

# Powys Notes

Spring 1997

Featuring new essays on *Owen Glendower* and  
*A Glastonbury Romance*

The Powys Society of North America



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# Powys Notes

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## Subscription Addresses

US and overseas:  
Constance Harsh  
Department of English  
Colgate University  
Hamilton, N.Y. 13346-1398

Canada:  
Michael Ballin  
Department of English  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5

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## "The Circuitous Outward": Natural Mythology in Powys's *Owen Glendower*

Denis Lane

### i

John Cowper Powys spent the last twenty-five years of his life in Wales. Although he bore a Welsh name and came eventually to think of himself as an "Aboriginal Welshman" (*Obstinate Cymric*, p. 7), he was in fact not Welsh—the family history, which was well researched by his brother Littleton, showing no Welsh blood on his father's side for well over several hundred years. The putative origins of the Powys line evidently lay, however, in Powysland, or Powys Fadog, an ancient princedom covering much of the former counties of Montgomery and Merioneth in mid-East Wales. When John Cowper finally settled in Wales he regarded it as in every sense a homecoming. All of his writing on Welsh matters, novels and essays alike, is a celebration of this event: One notes in *Owen Glendower*, for example, an obvious relish in Powys's frequent invocations of the name that is at once his own and that of his ancestral homeland.

Powys was immensely learned in the history and literature of Wales—the result of life-long study—and in his later years he learned to read and write Welsh, a feat of no mean proportions in view of his age and the notorious difficulty of the language. This deep-rooted interest in the culture and traditions of his adoptive home is poured lavishly into the 938 pages of *Owen Glendower*. The novel is a marvelous blend of historicity and vision, of mythology and romance, and for this it has won high praise.<sup>1</sup> Its action, which spans the first sixteen years of the fifteenth century, follows in its broadest outlines the known facts of Owen Glendower's great rebellion against the English, his outlawing and his eventual defeat. Only in his account of Owen's death does Powys depart from this principle; taking imaginative advantage of the gap in the historical record, he

provides what must surely rank as one of the more fascinating inventions of the Glendower apocrypha.

Powys's treatment is episodic rather than continuous, presenting the story through accounts of key segments of Owen's itinerary over these years. He sets the events of June to September, 1400, in Glyndyfyrdwy, Valle Crucis, and Dinas Bran; those of June, July, October, and November, 1402, at Snowdon and Tywyn; those of February and August, 1405, at Harlech Castle; and Owen's death, which he assigns to November, 1416, Powys places at his own doorstep at the Mynydd y Gaer in Corwen.<sup>2</sup> Almost all these settings, though varied in other respects, embody an atmosphere of tragedy in their affinity with all that is somber in the cosmos: night, darkness, wind and storms, severe winter weather or unceasing autumn rain. The world of *Owen Glendower* is an elemental world, defined by images of slate, earth, air and water, a world in which man's tragic passions of love and hate are expressed in the Saturnian images of dispossession, sudden death, and victory in defeat.

Certainly the confines of a known chronology operate to the structural advantage of the novel, and if we take into consideration the freedom of Powys's other novels from established dates, events, and personages we can see that *Owen Glendower* is a new type of Powys novel: one that comes with its basic ordering principle already supplied. The historical framework also helps explain why the novel is the most deterministic and fatalistic of Powys's novels, a point on which it contrasts sharply with *Porius*, the novel that follows it. In the long run, however, the events of Owen's rebellion, dramatically and forcefully portrayed as they are and structurally valuable as they are, become an imposing and symbolic background for the effective depiction of human psychology and personal relations. For Owen's is not the only story in the novel and, ingeniously, one of the others, that of Rhisiart ab Owen, receives as much attention as the story of Owen itself.

Rhisiart is Owen's distant cousin, first his secretary and later an English judge. He longs to play a vital role in the emancipation of Wales—his motive is that he is part Welsh, but the fact that he is also Hereford-born and Oxford-educated proves to be a mixed blessing. Essentially Rhisiart's story concerns his simultaneous love of Catharine, Owen's daughter, and the saintly Tegolin, the Maid of Edeyrnion, whom he eventually marries, but since both women are inseparable from

Owen's political ambitions, there is a close interconnection between Rhisiart's progress and the public events of the rebellion. Thus, there are two principal yet dependent plot-strands in the novel: One focuses upon Owen and embodies the collision of fate and character, the other focuses upon Rhisiart and illustrates the tortuous path of romantic love.

In the public, historical story Powys is concerned with the random nature of history, with the casualness rather than the causality of events. When, early in the novel, Rhisiart, attending the first discussion of Owen's war-plans, asks himself "were all epoch-making councils of all history as undecided and confused as this one?" (p. 186), he strikes a note that is echoed frequently in the novel, both by its participants and by its omniscient narrator. Powys's characteristically cosmic viewpoint will not allow him to view a segment of history as complete within itself. This is felt particularly in the characterization of Owen, whose decisions and judgments rest upon an awareness of his inheritance of the ancient mythology of Wales, and are made as much by the guidance of his "spirits," or cosmic intelligences, as by that of his earthly counselors. This equal emphasis, so typical of Powys, upon the two orders of phenomena—the cosmic stream and the world of personal feeling and personal value—is one of the major achievements of *Owen Glendower*.

ii

A reading of *Owen Glendower* reveals not only that the historical novel is a natural genre for Powys, but also that it is a superb vehicle for the expression of his philosophy of elementalism and the fictional techniques that this entails. Powys found in the English-Welsh border, where much of the action is set, as consonant a literary landscape as Scott in the English-Scottish border. The richly sensuous evocations of the natural world, the spirit of place, the contextualization of the elements, and the mythic atmosphere so commonly associated with these entities in Powys, all are maintained as effectively in this as in any other Powys novel. Noting that Powys is "the greatest master of natural description in our literature," G. Wilson Knight rightly observes that "what is so marvelous about *Owen Glendower* is the way that each description is exactly and variously integrated into the multifarious twistings and turning of the story."<sup>3</sup> Powys's elementalism implies much more, of course, than pure description, as we can see from the

first ten pages alone, which offer a virtual paradigm of Powys's use of nature as a fictional technique.

