawing is also shown and all the details of the building material used and the companies that supplied them:

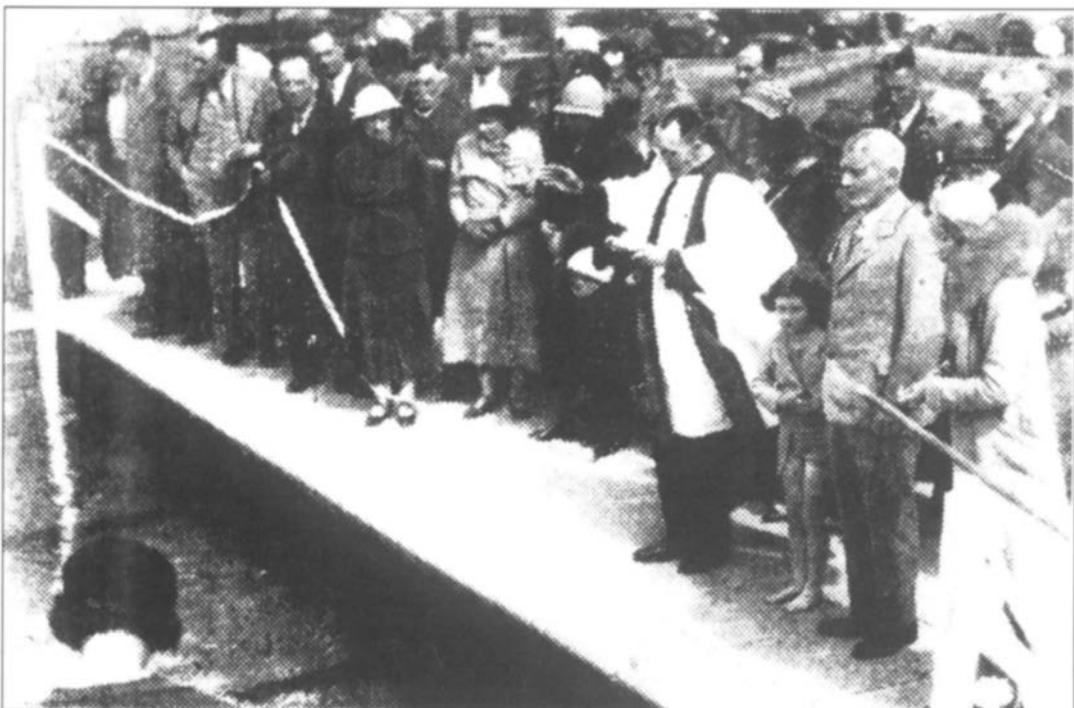
The cement used in the construction of the works was supplied by The South Wales Portland Cement and Lime Co. Ltd., of Penarth. The Mendip limestone by the Batts Combe Quarry Co. of Cheddar; the Bristol Channel sand by the Bristol Sand and Gravel Co. Ltd., and the Holms Sand and Gravel Co. Ltd., of Bristol; the pre-cast flags and copings by the Bristol Stone and Concrete Co. Ltd., of Bristol; the steel bar and reinforcement by The Whitehead Iron and Steel Co. Ltd., of Newport, Mon.

The reinforced concrete beams forming the floor of the balcony of the tea garden were supplied by the Rapid-Con Floor Co. Ltd., of Queen Square, Bristol.

One is reminded of Philip's building activities; Hodgkinson's restaurant, much modernized and extended, is still in use, and so was his swimming pool until five years ago. On 18 May another long article tells how the pool, now called the Witching Water, was declared open by Mrs G. W. Hodgkinson "whose little daughter opened the pool by jumping in and blowing kisses to everyone after the pool had been blessed by the vicar of Easton with Wookey Hole."

These newspaper reports make it increasingly clear why firstly, Hodgkinson, as a public benefactor could brook no scandal, and secondly, that his childhood urge to share a great delight is turning into exploitation; no less than Philip Crow he is exploiting the caves for "tin".

That this was ever more necessary is made plain by the very interesting autobiography, *One Foot Forward* by Hodgkinson's son Colin, published in 1957. It seems that his father had no idea of the business complications of running



Photograph from the *Wells Journal*, May 1934, on the occasion of Mrs G. W. Hodgkinson's opening Witching Water.

such an enterprise as the Wookey Caves commercially, and that he was no more successful as a business man than is Philip Crow. His son writes sadly:

*A frightening change came over him, and I for one found it all very disturbing. His passion for horses and sport, his pride in beautiful houses, his love for foreign travel and adventure, his cars, his gardens, the habits and tastes of a lifetime and a considerable fortune—all were engulfed in the rocky orifice of Wookey Hole. And ‘G’ the man, the hard-riding and munificent squire, the splendid patrician whom the West Country knew disappeared abruptly, as if through a trap door, to emerge metamorphosized into a pinchbeck showman.<sup>10</sup>*

Like Philip Crow, Hodgkinson was also an airman but of far greater prowess; in the First World War he had won the MC and Bar, “flying frail machines hovering over vast jungles” (BFF, 12). Philip Crow’s

much lowlier status as an airman must have been insulting. Hodgkinson wife, like Philip’s was “feminine, sensitive and forebearing” (BFF, 14), and perhaps one of the strangest coincidences of all is the likeness of their names; Hodgkinson’s was known as “Mollie” though it was not her real name, whereas Philip’s is Tilly. Colin writes of his parents’ relationship, “inspite of all their differences they were a happy couple. The explanation lies in my father’s abnormal capacity for believing that everything he did and had was of the finest. In ‘G’s’ way ‘Mollie’ was and felt herself to be loved.” (BFF 17) This is remarkably similar to the relationship between Philip and Tilly.

“Tilly!” The way Philip uttered these two syllables was a masterpiece in rich psychological nuances. In the first place his tone protected his wife from Aunt Elizabeth and from all these strangers. In the second place

his tone warned his wife that there were proper limits to this fashion of hers of giving herself away. In the third place his tone expressed an indulgent appreciation, a tender recognition, that Tilly was Tilly, and that she was the kind of thing in a person's life that he himself was glad to possess, though it might seem strange, and even absurd, to others!<sup>11</sup>

But several times in *A Glastonbury Romance* Powys makes it clear that Philip feels "no erotic attraction" to his wife. Even if true of them also how would the Hodgkinson family like that aspect of the identification? *A Glastonbury Romance* could have made Hodgkinson a laughing stock, no easy matter for a proud public spirit to bear. That Philip "felt hedged round by enemies, cornered, run to earth like a hunted fox" was perhaps a particularly unlucky simile considering that Hodgkinson had been a noteworthy Master of the Mendip Foxhounds. At the beginning of the book Philip is confident and ambitious; during the course of it he loses money, status, and credibility. Approximately from the time of bringing the libel action, Hodgkinson's affairs also begin to run into difficulties partly because of expenditure on the caves but most probably also perhaps because of legal costs.

Again, "My mother was never happy when 'G' talked of flying" (BFF, 12) writes Colin Hodgkinson. "Emma says that poor Mrs Crow is very concerned about all this flying," says Louie in *A Glastonbury Romance*; and she and Lily also discuss the great expenditure on the caves, and Mrs Crow's anxiety about it. In all probability it is how Hodgkinson's wife and servants behaved. All Philip thinks about, Louie tells us, is "electricity and flying machines and asking Mayor Wallop to dinner." It sounds very like Hodgkinson. Philip is dubbed a "Byronic seducer"; similarly

Colin remembers his father: "With women he always was, and with children he could be, an infallible charmer" (BFF, 11). The old ladies who remember "G" agree; and readers of *A Glastonbury Romance* will think of Philip's success with Morgan Nelly and her mother.

It is an exaggeration to say, as Lord Birkett did, that "Philip Crow in the book is a man of most immoral and depraved character," and Birkett's claim that Hodgkinson is "happily married and has been for years" was given the lie within the year when Miss Olive Treloar, a young typist from Wells, became the secretary to the Managing director of Wookey Hole Caves Ltd. "G" was "on his uppers till Olive made money", a contemporary remembers. Colin writes that Olive was "ripe and auburn, pretty, not 'county' and nearly twenty years younger than my mother." (BFF, 22) She became a well-known character in the area and many people remember her. But in 1936 "G" heard of profitable sounding caves in Canada, drew all his remaining capital from the bank, and with Olive "took ship from Liverpool, providing grounds for divorce en route." (BFF, 32) These caves failed and "G" had to borrow money to get back.

But there is also a much sadder and more uncanny sequel. At the end of *A Glastonbury Romance* in "The Flood" Philip "drawn by an irresistible instinct towards his steel flying machine and his steel bridge . . . had swum from the high ground above Godney Road . . . and had got hold of the airplane. The unlucky thing was that when he got there he was seized with such an evil cramp in both his legs as rendered him totally hors de combat;" "they hurt him at the slightest move;" and "were twisted beneath him," and as he "scrambled into the empty skiff, his cramp

was cruel," and then "agonizing".<sup>12</sup> "But the Norman will in the man—that will that had ruled England since the conquest—compelled his arms, though his legs were doubled up under him, to perform the motions of rowing and of rowing smooth powerful calculated strokes."<sup>13</sup> In 1939 Colin Hodgkinson joined the Fleet Air Arm, and in 1940 he lost both his legs as the result of a near fatal crash; three months later he was back in his squadron which was led by another legless pilot, Wing Commander Bader. When his father first visited him after the accident, he remarked "I wish to God this had happened to me instead of you." (BFF, 75)

The process of the law against John Cowper Powys is chronicled in his diary; all that it is possible to discover of the terms of the settlement and how they were arrived at is to be found there also.<sup>14</sup> Solicitors cannot find, or do not wish to, correspondence of so long ago. Although the case was fairly fully reported in *The Times* of 28 July 1934 and very fully, probably in its entirety, in the *Wells Journal* of 3 August 1934, the precise details of the settlement were not mentioned, and this, apparently, is customary.