We enter the novel not through human consciousness but through the consciousness of a horse: Griffin, the piebald, who will become a familiar presence. Weather and season are announced precisely but indirectly, by a description of the effects of heat and sunlight upon the horse and his rider, Rhisiart, at this time a young clerk. A short description of the Forest of Chirk suggests that the small forest animals have a greater proprietorial claim upon the woodland than the landowning nobles, whose pomposity is emphasized by the contrast. The sound of Welsh poetry chanted by unseen travelers on a another path, drifts through the woods, prompting in Rhisiart a pleasant reminiscence of his Welsh nurse, Modry, and of the Welsh legends she had told him that were now "the narrow imaginative cult by which he had come to live." (p. 7) With perfect naturalness, a swarm of insects is endowed with feeling as they cling to Griffin's flanks and feed upon his "sticky equine sweat," their readiness "to risk a violent end" (p. 6) mirroring Rhisiart's impetuosity as a Norman about to enter Welsh territory. Another insect, "a flimsy currant moth," feeds upon a pungent and sour-tasting elder leaf, and brings to Rhisiart's mind a more bitter memory, this time of a public execution he had witnessed, a memory that is fit to take "the heart out of all the June woods of England" (p. 11). Other woodland constituents, flowers, vegetative growth, birdsong—the invading presence of nature—mingle with Rhisiart's thoughts as he mulls over his prior resolve to find service in Owen's camp. From these small beginnings, in which there is a simultaneous blending of the minute particulars of natural life with human (and in this case even animal) consciousness, Powys shifts to a grander scale, giving a sustained, intense, and rhapsodic description of Dinas Bran:

It wasn't that it was so large...but it took into itself that whole hill it was built upon! Yes, that was the thing. Dinas Bran was not the stones of its human walls, not the majestic outlines of its towering battlements, not its soaring arches and turrets and bastions; it was an impregnable mountain called up out of that deep valley by some supernatural mandate. Its foundations were sunk in the earth; they were sunk in that

mysterious underworld of beyond-reality whence rise the eternal archetypes of all the refuges and all the sanctuaries of the spirit, untouched by time, inviolable ramparts not built by hands. (pp. 12-13)

Thus we glimpse the first of those locales, extensively evoked, against which Powys sets the action of *Owen Glendower* and all of which mark out, in mood, the different stages of development in the narrative. Rapturous excitement preceding action is the keynote of Powys's description of Dinas Bran, Castle of Bran the Blessed, which is for Rhisiart the "mystic terminus of every vista of his imagination" (p. 9). The immediate effect of Dinas Bran upon Rhisiart is, as we see, to urge him to a kind of prayer, but thereafter the action both intensifies and is externalized in the first important movement in the novel's action: Rhisiart's rescue of Mad Huw, the Franciscan friar, and his protector, Tegolin, from the hands and fire-brands of a mob of English soldiers. Since, in the description of Dinas Bran, the relation between the observer and the scene is organic, the natural details themselves operate as psychological counters presenting Rhisiart's state of mind concretely rather than through abstractions. This dynamic relationship further draws attention to Powys's variation of a familiar Wordsworthian theme—man, the observer, half creates what he sees; his sense impressions are as creative as responsive. Hence, even though the castle is "in a battered, broken condition"—and this Rhisiart "could see clearly"—Rhisiart's perception is of some nirvanic temple as much as of a fortress, of a sanctuary "of the spirit" as much as one of the flesh. Also, since he has previously thought of the castle only in terms of its mystical value, it is this same value that Rhisiart now imposes upon the scene as he views it for the first time, and which Powys conveys through the pulls of an abundance of adjectives and adjectival phrases ("ideal," "supernatural mandate," "apocalyptic"). The sight is beyond his already considerable expectations.

The opening pages of the novel employ a whole range of Powysian techniques allied to nature. He applies them with obvious care, and they are typical of the role of nature throughout. While nature controls the impression that persists in the reader's mind in *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*, it is wedded even more closely to character and event in *Owen Glendower*. What is noticeable in the opening pages, for instance,

is how all of the natural details, even the dominant description of Dinas Bran, are ancillary to the main action; we are never allowed to forget that we are following the progress of Rhisiart toward Owen's headquarters nor permitted to escape the tension of his emotions at this crucial point in his life-history.

### iii

In addition to its local dramatic and psychological functions, the Dinas Bran passage announces a number of important motifs that run throughout the novel: the patterning of weather, the cycle of the seasons, the subtle and pervasive use of effects of light, a complex scheme of color-values, elemental symbolism, and, of greater thematic importance, the integration of place and mythic influence.

There is an extraordinary consonance between the physical and mythological environments of *Owen Glendower*. Myth appears to spring from the landscape of Wales, to be as much a part of its natural texture as the external features of moors and mountains, forests and rivers. The catalogue of figures from the Welsh past is long and comprehensive, and encompasses those who are at once historical and mythic. The spiritual presence of Bran the Blessed—the dominant, and finally triumphant mythological influence of the novel—is found everywhere: among the ramparts of Dinas Bran (pp. 12, 121), suffused at the novel's ending in an appropriately Saturnian light (p. 936); upon the sands of Harlech, also golden (pp. 631, 775); or scattered among the stars on a summer's night (p. 291). In opposition to Bran is "Saint" Derfel, the Accursed, the rival claimant for the minds and souls of Owen and the Welsh, who makes "his moan" from the gorsedd or bardic mound upon which Owen has built his Llys, Glyndyfyrdwy. Derfel, a darker force than Bran, who demands a virginal and bloody sacrifice, is explicitly connected with the winds and rain that sweep across the bleak Welsh landscape (p. 82). Within hours of his acclamation as Prince of Powys, Owen visits the ruined avenues of Mathrafal, the ancient Welsh capital destroyed by King John. Here we sense the presence of King Eliseg, the legendary Welsh leader to whom Derfel was magician and whose sword and belt figure prominently in the novel as symbols of a unified Wales, though their mystic authority will be forcefully challenged by the pragmatic Broch-O'-Meifod, himself a figure out of prehistory. Reminders of

Arthur will be found in the earth-mound at Caerleon-on-Usk; of Princess Myfanwy in the "sacred water" of the river Dee which Rhisiart crosses at the novel's opening; of Pryderi in the forest of Tywyn. Most legendary of the monarchs of Wales and most remote historically is Prince Madoc, recalled in the seascape at Harlech, whence he sought refuge from war and strife in "some huge continent beyond the setting sun" (p. 793). It is with Madoc that Owen will finally identify himself when in his dying words he proclaims himself Prince of Anwynn, Madoc's own lost and mystical land, to which all Welsh hearts aspire, "the world which *is not*—and yet was and shall be" (p. 890). In one of the novel's rare passages of objective commentary Powys draws attention to this exceptional reciprocity between the land, its people, and its mythology. It is a tribute of great beauty and perspicacity.

The very geography of the land and its climatic peculiarities, the very nature of its mountains and its rivers, the very falling and lifting of the mists that waver above them, all lend themselves, to a degree unknown in any other earthly region, to what might be called the *mythology of escape*. This is the secret of the land. Other races love and hate, conquer and are conquered. This race avoids and evades, pursues and is pursued. Its soul is forever making a double flight. It flees into a circuitous *Inward*. It retreats into a circuitous *Outward*.... (pp. 889-90)

This is the tradition that Owen inherits and in which he is firmly embedded; the novel traces his torment as he is caught between the impulses to act and to escape that have characterized the history of his people. And when he dies, or enters that mysterious state of disappearance known as *difancoll*, he will likewise be true to tradition; he will have no grave but will pass into the process of mythic substantiation: "'Before I die...I shall take my soul and mix it with *all this*'—and he waved his hand towards the horizon—so that every Welshman from Ruthin to Llan Collen and from Carog to Lake Tegid shall feel me in his bones"' (p. 914). Thus his parting instructions to Broch are for his ashes to be left in the subterranean chambers of Mynedd-y-Gaer, one of the three "indestructible and indiscoverable" hiding-places of the secrets of his race (p. 882),

and for Broch to take those bones that resist the fire to Corwen and there bury them under the very "centre of the Druid millstone" (p. 919).

What is remarkable about Powys's characterization of Owen is the consistency with which he portrays him within a framework of the interrelation between the forces of nature and myth. From the very outset Owen is elementally conceived. The full portrait—one of the most detailed and complex in Powys—is built up by a process of accretion. Owen has particular affinities with both moon (pp. 431, 644) and sun (pp. 407, 769), the latter of which he can stare at without blinking. At Meifod Mill "the flood of the tide, the stars in their courses" are felt to be on his side (p. 420). He apostrophizes the dawn (p. 391), or, Sylvanus-like prays to the Universe (p. 393). Rain and wind possess his soul (p. 574). He is said to command "storm-spirits" (p. 737). In his final years he is "driven to earth" (p. 891) but still retains a "primeval dignity" (p. 881). Yet some of these primal contacts will desert him. He misinterprets the appearance of the comet at Snowdown—it resembles a "gonfalon" (p. 471), or "dragon" (p. 474)—as an augury of a triumphal march upon London. At Harlech, known proverbially (and fittingly) as "the Castle of Lost Causes," Owen expresses his loss of military control with the view that "the moon's gone over to Bolingbroke" (p. 665). Animal imagery and animal associations accentuate his elementalism: He whistles like a water-ouzel (p. 410); he sends his imagination, like the flight of the same bird, "skimming between wind and tide" (p. 496); he uses a cat as a psychic familiar (p. 751), and is himself once described as "a great golden cat" (p. 655). He communes with a goosander (p. 654), sleeps under a wolf's skin (p. 389), and finds reality in the sound of a horse cropping grass (p. 820). His psychic powers are all of the elemental kind. He can command a sense of being incorporeal and eternal:

His face was blurred to his hearers in that dim light, but he *felt* as if its features were melting, and as if his whole torso were melting and turning into a dissolving tower of mist. He felt as if he had sat on that spot on his grey horse for a thousand years, while the rains and the dews and the days and the nights passed over him, telling to all who came what was the secret of the place...he felt as if he'd been appointed—

had a *tynged* or a 'fate' put on him—to sit on his horse forever at the gate of Mathrafal! (p. 414)

Elsewhere he achieves, or gives the appearance of achieving, metamorphosis (pp. 122, 257); indulges in 'astral projection' by appearing from a distance to his son and grandson (p. 901); is possessed of a power of "*cracking* the wall of one dimension of life and passing through the crack into another" (p. 651). Sometimes he is seen as a "ghost" or a "revenant" (pp. 714, 715, 757); at others, as in his rescue of Rhisiart from Dinas Bran, he emits a "supernatural light" which is followed immediately by "a real" flash of lightning (p. 379). In a nice symbolic touch, Owen leads the escaping Rhisiart and Walter Brut, the Lollard, "into the heart of the scriptural 'outer darkness,'" causing Rhisiart to wonder: "was the substance of this extraordinary man's nature actually porous in some way, like that of animals and birds, to the chemistry of the elements?" (p. 384)

Color is another key component in the portrait of Owen. Particular attention is drawn to his eyes which "were of a flickering sea-colour, sometimes grey and sometimes green, yet always with an underglow of light in them that had the effect of an *interior* distance" (p. 120). Owen's beard is "yellow-grey" (p. 120). Symbolically, it is forked or "cloven" (p. 392), indicating his assimilation of the devilish cult of Derfel. Gold, however, is his dominant color and the one by which Powys endows him with a sacrificial import. One reason Powys was drawn to write a romance about Owen Glendower appears to have been a desire to investigate the essentially Saturnian role of Owen in Welsh history, and also, no less important, the essentially archetypal character of the aspirations of Welsh nationalism.

Rhisiart, the chief experiencing character of the novel and among those closest to Owen, politically and emotionally, is chiefly used to record these recurrent emblems. Here is how, in a fine example of the polish and control of Powys's mature style, he presents us with our initial view of Owen:

That he was taller than the rest of them, that his legs were bare above his high, tightly-fitting, chamois leather shoes, that he had a dark tunic with broad purple belt and a purple mantle over his shoulders clasped by a massive gold brooch, that his yellow-grey beard was forked and carefully trimmed, that round his head was

a twisted golden thread and from his belt hung a short two-edged sword of antique shape were all things that Rhisiart only took in after several minutes had passed....

Rhisiart never again got quite the impression he received that midsummer afternoon, and there came moments when its memory grew blurred. But it never altogether left him; and the Owen that he saw that day took his place, easily, naturally and with a fatal inevitableness, on the ramparts of Dinas Bran and gathered into himself their mystic enchantment. (pp. 120, 122)

What Rhisiart feels toward Owen at his first meeting is "neither admiration nor awe," but "an upwelling of fierce protective pity" (p. 122). And this is how Rhisiart will continue to see Owen: in the color of gold and in the role of one destined for sacrifice. Thus, while others might find Owen "a statesman-like warrior," Rhisiart sees him as a "delicately carved statue, hung with sacrificial wreaths, awaiting the ritual dance" (p. 140), or as "a statue carved in gold" (p. 164), or "a golden image" (p. 511). When, only hours before his acclamation, Owen makes the crucial gesture of smashing his conjurer's crystal and thus committing himself, reluctantly, at this stage, to the future, he appears as a "figure of gleaming gold" but he bears the "drugged and helpless countenance of a sacrificial animal" (p. 394). Shortly thereafter, in what amounts to an ironic perception of his fate, Owen quarrels with the colors of his new standard, "a golden dragon on a white ground," the choice of his wife, the Arglwyddes. "It was all wrong," he tells himself. "It ought to have been a red dragon, not a yellow one" (p. 396).<sup>4</sup>