John received the notice of the libel writ on 22 February 1934. As it happened he was already in the process of changing his will in favour of his son instead of his wife. At first he does not appear to realize the seriousness of the writ but thinks of it as being completely in character that "Philip Crow" should issue it, for there are in the novel a number of references to Philip's litigious activities; he is portrayed as one who quickly resorts to law if he thinks he may otherwise be thwarted in his designs. But there is no record that Hodgkinson was thus although his grandfather did win a court case against the owner of Priddy Minery for polluting the Axe, and so

hindering the processes of the production of fine paper.<sup>15</sup> (In *A Glastonbury Romance* Ned Athling accuses Philip of polluting the Brue.)<sup>16</sup>

After receiving notice of the writ, Powys posts his answer the next day and the following day was busy inventing the speech—"in the style of Sir Thomas Browne—I would make in the court if I were defending my own case." This would have been fascinating to hear. At the same time he was also worried by publishers' contracts which were too restricting and unrewarding and by the alteration to his will which made no provision for Phyllis Playter. The irregularity of his union with her, in his own eyes, and as he imagined his relations would see it, is such that he never once mentions it in his letters to Littleton, the brother closest to him after Llewelyn, in all the years they lived together before coming to England in June 1934. The letters from Hillsdale repeatedly tell Littleton how well he is looked after but never by whom. Even when they moved to Wales he still introduced her to new visitors as his housekeeper; perhaps it was to give credence to this fiction that Phyllis always dressed in black. In all legal matters at this time, Powys used Blundell and Baker of Serjeant's Inn, his wife's solicitors.

On 27 March he received an "agitating letter about that libel case saying that the sum offered by the publishers is inadequate". He continued making up speeches in his defence against the libel writ, to his son about Phyllis, and to his American publishers about his English Rights. He heard from the lawyer employed by Lane, the publisher of *A Glastonbury Romance* in England, and wondered whether he too should use him but really thought that he was "better able to defend himself than any lawyer." On 24 May he received the writ itself; his friend Arthur Ficke told him he

had best not employ any lawyer but he decided that he would use Blundell and Baker.

Possibly he would have done better with Lane's lawyers, Oswald and Hickson who still exist, and in the event Blundell and Baker seem to have handed the matter to them to represent Powys in court. Blundell and Baker rather as one would expect from Powys's description of them, "in a panelled room and they were like a couple of Lawyer Pleydels in *Guy Mannering*", are now defunct, at least under that name. Powys "liked them extremely!" Nevertheless he expected to "go bankrupt" and is relieved that his wife's and son's wherewithal is safe.

On 4 July he went to Blundell and Baker with Phyllis and she became extremely anxious and angry; and well she might for the next day it appears that she drew a cheque for \$1000 for Blundell and Baker. \$1000 is likely to have been all the money she had which she had hoped and expected would help to finance their life together in England. According to Malcolm Elwin, Powys "forfeited all his royalties", presumably, though Elwin is not specific, just on *A Glastonbury Romance*; though that was certainly bad enough, for these too they had expected to be able to live on in England.

The settlement of the case was announced in the King's Bench Division of the High Court before Judge Acton on 27 July. Blundell and Baker seem to have communicated the news to Powys at once and he was now grateful for their advice which one assumes must have been to settle out of court and not try to defend the case. Moreover their charges seem to have been very low.

Of the barristers who presented the case, Norman Birkett for Hodgkinson and Valentine Holmes for Powys and his publishers, Holmes had already gained his "repute in the law of libel and it was rare for there to be any important libel case in

which he did not appear". He is said to have had "the capacity to extract the essentials from the most voluminous set of papers in a short time",<sup>18</sup> but one feels that he could have extracted more in this case for the benefit of his client, and it is possible that Birkett thought so too. But *A Glastonbury Romance* is very long and neither Powys's nor his publishers' pockets were deep. Short of actually defending the case which would have been very expensive, fulsome apology such as Holmes made on their behalf is one of the ways of lessening the damages. But it is possible that the outcome might have been different if Lord Birkett had been the counsel for the defence.

Lord Justice Devlin's lively description of Lord Birkett is of interest:

he was lanky, had untidy red hair, angular features and spectacles—but he had the golden voice. Oratory itself was changing; tawdriness was more easily detected and men were beginning to look for earnestness and sincerity; these were Birkett's qualities, founded on his great integrity. He gave all he had to his work, often to the point of exhaustion. At the bar he was universally liked; there can hardly have been anyone who knew him who did not receive from him some piece, great or small, of his kindness and courtesy.<sup>19</sup>

Among his interests were literature, specially Dickens, and the preservation of the countryside. He had been notably eloquent, though unsuccessful, when appearing for the publisher, Jonathan Cape against the Director of Public Prosecutions about the banning of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*,<sup>20</sup> less eloquent but successful in defending the infamous Maundy Gregory accused of selling Honours;<sup>21</sup> he was interested in Baron Corvo, and wrote the introduction to the Folio edition of A. J. Symon's *Quest for*



Captain Gerard Hodgkinson, Master of the Mendip Foxhounds, c. 1930.

*Corvo.*<sup>22</sup> His first notable success was in defending Gladstone's sons from the libel suit brought by Peter Wright when they said that his imputations against their father were lies.<sup>23</sup> He was one of the two British judges at the International War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg and in 1957 he was created Lord Birkett of Ulverston. There is no mention of the Glastonbury case in his biography by Mongomery Hyde published in 1964, but that does not mean that there is no record of it in his unpublished papers.

For John and Phyllis the case had been emotionally and financially disastrous (and

the wonder is that their union survived it). How did Powys create a character so like a real person in so many details of character and of fate? Either he had amazing psychic powers or someone had sent him a great deal of local material. At the moment there is no evidence whatever of the latter possibility, so one is forced to the conclusion that the former was the case. For this there are several well-documented episodes; also attested is his fear of this power. The Glastonbury libel case proves how right he was to fear it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nina Bawden, *In My Own Time* (London: Virago, 1994) p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Davies, ed., *The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1930* (London: Greymitre, 1987), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> *The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1931* (London: Jeffrey Kwintner, 1990), p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> *The Powys Review*, 9, 1981, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Belinda Humfrey, ed., *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), p. 325.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>7</sup> *The Powys Review*, 27 & 28, p. 42 ff.

<sup>8</sup> S. Rands, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 325.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Hodgkinson, *Best Foot Forward* (London: Odhams Press, 1957), p. 20. Page references in my following text (BFF) refer to this edition. My italics.

<sup>11</sup> *A Glastonbury Romance* (London: John Lane, 1933), p. 536.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1162-1167.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1167.

<sup>14</sup> M. Krissdottir, ed., *Petrushka and the Dancer, The Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1929-1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Hodgkinson, *The Waters Under the Earth*, ed. James Hanwell, unpublished typescript, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 766.

<sup>17</sup> *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 287.

<sup>18</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography, 1951-1960*, E. T. Williams & Helen Palmer, eds., (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 495.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 112.

<sup>20</sup> H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Life of Lord Birkett* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964), p. 256 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353 ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176 ff.

# Elmar Schenkel

## From Powys to Pooh: Some Versions of Taoism in British and American Literature\*

Chinese philosophy has had a curious impact on Western ideas and seems to surface at crucial points of history in Western conceptions of the world. As with other non-European systems of thought, Chinese philosophy has alternately been either incorporated into Western thought, or its strangeness has been emphasized. Those Westerners who would include elements of Chinese philosophy in their thinking wanted to confirm a universalist attitude towards the world, whereas those who stress the distance between Eastern and Western philosophy take a more realistic view. The former inclusive attitude can be associated with the Enlightenment and partly with Christianity. Seventeenth-century Jesuits believed that *tao* was ultimately derived from *deus/deo* while one of the early translators Abel Rémusat, thought that the three ideograms 'i', 'hsı' and 'we' meant *Jehova*. The latter attitude may lead to an outright rejection of what is strange but also to a productive encounter: Chinese philosophy can be used as a tool for critically examining one's own system of thought and Western mores. Certain elements of Chinese philosophy have thus been 'appropriated' by people searching for alternative paths to social and individual development. These individuals believe that they are experiencing the bifurcation of Western history, that a decision has to be made on whether to renew one's thoughts, and habits or whether to stay in the rut.

When paths fork or seem to, one reaches a critical place where a change of attitudes, the reassessment of one's position and a survey of possibilities are called for. A look at other systems of thought or ways of life becomes necessary.

"Of the basic components of traditional Chinese culture", writes sinologist Anna Seidel, "the Taoist religion was the last to be discovered and studied in the West".<sup>1</sup> Seidel argues that this belated recognition was due to "a kind of ideological blind spot":

The image of China in seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe had been formed by Christian missionaries. Instructed by their Confucian teachers, these missionaries described to their European audience a Chinese civilisation that resembled more the Confucian ideal of an agnostic and well-regulated society than the reality of Chinese life. What the misionaries saw with their own eyes of the religion practised by the people was looked down upon as 'superstition' incompatible with Christianity. Taoism remained invisible to them except for the texts that enjoyed the esteem of Confucian schoolmasters.<sup>1</sup>

Yet some observers in Europe did see through this ideological veil. Intrigued by binary concepts in Chinese philosophy, Leibniz suggested the Chinese should send their own missionaries to Europe to teach "natural theology" in return for European missions.<sup>2</sup> Hegel was one of the first

\* A version of an article published in *Anglistentag 1993 Eichstätt* (Proceedings, Vol XV) (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1994), by kind permission of the editors.

Europeans to describe the concept of Tao. In his 1816 lectures he manifested quite a remarkable knowledge of both Taoism and Confucianism. Characteristically, he identified *tao* with the 'absolute' in Greek philosophy. Although a few earlier writers did take an interest in Taoism—such as Oscar Wilde<sup>3</sup>—it was not until the twentieth century that this Chinese *Weltanschauung* was fully and properly appreciated. In this paper I will examine why and how this warm reception became possible in Western literature.