The "interior distance" that Rhisiart remarks in Owen's eyes reflects another aspect of Owen's character and one that places him even more specifically within the context of mythological forces. Cultural primitivism is more than a cast of feeling in Owen; it becomes the method of his mind. He is subject to autistic fits, periods of mental distraction similar to, but more disabling than, Johnny Geard's somnolent trances, in which he gives full rein to his occult and necromantic leanings. Repeatedly he reverts to this "old mental trick" of "exteriorizing his soul" (p. 427) when in need of explanation or guidance. Sometimes his psychic withdrawal is momentary, as in the

episode at Meifod, sometimes prolonged for months at a time, as in the lengthy period of inaction at Harlech, where he waits for the arrival of the Welsh fleet and the deliverance he falsely believes it will bring. But these withdrawals are also the moments he approaches closest to Derfel. Although he would like to be a leader in the tradition of Bran the Blessed, whose story in *The Mabinogion* involves extraordinary self-sacrifice—he lies down so that his armies can use him as a bridge to cross a river, an act with which Owen is explicitly linked on a number of occasions (pp. 258, 718)—and although he is personally moved by the spirit of Mathrafal, a place that symbolizes both the essence of his nation's identity and its centuries of persecution, Owen is, nevertheless, not so confident in his capabilities as a military strategist as to be unwilling to draw upon the fully panoply of his countrymen's heathen dispositions.<sup>5</sup> Among their darker superstitions, Derfel is the paramount influence, and Owen learns early that to evoke the name of Derfel is to arouse all that is savage and fearful in the Welsh fighting spirit. "If Wales is ever liberated," his son Meredith records him as saying, "it'll be through hotheads and madmen, through bards and Derfelites...rather than through the counsels of the prudent" (p. 170). Owen's obsession with Derfel reaches its culmination in his ill-conceived strategy of placing Tegolin at the head of the army of the Usk. This act, aimed at stirring up "a wave of sacred madness such as hadn't moved the country since Arthur's or Boadicea's time" (p. 694), instead brings upon him a torment of Faustian proportions. At the time of Tegolin's ritual armoring, Owen senses a "dark power" pouring through his body; there is a "madness...upon him"; he feels that he has "no soul" (pp. 694-95). It is then that Rhisiart perceives in him "something unearthly," the presence of a power that he "couldn't understand" (p. 696). But Walter Brut best captures the essence of Owen's state. "Didn't you see how he looked?" he asks Rhisiart. "He was wrestling with the Devil" (p. 707). Even though Owen will partially redeem himself with his "little change of plan" (p. 709)—his marrying of Tegolin to Rhisiart—his decision to send her to the Usk proves also to be his gravest military error, resulting in the capture of both Rhisiart and Tegolin, the death of his eldest son Griffith, and the end of his hopes for military victory.

In the figure of Owen Powys unites the needs of a "modern" sensibility with the rituals and the nature mysticism of the ancient world. By temperament attuned to the past, Owen

must nevertheless live out the *tynged* of leading his countrymen into "a real, living, modern Wales" (p. 538), as Rhisiart interprets it, fresh from ancient Oxford and the study of medieval law. Thus Powys's characterization constantly emphasizes Owen's reluctance to assume the mantle of either the warlord or the autocrat. Even at the moment of his acclamation as Prince of Powys he is shown feeling resentment at being "dragged back from satisfying levels of being" (p. 390) and he wishes for that past age when there were "no princes, no rulers," the age when his people worshipped peaceful gods "without sacrifices and without blood" (p. 419). Resignation eventually comes, however, but for the victim of history—for such Powys's Owen Glendower is—consciousness is consciousness of impotence, of determination by external forces, and also of a destiny that is as much collective as individual. "This is what you were to expect," he tells himself at Harlech. "You've got to go on, on, *on*—till every head you've trusted lies low, and every heart you've loved lies broken" (p. 763). Owen's escape from this burden is to listen to the sound of the waves on Harlech beach, and by immersion in this private ritual to rationalize his experience of war; to think of it as a period of unreality, as a form of enchantment—"like that flung down by the magicians upon the persecuted Pryderi" (p. 644)—which involves him in no personal responsibility.

Only after a series of fatal reversals—the defeat of his general Rhys Gethin, the capture of Tegolin and Rhisiart, and the aborted siege of Worcester—does Owen come to realize the truth of the words of the oracular crone, Lady Ffraid, the prophetess of Dinas Bran: "Over your body, Cousin Owen, our people will pass to their triumph; but it will be a triumph in the House of Saturn and not in the House of Mars" (p. 823). This proves a sobering and painful reflection, but one with which Owen eventually comes to terms. If he has rebelled against the role of the sacrificial prince he has done so because he is a lover of life, indeed is "*wickedly* alive," as Broch, the laconic defender of death and Owen's chief critic, reminds us (p. 610). Owen's death, over which Powys lingers with passionate detail, evoking a brilliant sadness, restores the balance of nature. For all his promise, the Golden Age has not come to pass under Owen, but at least its spirit, so consonant with and essential to the most cherished of Welsh mythologies, so endemic to the hills and valleys of Wales, has been reborn.

At the end of the novel, Owen's vitalist heritage is



shouldered by Meredith, his only surviving son, and appropriately the only Welshman, according to the same oracular Ffraid Ferch Glow, "true to Bran the Blessed" (p. 274). The novel's closing thoughts sound the familiar Powysian theme of stoic endurance. As Meredith descends at dawn the mountain where his father's body has been burned, and as the "ramparted hill-top" of Dinas Bran—representing the endurance which is nature's closest approach to perpetual life—grows "already golden," he puts Owen's life in a universal context of flux and reflux. Owen, and all that he symbolizes, is an idea that by the very order of things will come again.

City University of New York

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Angus Wilson, for example states that *Owen Glendower* "is in many ways the richest and finest work in Powys....[Its] scholarship and reconstruction are marvellous" ("John Cowper Powys as a Novelist," p. 13). George Steiner observes that "Powys's *Owen Glendower* is not only the most comprehensive, imaginatively persuasive piece of historical fiction we have, but a book whose power to reconstruct a past world can, soberly, be called Shakespearian" ("Neglected Giant," p. 23). And G. Wilson Knight argues that "surely no work in English shows a more amazing artistry than John Cowper Powys's *Owen Glendower*; and it is unlikely that we shall find anywhere a work in which so close a regard to historical exactitude is accompanied by so profound a metaphysic" ("*Owen Glendower*," p. 41). For a more recent interpretation see Ian Duncan, "The Mythology of Escape".

<sup>2</sup>Powys, in fact, completed the novel in the very same setting where the principal narrative ends, as he records in a letter of Boxing Day, 1939, to C. Benson Roberts: "You will be comforted and relieved with me...when I tell you that on Xmas Eve I did on top of Mynydd y Gaer and in a sort of Phoenix Nest of prehistoric heavy-as-meteors stones write *The End* and made the "Ogam" Runic Mark (so dear to Iolo Morgannwg!) over *Page 2000 of my Owen*" (*Letters to C. Benson Roberts*, p. 35). Another letter, this time to Nicholas Ross, reveals that Powys had written the first page of the novel in the chapter-house of Valle Crucis Abbey, Llangollen, leaving it uncorrected "because the spirits of those Cistercian monks were inspiring it" (*Letters to Nicholas*

Ross, p. 35).