Before we disappear into the literary wilderness let us briefly outline what the term 'Taoism' means.<sup>4</sup> Contemporaries frequenting airport bookstores may be familiar with such exquisite works as *The Tao of Management*, *The Tao of Cooking*, *The Tao of Money-Making*, *The Tao of Pooh*, *The Tao of Physics*, and, inevitably, *The Tao of Sex*. The very range of these bestselling titles indicates either a fundamental insecurity about how to use the word 'Tao' or a lack of necessity to define it precisely. The term is represented by an ideogram which simply means 'way', 'path' or even 'method'.<sup>5</sup>

The very simplicity of this term has given rise to a great range of interpretations and applications. Taoism has been seen as a religion, a philosophical system, a political theory, a way of life, a set of superstitions, a form of ancient psychology, and a body of wisdom and legends. The roots of Taoism have been sought in ancient shamanism, in popular beliefs as well as superstitions and in a nature religion that is practised in large stretches of East and South-East Asia.<sup>6</sup> Popular types of Taoism still live on in contemporary Chinese customs—such as the Maoists' flaunting of the colours green and red. Taoism has also been associated with Chinese alchemy, alimentary and sexual methods.<sup>7</sup>

In the fifth century AD this type of Taoism became consolidated in what one might call a Taoist Church, in which "the art of attaining to immortality, yoga, exorcism, divinatory magic and sorcery" was practised.<sup>8</sup> Only recently have these practices been studied in the West.<sup>9</sup> The fusion of psychic and physical elements in Taoism has attracted the interest of that hotchpotch called New Age. Thus the Western versions of Taoism have made an interesting contribution to therapies, cults and esoteric techniques practiced in places as far apart as Berkeley and Freiburg im Breisgau.

But for a long time, Taoism reached the West only through its most representative writings, Lao-Tzu's *Tao-te ching* and the *Book of Chuang-Tzu*. Of the two, Lao-Tzu's work is easier to characterize since its author strives towards a philosophical articulation, while Chuang-Tzu, the "philosophizing shaman",<sup>10</sup> roams between aphorism, fragment, story, anecdote and philosophical statement. Many scholars now agree

that the *Tao-te ching* was understood as a teaching of physiological practices for the individual, a teaching which also can be applied to social groups, village or state. The cosmogonic metaphors of the text advocate a return to the undifferentiated state before the unfolding of the universe, a state which, in the case of man, corresponds to the pure potentiality of the embryo and, in the case of society, to a harmonious state of anarchy with rules of conduct so well adapted to the course of nature that they can be followed with a kind of unconscious spontaneity.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, in general, Taoist writing can be said consistently to work at being inconsistent. This inconsistency makes any attempt at classification extremely difficult. Neither can we be sure about the historical author

called Lao-Tzu, nor whether the *Book of Chuang-Tzu* preceded or followed the *Tao-te ching*. Chuang-Tzu, at least, was a historical person, who was roughly contemporaneous with Aristotle. The first line of the *Tao-te ching* expresses the fundamental paradox underlying their understanding of the ‘Way’. Lao-Tzu says: “Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao” (trans. Joh C. H. Wu). Hence any conceptualization of the Tao may turn into a self-defeating business. This first line is a good example for the problems awaiting translation. Take Richard Wilhelm’s rendering and you get: “Der SINN, den man ersinnen kann, / ist nicht der ewige SINN”.<sup>12</sup> The French version has: “Un Tao dont on peu parler (tao) n'est pas le Tao permanent”.<sup>13</sup> Most translators stress the ‘unsayable’ character of the tao, its ineffable quality and the statement it makes against logocentrism. Thus they are not unlike the cat in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* whose

mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation  
Of the thought, of the thought, of the  
thought of his name:  
His ineffable effable  
Effanineffable  
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.<sup>14</sup>

A more literal rendering of Lao-Tzu’s line produces a different result: “The Way that can be the Way is not a changeless way” or “The Way that can be followed is not the changeless way”.<sup>15</sup> Since this line is of great importance, these differences in translation produce substantial differences in philosophical interpretations. The very simplicity of the Chinese original leads to obscurities in the translations; simplicity creates complexities. This circumstance may illustrate the extent to which Lao-Tzu’s text is susceptible to all kinds of interpretation. If Taoism is essentially a

study of chaos,<sup>16</sup> its texts and their translations have certainly contributed to creating more of the same. A. C. Graham, one of the most astute translators of Taoist texts, has pointed out the devastating effects certain translations have had. Chuang-Tzu’s ‘rambling mode’ forces “the translator to be a radical textual critic”.<sup>17</sup> According to Graham, Chuang-Tzu’s chaotic style is to some extent itself the product of translation, of “that wilderness of unfocused English where the only law is the translator’s will to get past the next few sentences without publicly making a fool of himself”.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks may bring into focus some of the difficulties arising from Western assimilation or interpretation of Taoism. But have the Chinese themselves been able to settle once and for all the question of what the Tao actually is? According to the Confucian Hsün Ch’ing, no one has taught the Tao correctly yet:

If we look upon *Tao* as utility, we are merely seeking profit. If we look upon *Tao* as desire, we are merely seeking satisfaction. If we look upon *Tao* as law, we are merely gaining a technique. If we look upon *Tao* as power, we are merely seeking convenience. If we look upon *Tao* as words, we are merely being dialectic. If we look upon *Tao* as nature, we are merely finding cause and effect. These different presentations are all one particular aspect of *Tao*.<sup>19</sup>

And yet, despite these predicaments or rather because of them, the thoughts promulgated by Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu and those underlying the *Book of Changes*—the partly Taoist oracle *I Ching*—have meant a great deal to many Western and non-Western readers. No doubt it is the undecided meaning of certain Taoist key-concepts, their subversive, paradoxical, even self-defeating qualities that have

made them the subject of recent deconstructionist writings. Thus what one might call the school of Derridaoism has been created.<sup>20</sup>

This subversive quality of Taoism has attracted most writers I want to discuss now. While they stress different aspects of Taoist thought, they all share a deep mistrust of Western rationalism, organised Christianity and the human domination over Nature, be it psychological or external. To simplify, I want to present three writers, all of whom employ Taoist ideas differently in their work: John Cowper Powys stresses the Taoist way of life and its life-technique; Ursula K. Le Guin the philosophical criticism of Western values, while David Payne uses Taoism to offset the clash between Eastern and Western cultures. And finally, there is a little bear from Sussex who effortlessly combines all three attitudes.

## I

John Cowper Powys, the great eccentric genius of twentieth-century literature, had a deep interest in Taoism. This was mainly nourished by James Legge's translations of Chuang-Tzu (Kwang Tse in Legge's transcription), which were part of Max Müller's famous series, *Sacred Books from the East*. On 10 January 1930, Powys noted in his diary:

. . . I met two Chinese a man and a woman and we liked each other and they said I was like a Chinaman and he said he was a Confucian and I said I was a Taoist and she took my stick in her hands and said 'so walks a Chinaman with a stick just like you do.'<sup>21</sup>

The antagonism between Taoism and Confucianism is relevant for Powys. For him, this antagonism is of a friendly nature, since he had a deep liking for most

creeds and religions, and felt himself to be a polytheist, pantheist, Christian, or Jew.<sup>22</sup> Confucianism encourages self-control through discipline and education. Rules, roles, and hierarchical structures define a person's social being. Conversely, Taoism has traditionally represented the individualistic strain in Chinese culture: a defiance of obligations, honours, respectability. Powys certainly favoured the latter anarchical tendencies. They are evinced in many of his fictional characters, such as John Crow in *A Glastonbury Romance*, and Powys recommended these attitudes in his non-fictional works, such as *A Philosophy of Solitude* or *In Defence of Sensuality*. Here he flaunts individualism, anti-social positions, the cultivation of solitude, and the art of sensual perception—all of which can be seen as anti-Confucian. I hasten to add, though, that his respect for Confucianism was also profound and probably was rooted in the reliance on rituals that he developed in order to cope with psychological stress and his obsession with sadism.

When, a few months later, he started writing his monumental Wessex novel *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933), he invoked Chuang-Tzu on Easter Sunday "to put into my Dumkopf [sic] some exciting thing" to please his companion Phyllis Player.<sup>23</sup> But long before 1930 he had discovered Chuang-Tzu. In 1923 he published the article "The Philosopher Kwang" in *The Dial* in which he extols Chuang-Tzu at the expense of Lao-Tzu: ". . . the real genius of the Taoist tradition is not the legendary Lao-tze, its portentous prophet, but the much more whimsical and irresponsible Kwang, its Voltairean high-priest".<sup>24</sup> He goes on to praise Chuang-Tzu's "chaos-loving thought" and compares him to another favourite individualist of his, Montaigne, especially in his rejection of

courtly and political power. Above all, Powys emphasizes Chuang-Tzu's humour, which—in a typically Powysian fashion—he experiences almost physically:

Everything that it approaches is given a little twist, a little turn, a perceptibly new taste in the mouth. It is the body and the pressure of Kwang's whole mental vision.<sup>25</sup>

Through his cosmic attachment, the Taoist can develop a socio-political detachment that ridicules the Confucian world. Nietzsche's Zarathustra comes to mind and mischievous Pan himself. Chaos and chance seem to condition ultimate reality—and “something Unutterable”, neither Existence, nor Nothingness, some quality between Either/Or.

Intuitively, Powys comes very close to recent definitions of Taoism, such as the one propounded by Toshihiko Izutsu when he speaks of the “chaotification” at the root of Taoist thought.<sup>26</sup> Like Hermann Hesse, Powys also discerns a difference between Taoism and Hindu Brahmanism with its absolute. According to Powys, Chuang-Tzu goes even beyond the absolute, cracking jokes in the face of death and eternity.

Two years later, Powys dedicated *Ducdame*, one of his early Wessex novels, to

That Superior Man Kwang-Tse of Khi-Yuan—the only among philosophers to be at once respectful to his spirit-like ancestors and indulgent to those who, like the protagonist of this book,

Go where they are pushed,  
Follow where they are led,  
Like a whirling [sic] wind,  
Like a feather tossed about,  
Like a revolving grindstone.