<sup>3</sup>Knight, "*Owen Glendower*," p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>Powys attaches similar color values to other major characters in the novel. For Tegolin the color is red, captured in her "blood-red" hair (pp. 35, 124)—at one time a "heraldic symbol" for Rhisiart (p. 256)—or in the "blood-red" mist that surrounds her at the Tassel (p. 42), or in the "rosy stain" of her blush as she is married to Rhisiart in the Harlech chapel (p. 715). For Mistress Lowri, Tegolin's mother, and a figure of evil, the color is white, shown in the chilling whiteness of her hand (p. 257), or in the "gibbous moon" (p. 557), under whose power she performs terrible service at Bryn Glas.

<sup>5</sup>Nor, apparently, is the Welsh Church, as witness Abbot Cust's endorsement of heathen worship in his collation with Walter Brut (p. 242).

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## The Great Mother: The "Divine Feminine" in Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*

Christine Bilodeau

For She whom the ancients named Cybele is in reality that beautiful and terrible Force by which the Lies of great creature Nature give birth to Truth that is to be.

Out of the Timeless she came down into time. Out of the Un-named she came down into our human symbols.

—*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1120.

Images of the "Divine Feminine" pervade John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*. The novel begins with the dull throbbing of the archetypal "earth-mother" (23), and concludes with the Greek Mother goddess Cybele (1120), who draws together Powys's carefully developed "mythology" of the Feminine. In his article "the Idea of the Feminine in John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*," Peter G. Christensen argues that Powys's attempt at understanding his world through archetypes is unacceptable, and that "in doing so he asks women to accept his own version of the unsatisfactory Eros (woman) vs. Logos (man) dichotomy." However, "Masculinity and Femininity are not entities in themselves but dimensions of being human—traits of personhood" (Boff 52). The *Masculine* and *Feminine* archetypes within *A Glastonbury Romance* describe psychological components of the true human "Self," and are not automatically linked to *male* and *female* characters. Although emphasis is placed upon a Jungian equilibrium between both Masculine and Feminine archetypes within the human psyche, or the anima and the animus, the Feminine is privileged throughout the novel, and the Masculine is largely criticized.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that Powys's conception of the "Divine Feminine," exists as a source of strength for both male and female characters within the novel, but it is more importantly a

potential source of power for the female characters.

The earth is deified and gendered female, and she "has given birth" (22) to all consciousness. The novel both opens and closes in March, which is the time of year when the spring cycle in honor of the Earth-Mother Goddess Cybele takes place (Gasparro, 84). However, despite the references to specific goddesses, as well as to elements of Celtic and Greek mythology, Powys develops his own "mythology" of the Feminine, which encompasses a greater Feminine power that is closely connected to the earth and nature. Powys's "Divine Feminine" is depicted in archetypal terms, and it is likely explored for many of the same reasons that Eric Neumann discusses the Feminine archetype in *The Great Mother*: "Western mankind must arrive at a synthesis that includes the Feminine world—which is also one-sided in its isolation. Only then will the individual human being be able to develop the psychic wholeness that is urgently needed" (xlii). Both Neumann and Powys are searching for the Jungian equilibrium between the anima and the animus, and "the archetypal image of the Great Mother lives in the individual as in the group, in the man as well as the woman" (Neumann, 91). Michael Ballin argues in his article "*Porius* and the Feminine" that for Powys, "the essential Self is more important than any theory of principle. This assertion clarifies the nature of Powys's quest into the feminine: it is a search for the existential reality of the self in men and women" (6). However, the "Divine Feminine" can in many ways also be a source of power for women: "The return to the goddess, for renewal in a feminine source-ground and spirit, is a vitally important aspect of modern woman's quest for wholeness" (Perera, 7).

The importance of ancestry and lineage is emphasized throughout *A Glastonbury Romance*, including the importance of genetic and spiritual inheritance. For example, characters often describe distinctly "Celtic" traits or "Norman" characteristics: "we can't get away from the fact that we Crows are plain seafaring Danes...We haven't the goodness of a Saxon, nor the power of the Norman, nor the imagination of the Celt" (76). These "inherited" traits are linked to mythology, and therefore also to the conception of the "Divine Feminine" within the novel. There is a tradition of archetypal "Femininity" which exists in *all* women, in varying degrees, consistent with their own individual personalities. Similarly, Jung argues that "every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her

mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter...The conscious experience of these ties produced the feeling that her life is spread out over generations" (Weigle, 115-116). Just as the connections to ancestry and lineage provide a source of identity for both the male and female characters in the novel, an archetypal image of the "Divine Feminine" offers a possible source of strength and validation for specifically the female characters.

Christensen asserts that it is impossible to criticize patriarchy through archetypes, and that instead "we need more historical studies" (29). However, it seems that Powys is less intent upon "criticizing patriarchy," and is instead interested in creating a new world vision, a vision which incorporates both divinity and humanity, as well as their complex interaction. Christensen further argues that, "In trying to critique a Christianity traditionally biased toward the patriarchal, he offers us an ahistorical version of the Great Mother as a counterweight, never succeeding in reconciling the diversity and unpredictability of human behaviour with the idea of cosmic forces at work in the world" (18). On the contrary, none of the female characters are a complete reflection of the archetypes used to depict the "Divine Feminine." Occasionally, female characters can represent the archetypal definition of the female, such as when Cordelia becomes "a symbol of immemorial feminine annoyance" (808), yet the female characters are diverse and constantly changing individuals, as they redefine their relationship to the archetypal "Divine Feminine."

The narrator asserts that "Every woman—the most abject as well as the most beautiful—has certain moments in her life when the whole feminine principle in the universe seems to pour through her..." (976). Cordelia Geard has an experience which brings her closer to the "Divine Feminine," as well as her own femininity, when she climbs Chalice Hill in the chapter "Carbonek." She decides that "I've been considerate to everybody too long. I've thought of everybody except myself too long" (213). Cordelia makes a conscious decision to ignore the fact that the people around her expect her attention: "Crummie wants me. Mother wants me. Dad will be fussing about me. If Mr. Evans comes and I'm out, he'll think my feelings were hurt by the way he acted this morning" (212). Chalice Hill, and the Earth-Mother/Nature that it represents,

becomes a place where she can explore her own "Femininity," and "when her 'bad' moods were upon her she always went off along to one or other of such places" (213). However, Cordelia's will is not entirely her own in this instance, because "she had not allowed, as we seldom do allow, for the psychic pressure of the darkness itself, like a living entity surrounding her" (214).

Initially, Cordelia's experience on the hill is described in gender-neutral terms by the narrator, who addresses the reader as a universal "we," and state that "the darkness becomes a polymorphous amorist, irresistible, not to be stayed" (214). However, Cordelia's experience is unique, specifically because she is female: "When it is a woman who is in its grasp it seems to arouse something in the feminine nature corresponding to itself..." (214). Through her encounter with nature, Cordelia is better able to awaken many of the latent archetypal elements of the "Divine Feminine" within her own psyche. Her physical sexuality is translated into the supernatural, where Cordelia's vagina is described metaphorically as a "recessive mystery of darkness" (214), or her own "Aboriginal Abyss" (214). The "underground tide" which "ebbs and flows" alludes to menstruation, and again the physical "mysteries" of the female become psychic mysteries, linked to an archetype beyond the individual, physical woman (214).

Cordelia's physical connection with the land describes her spiritual and psychological experience on the hill: "She was certainly wrestling with a soil and with the growths of a soil that were more soaked in legends than any other hillside in Wessex" (214). Nature embraces her, becoming an active participant in her experience: "These apple trunks that she encountered...were like a sisterhood of invisible beings about her" (215). The trees act as a manifestation of the "Divine Feminine," a power which is both sympathetic to Cordelia and frightening to her: "She wanted to free herself from these sister-arms, but the darkness itself was weakening her resistance to them with its own sister-passion, a passion older than the world" (215). As a human individual with her own will Cordelia resists this divine, archetypal power which she cannot understand, even though part of her true Self responds to it.

Cordelia's confrontation with the archetypal Feminine within herself is part of a potential healing process for herself and all women. Jung argues that "an experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of

the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her" (Weigle, 115-16). Cordelia's spiritual experience culminates in an "orchestral monotone" by the "great oaks," a "cumulative and rustling sigh that came to the woman's ears" (216). The sound is made specifically for her: "[it] shook with a special intonation for the woman standing upon the bank! And Cordelia knew well what that message was" (216). Cordelia's individual experience is closely linked to Jung's therapeutic studies of the archetypal Feminine: "At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. All ritual and preoccupation with archetypes ultimately has this aim and this result" (115-16). Cordelia demonstrates that she has indeed been restored to some sort of wholeness, as she cries out in joy: "Hola-Hola! She could not restrain herself from giving vent to a wild cry of exultant delight as the first bursting deluge followed these premonitory drops" (217).

Cordelia's "Femininity" plays an important role at the conclusion of the novel, because it is her "feminine eroticism" which "rescues" her husband Owen Evans from his own evil, sadistic nature. He is affected by the "strange, dim undersea of feminine self-consciousness" (783) surrounding him. Cordelia's connection with the "Divine Feminine," through her encounter with "Mother Nature," provides her with enough power to overcome the forces of evil in her husband: "her face had caught that mysterious secret of the rain which very few faces and very few imaginations are able to catch" (787). She rescues Evans by using her "Cyprian disguises" and the "magical power of Eros" (1031). Cordelia, as a female, is a part of nature and reflects that aspect of her Self: "Like a tree that had begun to gather moss and lichen before it was old, there was so much untouched soil in the rich levels of this girl's nature..." (788).

Like Cordelia, Mary Crow also has a special connection to the "Divine Feminine." At the beginning of the novel, although the Mother-Earth Goddess is aware of John, Elizabeth Crow and the driver of their car, it is to only "one mood out of all these [which] the great maternal soul of the Earth [responded] and that was to a sudden exultant sense of peace and deliciousness in Mary's virginal breasts" (30). Mary is more knowledgeable than John regarding spiritual matters; for example, he is puzzled by the conclusion of the myth of Tieresias, but Mary finds it simple to understand: "Not at all, Cousin John. It seems a very natural punishment" (36). Mary is connected to the natural world, and her nose had "the nostrils of

an animal who goes by scent" (39). Marla Weigle argues in *Spinsters and Spiders: Women and Mythology* that "it is clear that peoples who view the earth as the *Terra Mater* (Earth Mother) and Universal *Genetrix* (female begetter) maintain a strong and sacred relationship to their lands" (47). The earth is an important aspect of both Powys's "Divine Feminine" and the novel as a whole, and therefore many of the female characters have special connections to the natural world around them.

Mary has a spiritual encounter with Nature, and, like Cordelia's, it begins when she is feeling troubled and depressed: "A tide of inexpressible sadness flowed through her heart. Tom was gone; and she had got scant comfort from him" (278). She is unable to find solace in other human beings, and therefore must turn to herself and the greater Feminine tradition. She wonders, "would other girls, all the way down the centuries...look up at those two stupendous pillars and fill the space between them, in their sad imagination, with the high carved arch full of wafted incense and choir-echoes and deep-voiced prayers?" (278) She looks up at the "coracle-like crystal shell of the crescent moon" (278), and imagines the centuries of women before her who have contemplated it, their "twenty-five thousand years of human yearning" (279). Mary connects with the "daughter and darling of the dark terrestrial orb, elf-waif of the infinite night" (279), and therefore, like Cordelia, she is drawn into the realm of the "Divine Feminine" through the world of nature.

The moon is a symbolic representation of the Feminine, just as the apple trees were for Cordelia, and both natural manifestations of Powys's "mythology" of the Feminine become a source of solace for lonely and saddened women, "gathering their life-streams towards itself, guarding their mystic chastity...companioning them when all else failed!" (279) Nature is linked to actual "women," and it is a source of solace for them in instances where "masculine" world experience is inappropriate. Mary was not able to find an accomplice in Tom; in fact her encounters with him regularly ended with "a sense of weary frustration" (278). The Moon is described as the "patroness of all defiers of man's laws" (279), and she has "always been the forlorn hope of the impossible; has always been the immortal challenge to What Is, from the wavering margins of What Might Be" (279-280). The magical touch of the Moon is able to "bring healing to Mary Crow" (280), in a way that no human intervention could.