Most likely Taoism here serves psychological needs that are deeply embedded in Powys's biography. He seems to be rejecting his father's stern moralism and

rigid discipline, which also represents the values of a patriarchial culture: Powys's father was an Anglican vicar. This rejection is reflected in the novel's protagonist, Rook Ashover who, like many other characters in Powys's fiction, experiences his identity as fragmented. As Chuang-Tzu illustrates in a variety of fables, reality is basically a dream for Taoists, or, put another way, it is all but impossible to draw a clear line between dream and reality. Even the ego as the “most solid and reliable core of existence . . . becomes transformed all of a sudden into something dreamlike and real”.<sup>27</sup>

While Powys's characters search for unity in love, death or cosmic dissolution they also develop techniques for anticipating this state. They find tricks, loopholes, and moments of vision and sensation that enable their souls to survive in a hostile environment. In his philosophical essays Powys espouses a higher form of escapism to cope with fragmented existence, inner strife and obsession.

When Powys moved back from the United States to settle down in Wales, he could not help identifying his beloved Celtic Wales and Taoist China. In an article on the “Resemblances between Welsh and Chinese Culture” he compares the mythological stories of the *Mabinogion* to “those wonderful anecdotes of symbolic and cosmogonic Beings” in the writings of Chuang-Tzu.<sup>28</sup> In both mythologies he discovers a cognate humour and whimsy unique in the world. Again, the “ecstatic, musical religion” of the Welsh is close to the “ideal taught in the writing of Kwang-Tze”, and the “Taoist [sic] advice to ‘avoid publicity’ is at the heart of Welsh psychology”.<sup>29</sup>

While in Powys's novels—*Ducdame*, *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands*, or *Porius*—Taoism appears in certain

cosmic-sensuous experiences or in the protagonists' passive enjoyment—it takes more explicit forms in his later eccentric fantasies. Here he concentrates on the purely whimsical side of Taoism that seems to coincide with his second childhood. Having given up fame and publicity towards the end of his long life, Powys could now indulge in endless cosmic speculation that bordered on wisdom and silliness alike. In *Up and Out* (1957) Powys described a postnuclear world inhabited by monstrous and mythic beings such as Org and Asm, who resulted from terrible experiments in vivisection. Like many of Powys's later works, this book was meant to be a full-fledged attack on the horrors of vivisection, which Powys saw as the culmination of modern rationality and pragmatism. Org and Asm, Buddha and God discuss whether the only solution for creation would be universal suicide. Kwang-Tze appears in this discussion as a terra-cotta image with a loose head. His appearance underlines Kwang-Tze's eccentricity as opposed to Buddha's gravity. He then pontificates on the Tao and his relationship to Lao-Tzu. Kwang-Tze's attitude is ultimately that of a sceptic. He says, or rather quotes himself: "All things have the life which we know. But we do not see its root. They have their goings forth but we do not know the door by which they depart".<sup>30</sup> Powys wanted to show his alliance with a world view that condones openness, scepticism, tolerance and humour as a method of helping people to live with uncertainty. He was rejecting a system that promises security and promotes unlimited consumerism, but distorts one's inward qualities.

## II

Powys wrote the following to a Japanese correspondent in 1958: ". . . ever since in San Francisco I first read Laotze and Kwangtze I have been a Taoist at heart".<sup>31</sup> The American west coast seems most susceptible to these waves of philosophy from the Far East. It is no coincidence that one of Powys's admirers who practised Taoism lived on the west coast. Henry Miller carried on a book-length correspondence with Powys, in which Taoism and Zen figure prominently. They figure equally importantly in Miller's correspondence with Lawrence Durrell. In his autobiographical essay *A Smile in the Eye* (1980), Durrell, like Powys, emphasizes Taoist humour, its transcendence of Christian dualism and its lack of interest in a metaphysical beyond.

Apart from these three individualistic writers, Taoism gained further ground on the American west coast with the Beat generation's interest in all things Asian. Writers and thinkers such as Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Alan Watts and, later, Robert Pirsig, saw Zen and Taoism as possible antidotes to the distortions wrought by Western civilization.<sup>32</sup>

It was the science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin who made a more sustained and coherent attempt to integrate Taoist ideas and attitudes in her work. Le Guin has studied Taoist writings from early on. In her *Earthsea*-tetralogy (1968-1990) she narrates the story of a magician who gradually abandons a manipulative, greedy way of using magic to work within the cosmic order rather than dominating it in a Baconian fashion.<sup>33</sup> It is basically an attempt to overcome the masculine, Faustian magic that governs Western ideas of progress and technology, which "defying all limits, strives for

domination over nature . . .”<sup>34</sup> She differs from Powys in the way she enacts these ideas in thrilling plots so that there is no need for explicit references to Taoist writings. The new type of magic the wizard strives for is very close to the non-action known in Taoist terminology as *wu wei*, which helps cosmic orders to unfold in a natural way. Thus Le Guin asserts in her essay “Dreams Must Explain Themselves”:

This attitude towards action, creation, is evidently a basic one, the same root from which the interest in the *I Ching* and Taoist philosophy evident in most of my books arises. The Taoist world is orderly, not chaotic, but its order is not one imposed by man or by a personal or humane deity. The true laws—ethical and aesthetic, as surely as scientific—are not imposed from above by any authority, but exist in things and are to be found—discovered.<sup>35</sup>

This is not the place to raise the epistemological problem of how human beings can recognize order without imposing it. In any case, this nonviolent attitude is strongly linked to values associated with women—and hence Le Guin does not find it difficult to use Taoism to endorse feminist issues.

In a more explicitly Taoist book, *The Lathe of Heaven*, such a non-violent attitude is ascribed to the protagonist George Orr, who has the power to change the world, even in retrospect, by dreaming. The fundamental metaphor is derived from the famous Taoist fable of Chuang-Tzu who dreamt that he was a butterfly. On waking up, he is no longer sure whether he dreamt that he was a butterfly or whether the butterfly is dreaming that it is Chuang-Tzu. This is the paradox of the novel in which a rationalistic psychiatrist tries to use Orr’s dreams for his own purposes,—that is, to turn the world into a better

place—by harnessing the dreams to his so-called Augmentor machine. All that he gains by implementing Orr’s dreams is the creation of a more difficult, dangerous, and newly endangered world, because a residue of autonomy remains in the dreams. As in Powys’s fantasy *Up and Out*, the world and its people suddenly turn grey when almost all sources of conflict, such as racial diversity, are artificially abolished. When the doctor finally uses his own dreams to create the ultimate ‘improvement’, a waste land is formed. The dreams of reason have produced monsters. Only due to Orr’s fundamental Taoist quietness, his being an “uncarved block”,<sup>36</sup> do things begin to return to normal. Like a number of epigraphs by Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu that are prefixed to individual chapters, the book’s title is itself a Taoist quotation. Humanity’s hubris is castigated as is the greed for power and knowledge: “To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven”.<sup>37</sup> This quotation resembles Goethe’s exhortation in *Maximen und Reflexionen* (Nr. 1207): “Das schönste Glück des denkenden Menschen ist, das Erforschliche erforscht zu haben und das Unerforschliche ruhig zu verehren.”

### III

Dreams play an important part in another American Taoist book, David Payne’s *Confessions of a Taoist on Wall Street* (1984), which, for inscrutable reasons, became an international bestseller. The title of this involved, sometimes overdone, baggy monster must have sparked off specific fantasies.

The protagonist Sun I, a Chinese American, grows up as an orphan in a

Chinese Taoist monastery (his Chinese mother having died after his American father abandoned her). Having learnt all the tricks of the Taoist trade, Sun I leaves China and eventually reaches New York's Wall Street, where, with the help of Chinese and Jewish friends and by dint of the power of the *I Ching* oracle, he becomes a financial tycoon. When Sun I fails in his attempt to buy his father's one-time conglomerate, American Light and Power he rediscovers Taoist values. After his failure, Sun I returns to poverty and begins to relish the simple things in life again. All in all, the book is a monumental attempt to fuse Western and Eastern ideals, verbalized in Sun I's painful and punful effort to merge *Tao* and *Dow*. His quest focusses on the 'delta' where the symbolic rivers of Chinese spirituality and Western materialism join the ocean of life. At the same time the book recounts Sun I's quest for his father. Motivated by a love for his mother and a desire to revenge the injustice done to her, his attitude towards his father vacillates between worship and a desire to commit parricide. Taoist ideas such as non-action, the importance of dreams and the defiance of conventional notions of success become most pertinent when they clash with Western creeds and attitudes, such as the hard-boiled materialism of the American Dream, or misrepresented and misused Christianity or Judaism. Taoism here is an important and unresolvable factor in a culturally diverse person's attempt to seek an identity. No other system—be it Christianity, the American civil religion or Confucianism—can prevail over Taoism; yet Taoism provokes certain elements in other systems of thought or belief. At once sad and hilarious, the book asserts the presence of Western and Eastern values in the contemporary world and describes the clash between these values in

terms of an intense psychological and political struggle.

In this respect, Payne's novel resembles Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), the first American novel in which the *I Ching* plays a prominent role. The author bases this science fiction novel on an alternative account of history: World War II was won by the Germans and Japanese, and while the Germans have established a totalitarian regime on the east coast, the Japanese control the Western part of the U.S. But, somewhere in the Dakotas, in the "High Castle", a science fiction novelist is writing *his* alternative version of events and imagines a world in which the Allies had won the war. In the novel, the Japanese are treated with some sympathy; it is they who bring Taoism to the west coast. Hence Taoist ideas of doing nothing and finding a balance exert an influence on American characters, some of whom play *I Ching*.