However, the Moon is not only a source of solace for

Mary, it is also at times a powerful and frightening entity: "She [the moon] has been the tutelary mistress of all sterile passions, of all wild revolts against 'the Mothers,' that have led the virgins of prophecy to shatter this world's laws" (279). Eric Neumann argues that "it is an essential feature of the primordial archetype that it combines both positive and negative attributes and groups of attributes" (12). Although the Moon is presented as a source of power for the female character Mary, it is also linked to the possibility of madness: "Here floated the virgin-mistress of the tragic madness of maids" (279). The rebellious "female" image of the moon as the "daughter of the night" is also connected to physical extremes such as virginity and sterility, and real women must be cautious that they do not come too close to the primal force, "that shapeless conch of dangerous whiteness, tossing herself, through the scudding drifts of ship-swallowing seas, rocking like a sea-mew in the rigging of doomed ships" (279). Mary sends a prayer to that "white, floating, immortal creature" (280) to "bury it deep, deep in my womb, so that henceforth to the end of my days, something cold and free and uncaught may make me strong" (280). She is able to find strength in the Moon's Feminine power, which is a combination of goddess worship through the ages, including the veneration of the Virgin Mary: "With her silvery horns of Mystery gathered in the folds of that blue robe or bearing up those divine feet of the Maid-Mother of the Crucified she has challenged the whole authoritative reign of Cause-and-Effect itself" (280). The virginity of Powys's "Divine Feminine" does not seem to represent the same state of idealized female sexuality as it does in Christianity, but rather a rebellion against all that is male. Ultimately, that "rebellion" is a representation of the power of the "Divine Feminine," for the "truly" virginal characters in the novel are often marginalized and "unnatural."

The "Divine Feminine" is not always available as a source of power for female characters in the novel. When Nell Zoyland is waiting for her lover Sam Dekker in the chapter "Consummation," she remains indoors: "She had been sitting on that couch she had turned into his bed, listening and listening! It was not *her* destiny to see the moon that night" (308). The moon, which was clearly established as a representation of the "Divine Feminine" during Mary's encounter with it, is not available for Nell on this occasion. Instead, it is provided for *Sam* as he wanders around outdoors: "He knew at once what *that* sign hung in the heavens was—the young moon!" (306). Sam has a

physical and erotic encounter with Nature, similar to Cordelia's: "The dark earth beneath him seemed to him then like a vast, wild-maned horse, upon whose broad back he was being borne through space" (307). Feminized Nature is like a real woman with whom Sam is having a physical encounter: "Cold against his clenched fingers were those smooth twigs. Cold against his mouth was the river's breathing" (307). The fact that Sam can have a close connection with Nature and its spirituality reveals that the experience is Feminine in a broad sense rather than restricted to female characters.

When Sam returns from his encounter with the moon, the narrator draws a distinction between Nell's sexuality and his: "It is women's fatal susceptibility to passionate touch that hypnotises them into by far the greater number of their disasters" (206). The narrator further asserts that "there are levels of feminine emotion in the state of love entirely and forever unknown to men" (298). Therefore, although there must be a distinction between feminine and female, there are still certain psychological attributes which exist in females alone. The narrator suggests that women have "no illusion" about love, and are therefore able to persist in it longer, whereas men's love relies upon an "exaggerated admiration" which must eventually weaken (299). There is a power hierarchy established between Sam and Nell during their encounter: "This was the moment, as she felt herself pulled across the room by her wrist, that she knew her first real spasm of *fear of her man...*" (309). Although this chapter does establish obvious gender stereotypes, for example the fact that Nell is linked specifically to "passivity" and "abandonment," it is important that Nell is distanced from the "Divine Feminine" for much of the chapter.

A distinction must be drawn between the "mythology" of the Feminine, which describes abstract and idealized psychological attributes, attainable by both males and females, and the "mythology" of the Female, which is the means by which the narrator and other male characters attempt to define the "inscrutable" nature of actual women. Often, the narrator and other male characters speak of the female characters in essentialized terms, mainly because they do not understand women, and therefore determine them to be "mysterious." (See pp. 168, 259) In other words, although the "Divine Feminine," as a spiritual psychological force, is sometimes entirely separate from female characters, actual women are often "essentialized" by males who do not understand them.

Although power hierarchies are established between Sam and Nell, female characters occasionally demonstrate their ability to overturn similar hierarchies. When Nell reads a pamphlet about Communist Motherhood, she is upset by its claims: "No human creature has a right to claim possession of the person of another. Children are the creation of Nature, but their well-being is the responsibility of the State" (460). Nell describes it as an "odious pamphlet written by men who knew nothing about women" (461). However, the communist ideas are closely connected to Percy Spear, a female character very different from Nell. Not only is Percy bisexual, but she is "Artemis-like" (314), and feels a "lurid attraction and nervous disgust towards men" (315). In contrast to Nell, Percy is "not the maternal type" (317). Therefore, no matter how archetypally any of the female characters are portrayed, they are real human beings, in constant flux.

Essentialized, archetypal notions of "femininity" can both liberate female characters, and subject them to sexual hierarchies. Claire Douglas argues that Jungian archetypes, although potentially powerful, must be contextualized: "Jung's concept of fundamental androgyny could potentially free analytical psychology from the stereotypical prejudices of his age. It allows individuals to experience and develop all parts of themselves, whether or not these parts are conventionally gender-specific for their time and culture" (59). However, "the patriarchy of Jung's time, which we inherit, projected all outward power onto men while it imposed a narrow, idealized role on women" (54-55). Powys is very much aware of the conflict between the social realities of his time and his own greater spiritual and psychological vision, and that conflict is represented by the connection between the Female and the Feminine. At one point the narrator describes the fact that every small town in England has "several eccentric women" who break free of their family and "realise their inmost selves" (213). He further states that "every one of them has been spiritually ravished by the great unmerciful Father of all Lies" (213). The narrator is justifiably angry at the fact that both metaphorically and in reality, women are oppressed by men. Powys demonstrates his awareness of social constructions, and their devastating effect upon all people.

The discrepancy between the idealized "Divine Feminine" soul of the earth, and the life that real women must lead, is portrayed most clearly in the character Jenny Morgan,

who has been "spiritually ravished" by several male characters: "All that this sad, old-young woman of thirty felt, as she listened to the prolonged whispering that now went on between these two men in that gloomy and dingy hallway, was a wave of infinite, unspeakable, life weariness" (482-83). At the end of the novel, she gets her wish and dies in the flood. When her body is brought to shore, Geard looks at her and says: "She has a lovely face" (1097). His words are a direct echo of Sir Lancelot's, in Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," where the female protagonist is isolated from reality by art and illusion. When the Lady of Shalott finally leaves her world of metaphor and reflection, in order to exist in the world of reality, she dies. The realm of the "Divine Feminine," the psychologically abstract ideal and the real world in which women live are both reflected in this story. Powys's reference to Tennyson reveals his sensitivity to the sometimes destructive gap between the archetypal feminine and the actual female—here Jenny Morgan.