Both novels testify to the growing importance of Far Eastern ideas and techniques in contemporary Western culture. The growing popularity of Eastern philosophy seems to be a reaction to certain deficiencies. If we read these novels carefully, we can name some of these deficiencies: Western cultures have suppressed the body or relegated to it to the arena of sports; there is a distrust of anything that cannot be verbalized; and related to this last point, there is an unbalanced emphasis on action and violence as opposed to non-action. It seems that, so far, only Taoism has brought these characteristic faults into relief. Yet there are obviously also Western traditions that have strongly criticized some of these deficiencies.

## IV

The debate between Taoist and Western values is most beautifully epitomized in a book written in the 1920s by a Sussex writer. Probably, A. A. Milne had not the faintest idea of Chinese philosophy when he created a small bear—modeled on his son’s teddy bear—that expressed Taoism as succinctly as anyone else, and in a most unpretentious way at that. The name of this Bear of Little Brain is Winnie-the-Pooh.

Yet we needed an American writer to discover Pooh’s Taoist qualities in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Hoff’s *The Tao of Pooh* (1982) was directed against the prevailing purely scholarly approach to Taoism and favours practical Taoist wisdom:

. . . one day, while quoting to someone from A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*, I got an idea. I could write a book explaining Taoism through the characters in *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*. That would, it seemed to me, release Taoist wisdom from the grip of the Overacademics and restore to it the childlike awareness and sense of humour that they had taken away.<sup>39</sup>

This it did: “. . . the book most often recommended to explain Taoist principles is the *Tao of Pooh*”.<sup>40</sup> Hoff’s book, which was followed in 1992 by *The Te of Piglet*, succeeds in explaining Life according to Tao by quoting the bear and quietly commenting on his overwhelming naiveté. The author’s meditations on Pooh’s so-called foolishness encourage new attitudes towards life, such as effortlessness, a retreat from busyness, humorous self-detachment, the abandonment of self and the enjoyment of simple things.

As a matter of fact, much of what constitutes Taoism can also be found in the Christian gospel, but it may be that we need the circumnavigation through China

and Pooh Corner in order to relish some truths hidden by the Church.<sup>41</sup> Harvey Cox has observed, perhaps the Orient began to exert a spell on Western minds when God died over here.<sup>42</sup>

Even physics and the sciences have begun to call for unfamiliar attitudes towards the world and new ways of studying it that are possibly more akin to Eastern philosophy—if we can trust prophets who are not always reliable such as Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, Taoism has helped to illuminate new paradigms that may be necessary for future life on this planet, and has helped to encourage what one critic called the “the left-handedness of modern literature”,<sup>44</sup> that is, the acausal, holistic, intuitive, anti-historical and anti-rational elements. Certainly, all the writers discussed here have these qualities in their work. We may be heading for new paradigms such as the one described by Morris Berman, for a new type of creativity. Less Manichean or ‘schismogenic’, this creativity will no longer be the ‘expression of self’ that had produced “a battlefield of psychic, and often literal, corpses”.<sup>45</sup> All developments in the modern world—technology, education, drugs, warfare—seem to point persistently to one fact, namely that “something obvious keeps eluding our civilization”.<sup>46</sup> Or, as a Bear of Little Brain put it when asked what he liked doing best in the world:

‘Well’, said Pooh, ‘what I like best—’ and then he had to stop and think. Because although Eating Honey was a very good thing to do, there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were, but he didn’t know what it was called.<sup>47</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anna Seidel, "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West 1950-1990", *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 5 (1989-90), p. 226.
- <sup>2</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Preface to *Novissima Sinica* (1697), repr. in Adrian Haia, ed., *Deutsche Denker über China* (Frankfurt/M.: Insel, 1985), p. 17.
- <sup>3</sup> Günther Debon, *Oscar Wilde und der Taoismus* (Bern, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1986). One critic went so far as to see in Wilde's dandy a modern version of the Taiost sage (Isobel Murray, "Oscar Wilde's Absorption of 'Influences'. The Case History of Chaung Tau", *Durham University Journal*, 64 i (Dec. 1971), pp. 1-13). For further information see Knut Wolf's invaluable bibliography, *Westliche Taoismus—Bibliographic* (Essen: *Die Blaue Eule*, 1992). I am indebted to Finn Riedel for an update on sinological research.
- <sup>4</sup> As this is not a sinological paper, I shall use the familiar way of transcribing Chinese words, i.e., the Wade system.
- <sup>5</sup> The ideogram consists of three elementary particles that denote these roots: a road, a human head, probably of a leader, and a human foot (Chuang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism. A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), p. 24).
- <sup>6</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Absolute and the Perfect Man in Taoism", *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 1967 (Zürich: Rhein, 1968), pp. 379-441.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: Brill, 1961).
- <sup>8</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, p. 380.
- <sup>9</sup> Henri Maspero, *Le Taoisme et les Religious Chinoises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).
- <sup>10</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, p. 382.
- <sup>11</sup> Anna Seidel, p. 230 f.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Wilhelm, *Lao Tse, Vom Sinn und Leben* (Jena: Diederichs, 1921), p. 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Max Kattenmarck, *Lao Tse et le Taoisme* (Paris, 1976), p. 40.
- <sup>14</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (London: Faber, 1962), p. 12. T. S. Eliot did not believe in the amalgamation of Western and Eastern modes of thought and harboured great doubts about understanding Chinese civilisation "without some knowledge of Chinese and a long frequentation of the best Chinese society . . ." (1934). This attitude set him apart from such writers as Whitman, Pound or Rexroth (see Sanchide Kodama, *American Culture and Japanese Culture* (Itamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1984), p. 56f). On the problem of the appropriation of Eastern thought, see also Umberto Eco's chapter on Zen and the West in his *Opera Aperta* (1967).
- <sup>15</sup> Benjamin Hoff, *The Te of Piglet* (New York: Dutton, 1993), p. 233.
- <sup>16</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984), p. 310 ff.
- <sup>17</sup> A. C. Graham, "Chuang-Tzu and the Rambling Mode", in T. C. Lai, ed., *The Art and Profession of Translation* (Hong Kong: Translation Society, 1975), p. 71.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- <sup>19</sup> Chuang Chung-yuan, p. 26.
- <sup>20</sup> Michelle Yeh, "The Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tsu", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10 (1983), pp. 95-126; Hongchu Fu,
- "Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered," *Comparative Literature Studies* 29 (1992), pp. 296-321.
- <sup>21</sup> Frederick Davies, ed., *The Diary of John Cowper Powys: 1930* (London: Greymitre, 1987), p. 27.
- <sup>22</sup> The entry in his journal continues characteristically: "And there was a nice little Anglican Parson who was pleased because I praised the Holy Ghost".
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>24</sup> "The Philosopher Kwang", *The Dial* 75 (Nov. 1923), repr. in *The Powys Review* 7 (1980), p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>26</sup> *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 310.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.
- <sup>28</sup> *Obstinate Cymric* (Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1947), p. 51.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>30</sup> *Up and Out* (London: Macdonald, 1957), p. 57f.
- <sup>31</sup> Anthony Head, ed., *Powys to a Japanese Friend: Letters to Ichiro Hara* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1990), p. 86.
- <sup>32</sup> Other writers who refer to Taoism come to mind: the poets Thomas Kinsella and Ted Hughes (*Remains of Elmet*), Eugene O'Neill and Neill Gunn.
- <sup>33</sup> Robert Galbreath, "Taoist Magic in the Earthsea Trilogy", *Extrapolation* 21, 3 (1980), pp. 262-268; J. R. Wytenbroek, "Taoism in the Fantasies of Ursula K. Le Guin", in Olena J. Saciuk, ed., *The Shape of the Fantastic* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), pp. 173-180.
- <sup>34</sup> Robert Galbreath, p. 262.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Language of the Night, Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1989), p. 39.
- <sup>36</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* (New York: Avon, 1971), p. 95.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30. James Legge's 'Lathe' is nowadays translated as 'Equalizer'. Le Guin later pointed out that she got "considerable mileage" from this early translation: "But Joseph Needham had gently pointed out to me that when Chuang Tzu was writing the Chinese had not yet invented the lathe" (Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World. Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p. 99).
- <sup>38</sup> Of course, the inimitable Frederick C. Crewe offered many important scholarly insights bearing on this bear in his *The Pooh Perplex*. Alas, the book was written in pre-postmodern times and will have to be rewritten or expanded into a derridaist or deconstructionist discourse.
- <sup>39</sup> *The Te of Piglet*, p. 3.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>41</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Occultisme, Sorcellerie et Modes Culturelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 87.
- <sup>42</sup> Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).
- <sup>43</sup> See also Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (New York: Wilham Morrow, 1979) and Wes 'Scoop' Nisker, *Crazy Wisdom* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1990).
- <sup>44</sup> Scott Sanders, "The Left-Handedness of Modern Literature", *Twentieth Century Literature* 23, iv, (Dec. 1977), pp. 417-436.
- <sup>45</sup> Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses—Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 331.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- <sup>47</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh* (New York: Mandarin, 1989), p. 110.

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# John Cowper Powys

## The Occult Madonna

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She is the mother of all things  
By the world's engines outcast thrown:  
Where they are she is: hope she brings  
To those beneath the Nether Stone:  
Incorporate with the air and mould,  
She moves through regions manifold.

Evasive, fleeting, blown like chaff  
Across the chill and pallid dawn;  
A touch, a sign, a breath, a laugh,  
Then once again the Curtain's drawn:  
Yet Memory, roused from ruined days,  
Turns comforted, and goes her ways.

Unbound, unharbour'd, toss'd like scum  
Along wild shores and desolate seas,  
A trail of weed—a track of foam—  
A murmur of the hurrying breeze;  
Yet, clinging to the drowning mast,  
Despair discerns her at the last.

Inurn'd, enwrapt, seal'd with the mole,  
And shrouded in the worm's embrace;  
A mattock's heave, a coffin's roll,  
A shudder through the soundless place:  
Yet from its everlasting bed  
Death hears the Occult Madonna's tread.

(*The Occult Review*, January 1906, Vol. III, No. 1,  
edited by Ralph Shirley (London: William Rider & Son))

A copy of this poem was sent to me twenty-five years ago by the generous Mr E. E. Bissell of Ashorne, Warwick, the great collector of Powys material (whose collection has recently been stored in the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester). It appears that JCP forgot the poem, perhaps requested by his first cousin on his father's side, Ralph Shirley for his *Occult* periodical (Shirley having secured Powys's first publications in 1896, *Odes and Other Poems*, and 1899, *Poems*); or perhaps he did not think it worthy of republication in one of his later volumes. It is printed here, not because it has charm or sense, nor because it has the haunting lyricism of some of Powys's better poems (such as 'The Epiphany of the Mad', *Wolf's Bane* (1916)), but as representing Powys in 1905-6, after a first lecturing visit to America, still immature as a writer, but producing his unmistakeable verse-language of a part-humorous, theatrical search for the marginal, twilightish and gothic. Ed.

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# Joseph Resnick

## Remembering John Cowper Powys

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Once having seen the face of Powys, one was not likely to forget it. His features were not molded, but hewn—as rocks at the edge of rough waters. His cheeks were like slabs of chiseled stone; his Roman nose primed for prospectives; his chin pendent like a slingshot readied for use. His mouth tense as a dam holding back the force of a million words. His forehead, rising under a cloud of coiled, disheveled hair, struggling monumentally with the resistance of the air he moved through. His body, erect with purpose and direction, moved with the rhythm of an inner dream and compulsion. His garments flung themselves about him with the zest of his momentum. His whole person was alive with the realization of himself in his uniqueness—flagrant and frank in his ego. His walk was a stride. He annihilated space and time with his presence.

In his lecture on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he became Hamlet himself, filling the reincarnation with a revivified éclat. As his audience waited for him in the rows of simple benches in the Labor Temple on 14th Street at Second Avenue, he arrived as at a summons from some high authority. Swinging down the middle aisle, as turned heads became aware of the wind of his arrival, he dashed towards the steps of the platform with the air of one entrusted with some valued news. Hoisted on the stage, he breathed the incense of his own presence, flung the shock of hair backwards over his head and thrusting the folds of his great black cape to either side of him, surveyed with surprise the attentive congregation

before him.

His form lurched toward left and right, the lids of his eyes opening like shields of auto-lights, his gaze already beyond the precincts of lecture-hall and listeners. His words carried the vibrations of his flesh and mind, married to the flutterings of unreachable spaces.

On the lecture platform he was not merely a speaker, but an actor who spoke his own lines with vocative emphasis and clarity. Words poured from him with the urgency of their necessitous formingness—their place in the life of a thinking, experiencing individual. One could sense that he was not simply garnishing an idea or a literary work out of critical evaluation or elaboration, but was elucidating the deep intimations of things found in himself.

His words were woven with the intense thrust of his thought. He paced the platform as though indeed he were alone in a cell expostulating to the walls the uncontrollable fervor of his being. So *visual* did he become that what he was saying also seemed to take on bodily form and reached his hearers with physical force. From this sense, there was the hazard that the tenor of what was heard would become converted into the image of the speaker and not simply a substance of commentary to be added to one's hoard of information. Yet, strangely, however much one attached every word of Powys to the image of himself, this had the extraordinary pervasiveness for absorbing and understanding his utterances in the lightning intensity of one's own excitement. One carried away

not the accumulation of a linkage of words, but the impress of a figure illuminated by life and giving life its illumination.

He poeticised existence. When, after an hour being oceaned by his voluble, explorative, metaphoric talk, we exited from the auditorium, walking dazed and stirred in the raucous air of 14th Street, with its river of people blunting our passage, with traffic grindings choking our ears, we could not but feel a bit alienated—since we were angelized only a moment

ago by words which were in themselves energized spirit.

This portrait of J. C. Powys on the lecture platform appeared in the New York little magazine, *Stroker*, No 21, in 1981. The author, Joseph Resnick, died in 1996. The republication comes with the kind permission of his widow, Ida Resnick, and the editor of *Stroker*, Irving Stettner.

#### THOMAS HENRY LYON (1870-1953)

This portrait hangs in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in honour of Lyon as architect (and graduate) who restored parts of the College. It was however as “that young Harry Lyon whose unequalled charms held me spellbound”, “with his good looks and brilliant humour” that he met John Cowper Powys as an undergraduate at Corpus in 1891. His sister, Margaret married JCP soon after. Susan Rands has contributed three minutely researched articles on “Thomas Henry Lyon, Architect” to *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, Spring and Autumn 1995 and Spring 1996 (Vol. XXXVII, Pts vii, viii & ix, pp. 220-27, 252-54, 283-87). The Lyon-Powys friendship was clearly important for Powys, but has been little researched. Susan Rands will provide more material on this in the next *Powys Review*.



Thomas Henry Lyon (1870-1953).

## REVIEWS

*Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson,*  
Edited by Gloria G. Fromm.

The University of Georgia Press, 1995, £58.50  
(\$66 U.S.).

Writing in 1987, with reference to her own unsuccessful plans for an edition of Richardson's letters, Virginia Smyers notes "we'd been told that no publisher in London was interested in Dorothy's letters—because so few people knew who she was." It has therefore fallen to the University of Georgia to publish Gloria Fromm's edition of vigorous and interesting letters by the "Wordsworth of the city of London". This was what J. C. Powys calls Richardson in that short pamphlet he wrote in 1931 to encourage the sales of *Pilgrimage*, her *bildungsroman* about Miriam Henderson (volumes 1, 2 and 4 of the 1979 Virago edition, in 4 volumes, are currently in print). These letters form the posthumous sequel to Gloria Fromm's biography of Richardson, first published in 1977, and re-issued in 1994.

Readers of J. C. Powys will be interested to find around 40, often lengthy letters from Richardson to Powys, as well as a few letters from him to her (there are also references to the Powyses in other letters). While these letters indicate Richardson's pleasure in this epistolary friendship, Richardson was not as enthusiastic as her husband Alan Odle about Powys's novels, other than perhaps *Wolf Solent*. For her Powys's "one solid contribution" was *The Pleasures of Literature*. This work so "stirred [her] to the depths" that she advised him in 1939, to "write no more novels!"

While as Gloria Fromm notes, in *The Powys Review* 25, Powys and Richardson "seem on the surface as unlike each other as is possible to be," she also significantly recognizes that,

the author of *Pilgrimage*, the creator of Miriam Henderson, . . . seemed to feel the same magical intensity that [Powys] did in the things of everyday life.

In addition to recording this friendship between major novelists, these letters reveal the differences between the lives of men and women writers:

I'm convinced that the reason why women don't turn out much in the way of 'art' is the everlasting multiplicity of their preoccupations, let alone the endless doing of jobs, a multiplicity unknown to any kind of male.

The large number of letters to the historical novelist—and wealthy patron of women writers—Bryher, also add to the value of this selection, as a record of the lives of twentieth century women writers (Bryher was the lover of H.D., a former friend of Frances Gregg).

There is a further dimension to Richardson's struggle as a woman writer, because she saw the novel as usually a masculine genre, and she set forth in *Pilgrimage* in fact to create an equivalent feminine narrative form. Richardson even sees Virginia Woolf "for all her femininity, [as] a man's, almost a male, writer"; she, however, finds in "[both the Brontës] a definite depth of experience, that is totally lacking in the masterpieces of masculine fiction."

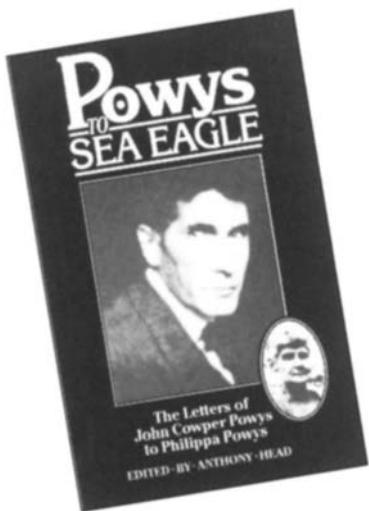
It is also interesting to read the numerous comments, of such an important modernist, on Pater, James, Proust, Woolf, Joyce, Lawrence, Henry Miller, and others. Gloria Fromm's title is indeed aptly chosen. There are also frequent references to H. G. Wells, who was Richardson's lover at one time, and a major influence on her, both as a teacher and as representative of that novelistic tradition, which she felt had, with a few exceptions, misrepresented feminine reality.

This is an important selection of letters: valuable not only because it contains a substantial selection of letters written by a major modernist, but also because Richardson writes interesting and intelligent letters. The introductory essays, that both preface the book, and each period of Richardson's life, into which the book is divided, are also very useful. While the price is substantial, there are well over 700 pages.

In a sense these letters represent additional chapters to *Pilgrimage*, a highly autobiographical work as John Cowper Powys

recognized: "A letter from Dorothy Richardson yes! from Miriam Henderson herself" (Diary, 5 May 1931).

ROBIN WOOD



*Powys to Sea-Eagle: The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Phillipa Powys*,  
Edited by Anthony Head.

Cecil Woolf, London, 1996, 338 pp., £35

This volume represents one of the most significant collections of John Cowper's letters to have appeared in print to date. In *Powys to Sea-Eagle* we have a volume of letters which span a period of nearly fifty years, from 1911 to 1961—a greater chronological spread than that of any collection published so far. And, as the editor of the volume points out, these letters are addressed to "an ideal correspondent" (9)—to a member of the Powys clan with as undogmatic a temperament as John Cowper himself.

The sensibility common to John and Katie produces a 'breathless' quality in John's letter-writing which, though evident in all his correspondence, is particularly notable here. With the very first letter of the volume John Cowper sets a pace of discourse which rarely slackens in the remainder of the book.

Writing from the Grand Hotel in Cincinnati, he manages to describe the "delapidated charm" (33) of the hotel, to remark on his trip to the barber's shop, to narrate his motorcar adventures with one Mrs Roening from Pittsburgh, to discuss American Socialism and the imminent Presidential nominations, to digress about the peculiarities of American train engines, and to mention "a middle-aged man in one city who had spent days & days with Walt [Whitman] in his youth" (34). And all in a letter of barely two printed pages.

The letters in this volume abound in such outpourings of the unsifted details of John Cowper's life in the United States and Wales. The whole effect should be one of epistolary chaos. However, the volume is held together by the integrity of John Cowper's voice and by the underlying theme of his correspondence with Katie. Time and again Powys returns to the topic of Katie's writing. As the editor of this volume asserts, Powys "never ceased to encourage and advise, praising her for successes, consoling her for disappointments" (10).

A typical example of John Cowper's concern for his sister's work is found in a letter written from Phudd Bottom and dated 1 September 1932. Powys is himself having difficulties in finding a publisher for his greatest work, *A Glastonbury Romance*. But in the midst of his own disappointments and frustrations he takes time to offer Katie advice and encouragement.

So don't in future alter anything in your books *except the spelling*. That is the only thing to alter & that you can do yourself with a Dictionary. The grammar does not matter. I swear to you this is the case. Just write on & on & on & *never destroy anything*. (81)

The problem of his sister's creative work is not the only topic broached in this volume; there is an abundance of material to interest the Powys reader. For instance, it might come as a surprise to perplexed readers of say, *Porius*, that John Cowper felt his writing could be improved by "a little Obscurity" and that he struggled "in vain . . . to be obscure" (95).

Even for the casual reader there are fascinating glimpses of John Cowper's historical

context. In a letter from Corwen dated 24 September 1940, there is a long passage about the East End experience of the London Blitz narrated, of course, at second-hand but still vivid and with a salutary political moral attached.

With their exuberance of incident and imagination the letters of this collection are an ideal introduction to John Cowper's life and preoccupations. Further, they are proof, if any is needed, that his immense talent in correspondence is an unignorable aspect of his imaginative genius.

JEFFREY RODMAN

*Jack and Frances: The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg, Volume Two.*

Edited by Oliver Marlow Wilkinson assisted by Christopher Wilkinson.

London: Cecil Woolf, 1996, i-xi and + 251 pp.  
£29.95

Volume Two of the letters of John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg has been edited by Oliver Marlow Wilkinson and Christopher Wilkinson, the son and grandson of Frances Gregg. The letters date from 1930 until 1941 when Frances, with her daughter and her mother, was killed during a bombing raid on Devonport. Notes to the letters are provided. There are also biographical notes on key figures in the Powys circle of family and friends.

Readers of J. C. Powys's *Autobiography* will turn to the letters in search of the anonymous female subject who becomes the focus of certain scenes set in Venice before the First World War. These are passages of a Henry Jamesian glamour of suggestion and writerly nuance. The romance of this connection between Frances Gregg and Powys was to remain between them during a lifelong relationship, although as Oliver Wilkinson explains, Jack Powys "marries Frances to Louis Wilkinson . . . his friend and fellow lecturer in the United States." Jack "wills and manipulates

this marriage, inspires it, in order, as he thinks, to keep Frances close to him" (vii). The letters don't, of course, explain the mystery of this romance. To Jack himself, Frances remains, to the point of her death, ". . . the greatest woman of genius I can imagine and have ever supposed possible; and the strangest" (Letter 325).

The book has the names of Jack and Frances on its cover, but at this point in the review I acknowledge the need to place oneself on guard against the temptation to use the names of these two people as familiarly as if one had known them. The reader who falls into such familiarity has probably been drawn too far into the circle of flattery which is part of the spell of the book. The editor comments on the gift of the Powyses for "raising people, however casually met, onto a plane greater than they had ever known" (Notes to Letter 220). He adds that "Jack continued to do that!—treating people as though they had reached the pinnacles of greatness he saw as possible in them. This cosmic flattery was self-protection; but it was also to lift the other on to a new plane of existence" (Notes to Letter 272). These comments may alert the reader to one of the most powerful elements of the desire that these letters reveal: the urge towards self-fulfilment in writing. Jack, entering the most prolific period of his own writing, persuades Frances to begin writing the book that is in her. But Frances is not easily taken in: "You must think it odd that I never say thank you for all the kind things that you say about my ability to write. I must seem to take your very heady flattery for granted. I don't actually. I don't take it at all" (Letter 272). The letters form a debate on the poignancy of the unexamined life; on the compelling need to convert life into art.

Frances' part in the relationship is to act as Jack's scourge. She knows both his "sincerity" and his "treachery". She appears to remind him of particular scenes between them which left her the female victim of his male duplicity and malice. "Do you really think, dear Jack, that my mind is so shallow that I have forgotten our deep struggle in California [in 1919]. I—a woman—struggled for your honour, and I—a woman—was forever dishonoured by you. You won and involved me terrifically in your doom.

Such poor weapons as I had I have used. But time is getting on, and unless you come to my aid it may be that I, too, shall have this weary round to repeat. I am not sure though . . ." (Letter 195). It is not possible to be sure how much the reader is entitled to make of such a passage. The biographical notes do not really help one to interpret it further. The Editor however reminds us that Frances saw in Powys a man "riddled with manias and lust for pornographic sadism" (viii). I suppose that the compulsion to read closely leads to a further acknowledgement of the power of the book in which these desires and conflicts are most fully played out, the *Autobiography* of 1934. Yet in that book, Powys refuses to discuss any of the women in his life, including Frances. As we see, he encourages her to write her own book instead.

It is time to note that I have not yet seen Volume One of the letters. I certainly look forward to reading them. The imaginative radiance of the *Autobiography* tempts one to find out more of the details of the lives concerned. I have to say that I find the letters in Volume Two a little disappointing in themselves. Powys is not at his prolix best. Frances often seems conscious that her letters do not quite rise to the occasion. Nevertheless, the story of which the letters tell—as full of hardship as any romance requires, extends one's appreciation of the *Autobiography*, which sets the scene for this romance.

PETER EASINGWOOD

*The Mystic Leeway*,  
FRANCES GREGG  
Edited by Ben Jones

Carleton University Press, Ottawa, 1995, i-ix + 194 pp., £14

. . . let me travel backwards, ten, twenty, thirty years, and see these people again. Here are Ezra Pound, Walter Rummel, Hilda Doolittle, John and Llewelyn Powys, and Louis Wilkinson. Each of these was to become . . . a figure of note in the world of art . . . With each of these I was to endure tangled and erratic episodic flights into

what we call 'reality' and 'life's episodes that were inconclusive, irrational, often dolorous, and always unexpressibly comic . . . but . . . from each of these I was to receive . . . a reassurance, a divine faith and assuagement for my timid wayfaring soul, of meaning in life, of a secret passed from soul to soul; through them I was to glimpse the shape and purport of infinity and time; I was to know . . . the incommunicable. Nothing could make me believe in chance. I have never known a life that did not have . . . *this mystic leeway* in which something infinitely real blossomed, grew, and fed upon the mysterious bread, the secret wine, borne to it by stated messengers. So, I would have starved, had it not been for this one; gone blind, had it not been for that other; died, were it not for you. (58, my italics)

*The Mystic Leeway* is a memoir about the "messengers" encountered by Frances Gregg (1884-1941) in her and their Modernist youth, written between late 1938 and early 1941, sent chapter by chapter to John Cowper Powys, published here from the manuscript found by her son, Oliver Wilkinson with a sack full of letters from Ezra Pound, Powys, H. D. and others, in Plymouth where she was killed in a blitz, there, with her mother and daughter, in 1941. (Whereas an interpretation of Christ is the human ideal most discussed in *The Mystic Leeway*, Oliver Wilkinson is the work's marginal hero, like the lovers and friends listed above, bearing on his brow "that mysterious sign that sets men apart"; and he has not failed her as they have. Margaret, Oliver's wife, seems to anticipate that day when "a woman will rise up and laugh to scorn all man's analyzing and invention. But . . . We women still ape that failure man, and are still dominated by his colossal bluff of knowing us, we who do not know ourselves." (78)

As Ben Jones says in his excellent informative and analytic introduction, *The Mystic Leeway* is "an uncertain, disconcerting text" (1). It covers only 126 pages of this edition (including photographs) but, contrary to Gregg's disclaimer that it is "trifling . . . with all its vanity and folly" (170), it is ambitious in its concerns. Rooted in actual and metaphoric descriptions of scenes and voyages, present and

past (using in particular a voyage to the culture of Europe by Gregg, her mother and H. D. in 1911), brilliant in character sketches and analyses, it also describes Gregg's quest for her own spiritual identity (a quest perhaps, as Coleridge would say, more misty than 'mystic') combined with a critique of Modernist art and a 'messianic' plea for an earthly future probably to be redeemed by a Jewish woman. *The Mystic Leeway* has much in common with Yeats's *Autobiographies* but aims for more.

Frances Gregg was no doubt an actual, brave "caravanner" (55), but in this text we find no "timid wayfaring soul"; nor do we find Sadista, Lucrezia, Messalina or Faustine—some of the names given to her by JCP and H.D. (4). Possibly JCP's phrase about the "Saturnian cleansing of her carbolic soap" (23) produces an accurate image of Gregg's effects, both liberating and destructive of self-esteem. For an example of what she does, see one of her accounts of JCP which includes:

I had, and have, the unshakeable conviction that John Cowper Powys was the best that life could offer, the most profound, rich, thrilling personality, . . . a God-like being whose only flaw was that he knew not God and was hag-ridden by superstition. He lacked the one thing upon which I had staked my all, he lacked intelligence . . . He could acquire, derive, elaborate, but he could not think. (101)

The voice is consistent throughout *The Mystic Leeway*; it is the voice of the rebel against orthodoxies, still the searcher for gods on earth; but the style of the writer is mixed: pretentious (without pretence), humorous, naive, devastating, and more. One seldom reads such disarmingly frank autobiographical writing; to some extent it lacks the 'culture' which this American sought in Europe; Gregg holds back neither praise nor prejudice, nor infliction of hurt which she sees as hissing and flaying. Her character comes across very strongly in this work, likeable and dislikeable in turn, fascinatingly honest, thoroughly entertaining, inviting massive quotation.

Frances Gregg's text is beautifully presented by Ben Jones's edition. His introduction and annotations place it thoroughly as an important work for the understanding of the Modernist

movement. A biographical chapter "Frances Gregg: First Hand" by Oliver Wilkinson charts the difficulties of his mother's life and the miracle of her having managed to make-up this valuable leeway.

BELINDA HUMFREY

*Petrushka and the Dancer. The Diaries of John Cowper Powys, 1929-1939,*  
Selected and edited by Morine Krissdottir.

Carcanet Press, 1995, 340pp., £25

For this fan of John Cowper Powys, *The Diaries* brought great joy with unbounded interest. I was magically taken into a different age, as I had felt similarly when reading Virginia Woolf's *Diary*, with the same names appearing, such as Frances Gregg, Louis Wilkinson, Gamel Woolsey, and Gerald Brenan.

The further into the book I went the more I became aware that *The Diaries* had been started at the instigation of Phyllis Playter—to act as a self-psychiatric therapy for John Cowper Powys, to help him come to terms with the chauvinistic man she had found him to be. Out of which grew *Autobiography* (which he intended to be without women—at her behest?). The wrestling with himself is constant throughout, and brought to mind his *cri de coeur* in *Autobiography* (which was being written during the early period of *The Diaries*): "And why should I not be what I was born to be in my deep heart?" (My emphasis.)

He attributed his "anti-social tendency" to "house parties" to which he was taken as a child, and says of his first seven years that he had found relief in Nature: "My whole psychical and sensual response to Nature appears a deliberate intellectual achievement, something into which I willed myself, knowing it to be the true Tao, or Path of Deepest Wisdom." Literally it carried him through life, from which Phyllis Playter was largely excluded.

*The Diaries* portray a man deeply scarred, and one who railed ineffectuously against his dreams. The explanation is given in *Autobiography* where he gives such a gruelling

picture of his schooling, as to beg the question why his intelligent readers did not turn against the unthinking tradition of sending sons away to be so cruelly trained. As John Cowper Powys suggests, the salient characteristic of the English mentality, 'malice', would explain why, coupled with the adolescence induced by the education.

Aspects of his life's five guiding constituents emerge throughout *The Diaries*. They were: "a desire to enjoy the Cosmos, a desire to appease my Conscience, a desire to play the part of a Magician, a desire to play the part of a Helper, and finally a desire to satisfy my Viciousness", which included the "most dangerous of all vices . . . Sadism." The last he strove to overcome throughout his post-school life, as *The Diaries* indicate.

That spontaneous preamble was necessary to make sense of the unfeeling, selfish character who emerges in *The Diaries*, a character which nearly drove Phyllis Playter to distraction. He gave her absolutely no help in housework or cooking, or more graphically, he never lifted a finger, which no liberated woman today would tolerate. But Phyllis Playter, with talent of her own for writing, freely gave it to John Cowper Powys. And finally, I was forced to conclude, John Cowper Powys grew to become Phyllis Playter's loveable old puppet.

This book gives the impression that one is reading a film script, with its leaps and gaps, and even non-sequiturs, which become exasperating as they keep on occurring right to the end. A feather, rather than a chisel, would have ensured smoother linking. Likewise, with the siting of the interesting photographs, which interrupt the text, rather than being placed more appropriately at a natural break. The Editor suggests that "Some bridging material was necessary", and also says that the diaries which themselves are the property of the National Library of Wales, have been reduced for the book "to one tenth of [their] extent"; with that in mind, the "bridging material" needed to be more thorough. However, one does receive a good, if elliptical, picture of the lives of John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter in relation to each other over eleven years from 1929 to 1939.

*The Diaries* show how difficult the lives of

them both were, not least by being dogged by worries of lack of income. *The Meaning of Culture* written during this period was actually the only regular income bringer, and, at one time, consideration was given to Phyllis becoming a waitress.

*The Diaries* cover a phenomenally fertile period, whether by inspiration or fear of penury, when John Cowper Powys produced, and discusses in *The Diaries: A Glastonbury Romance, Autobiography, Weymouth Sands, Maiden Castle, Morwyn, Owen Glendower, The Meaning of Culture, In Defence of Sensuality, A Philosophy of Solitude, The Art of Happiness and The Pleasures of Literature*.

We are told that John Cowper Powys wrote his diaries for publication, which I doubt, and suspect it was the genius of Phyllis Playter to persuade him to do that, telling him that! *The Diaries* show the great contribution made by Phyllis Playter, and it is not too much to conclude that John Cowper Powys had a co-author.

RODNEY AITCHTEY

*Steeple on a Hill,  
GLEN CAVALIERO.*

Horam, East Sussex: Tartarus Press, 1997, £8.99

A prefatory evocation of Arthur Machen, John Cowper Powys and David Jones is certainly an earnest of the desire to explore what Glen Cavaliero calls "the numinous quality of the world in which we live". But of course such an aspiration can issue forth in many different forms: one thinks of Roy Fisher's *A Furnace* whose dedication to J. C. Powys precedes a pilgrimage from black-country trolleybus to snails climbing on a roadside verge by way of Trier and the Derbyshire hills. This, perhaps, is by way of saying that Glen Cavaliero's approach is more hieratic, his poetry more formalized, his landscapes less 'alternative'. The point is not put negatively: Donegal,



38 High East Street, Dorchester (centre, 1997). This is where J. C. Powys wrote much of *Maiden Castle*.

(Photograph: Susan Rands).

Suffolk, the Lake District fells, are precisely those sites at once magical and historically-layered which need fresh visioning to counterbalance the heritage industry's kindly intentions.

There are, perhaps, a few merely occasional pieces here. But from the very first poem "Sieve League" there is also an ability to capture the interaction of sensibility and particular landscape:

One Man's Pass can be  
another man's destruction.  
Dizzy with the glory  
of the enormous green  
and brandy-gold cascade  
of cliffs, vaulting the ridge  
reared from the moor to drop  
sheer where the white-bird fathers  
mew in their cells  
to the virgin, ever-to-be-secluded sand,

The passage captures well Cavaliero's long movements through stanzaic forms (note that only a comma follows this and the movement runs through the next stanza as well). Also one catches hints of more formal religious symbolism which are yet absorbed back into the run of vivid observation. Elsewhere as in "Cerne Giants", "The Passing of the Gods" and "A Norwich Triptych" one encounters a more explicitly mythopoeic framework. Typically, the overall feeling is one of syncretism, with Rome and Christianity seen as literally overlaying pagan ways:

To the north, beside the ford, a Lemurian mound,  
great with lost keepings and vigilant for travellers  
in every season, powered with the sun's strength  
transmits a planetary force along elected  
ancient ways paved by the later arbitrary  
orders of empire . . .

("The Passing of the Gods")

Just once there arose a desire to call in Roy Fisher to speak up for Cavaliero's "distressing Midlands cities (Smethwick, Brum)". But this is a very occasional forgetting by Cavaliero of Fisher's downbeat Powysian discovery: "Most of it has never been seen" ("City"). Glen Cavaliero's revisioning of traditional loveliness does not normally preclude a keen eye for poignant humn detritus and I particularly bear in mind the fallen farm of "Landslip":

Catastrophe: an entire farm capsized,  
a mess of garbage flung upon the sea,  
the shoreline smashed, its grand embankment  
pulp. Above the drop  
a trades-van tottered  
like a stout bewildered dodo—

then tipped more bodies on the convoy crushed below.  
This is a sense-refreshing, echoic and crafted  
volume of poetry which its literary begetters, in  
whatever dimension they may now be, will  
surely acknowledge as one of their own.

K. E. SMITH

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RODNEY AITCHTEY is a free-lance journalist, contributing mainly to periodicals, such as the *Contemporary Review*, *New Welsh Review* and *Resurgence*, on environmental and social matters. His latest book, *Soiled Roots* is published by Gwasg Gwawr, Cardigan (1994).

JOE BOULTER is at Somerville College, Oxford, engaged on writing a D.Phil. thesis on J. C. Powys.

PETER EASINGWOOD lectures at the University of Dundee. His Ph.D. was on J. C. Powys' critical writings; his publications are on Powys and late 19th, early 20th century writers, especially Hardy.

JACQUELINE PELTIER who is engaged in research on J. C. Powys's correspondence at Paris VII University, last contributed to the *Review* in 1986.

SUSAN RANDS began her literary career on *John O'London's Weekly*. She has published extensively on J. C. Powys in the form of articles, but also many more on persons and places in the West Country of historical and literary interest. Her current research is on Susan O'Brien of Stinsford (Dorchester), her relationships and influences.

ELMAR SCHENKEL is Professor and Head of English at the University of Leipzig. He publishes articles on numerous 20th century

writers, including W. H. Hudson, T. S. Eliot, Peter Huchel, the Inklings and others in a range of periodicals from *Akzente* to the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, translations of Powys, David Jones and Caillois, and his own books of short stories.

K. E. SMITH, Senior Lecturer in Literature at the University of Bradford, and poet, has published widely on later 18th century writers, notably Johnson, Smollett, Sterne and Godwin in periodicals like *The British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, and on regional writers especially of Yorkshire and Wales, with special attention to dialect poetry, to G. M. Hopkins, R. S. Thomas and Gillian Clarke.

ROBIN WOOD lectures at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. His work on J. C. Powys for a PhD at UW, Aberystwyth (1982) has been followed by several articles on Powys, the latest in *The New Welsh Review*. His current Powysian research is on the correspondence with James Hanley.

JEFFREY RODMAN is currently Principal Lecturer and Head of English at Bath College of Higher Education. His doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge was on the Wessex Novels of John Cowper Powys. His most recent publications have been in the areas of eighteenth-century studies and of psychoanalysis and literature.