The contrast between the "Divine Feminine" and actual females is also demonstrated in the chapter "May Day." The chapter opens with young girls dancing around the phallic maypole, and once against the importance of tradition is emphasized: "These bluebells must have been the direct descendants of flowers that had been the background of many a Druidic May Day ritual round those great oaks" (508). Christensen argues that "repressed, however, under [the] dominant discourse of heterosexual inevitability are a few statements about the naturalness of same-sex responses" (22). He is speaking of the times when "totally unconscious of what is happening to their young bodies and souls, girls, when they are thus alone together, give themselves up to all manner of little gestures, movements, abandonments, which not only the presence of a man but the presence of an older woman would drive away" (508). However, I would argue that instead of suggesting some sort of homoerotic impulse in the women, the May-Day section serves to emphasize the connections that can occur between women, outside of the realm of masculinity. Although May-Day celebrations involve a phallic symbol, the stress is placed upon the fertility and the actual women, rather than the masculine symbol. For example, the chapter begins with the relationship between Sally Jones and Tossy Stickles: "The May-Day feeling in the air, the warm sunshine, the presence of such a quantity of flowers at their full height of blossom, gave to the high spirits of the girls, as they chatted



volubly together, that delicious quality of young feminine life which is so fleeting and so easily destroyed" (508). As well, the interactions between real men and women both reflect and expand upon the May-Day theme. Lady Rachel and Ned Athling discuss poetic theory, and at no time does Rachel passionately dance around his "may-pole." Instead, "with burning cheeks and gesticulating hands, she freely attacked him now, all the stirrings of her love transferred to her argument" (528). Ned "wanted her admiration; he wanted her respect; he wanted her hero-worship" (532), and it is significant that he never gets that final desire. The female characters are able to use the archetypes of the "Divine Feminine" to their own advantage.

Christensen cites many examples of "essentialism" in *A Glastonbury Romance*, where female characters are described in terms of absolute archetypes. He argues that even if they are "often intended to show the superiority of women to men or of the feminine to the masculine, they tend to create a reductionistic, essentialistic conception" (19). However, he fails to make the important distinction between women and the "Feminine," and to recognize that the "essentialistic" phrases are used in conjunction with either the archetypal notions of the "Feminine," or by male characters who mistakenly relegate females to the realm of the "mysterious." None of the female characters are stock "types," even though they do possess certain elements of mythologized femininity. Eros, represented by idealized visions of the "Divine Feminine" as Mother-Earth, is a source of power for the female characters in the novel, just as the Anatolian Mother-Goddess Cybele "wears a mural crown as protectress of her people" (Stoneman, 55).

London, Ontario

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Throughout my paper I will be using Jungian terms and concepts such as "archetype," "self," and "anima/animus." I provide below basic definitions of these complex terms, modified from Sylvia Brinton Perera's *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*.

**Archetypes.** Irrepresentable in themselves, but their effects appear in consciousness as the archetypal images and ideas. These are universal patterns or motifs which come from the

collective unconscious and are the basic content of religions, mythologies, legends, and fairy tales.

**Self.** The archetype of wholeness and the regulating center of the personality. It is experienced as a transpersonal power which transcends the ego.

**Anima.** The unconscious, feminine side of a man's personality.

**Animus.** The unconscious, masculine side of a woman's personality.

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## Cavaliero on the Supernatural

Glen Cavaliero. *The Supernatural and English Fiction from The Castle of Otranto to Hawksmoor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. £18.99 net, U.K. xii + 273 pp.

Cavaliero's study—focused on works written in English in England, Scotland, and Ireland—can be read in at least two ways. It makes a wonderful annotated bibliography: Someone searching after ghost stories and related material is bound to find promising new titles here. (The actual bibliography, at the end, seems to list significantly more books than the text discusses, so that we are left on our own to discover the merit and demerits of, say, A. N. L. Munby's *The Alabaster Hand* or Margaret Irwin's *Madame Fears the Dark*.) It also serves as an extended essay on the fate of the supernatural in eighteenth, nineteenth, and especially twentieth-century prose fiction. Modern culture is taken to be primarily rationalistic and scientific; against these norms, the depiction of the supernatural acts as a kind of fundamental disturbance, pleasurable to the materialist and the mystic alike, though perhaps for different reasons. This disturbance is Cavaliero's subject.

*The Supernatural and English Fiction* is casual in tone throughout, submerging or disguising theoretical and philosophical concerns, perhaps as part of its campaign to attract that elusive quarry the general reader. One form of conceptual organization *is*, however, highlighted. There is a conspicuous and largely successful effort to group books by categories. After a survey of gothic iconography, Cavaliero proceeds, chapter by chapter, to treat "the hermetic tradition"

(Bulwer-Lytton, Machen, Blackwood); theological fables (MacDonald, Williams); the stories of de la Mare and Kipling, suggestively juxtaposed; earth-worshippers (among them John Cowper Powys); specialists in psychological terror (Hogg, Stevenson, James, Bowen, and Phyllis Paul, the last a new name to me); and late modernist game-players, like T. F. Powys, Fowles, Murdoch, and Spark. A chapter titled "Reversions to Type" is harder to describe, first treating some distinguished children's writers (Susan Cooper, Alan Garner), then turning to Peter Ackroyd and Susan Hill.

Cavaliero categorizes supernatural fiction for practical purposes; his presentation of a large body of writing thereby becomes more comprehensible, less like an endless parade. In the realm of ideas, his method has one crucial implication. On the one hand, a literary ghost is a rhetorical effect, a manipulation of words with an audience in mind, a point to which Cavaliero pays considerable attention. On the other hand, a ghost's reality looks like or feels like more than a creation of rhetoric. There is a certain sort of visiting spirit that breaks through not only into the world of the tale but into the world of the reader. The clammy hand is under *our* pillow. Worse yet, the clammy hand is *our* own: To borrow Cavaliero's terms, visitation becomes possession. So understood, the supernatural is both in line with fiction's perennial claim to truth (the events of this tale really happened) and an intriguing, sometimes upsetting challenge to that claim (what really happened was not the sort of thing that really happens: a contradiction in terms). Cavaliero's kinds of supernatural fiction constitute different ways of working with this logical snarl. In other words, his categories correspond to various ways of conceiving and representing the ontology of the supernatural.

This investigation is always helpful, sometimes brilliant. I will add an observation provoked by Cavaliero's account, though not central to it. Among writers of supernatural fiction, there is a gulf between those who write tales and those who prefer to compose novels. The two genres can, of course, be combined—Wandering Willie's Tale is nested within the ample three volumes of *Redgauntlet*—but in such cases, the tale is almost always the repository of supernatural experience, the novel which frames it the repository of the everyday, against which the tale stands out as a departure. Supernatural novels, as such, are both rarer than ghost stories and, I suspect,



fundamentally different in kind. The sort of energy and skill required to produce the one seems quite remote from that required to produce the other. Furthermore, people who can write good supernatural novels seldom can write good supernatural stories, and vice-versa. (Certain Scots, such as James Hogg, are possible exceptions.)

Cavaliero addresses this separation on p. 52 of his study, where he writes: "Supernatural terror was to find its most distinguished literary expression henceforward [from the end of the nineteenth century onwards] in the ghost story," with the tales of M. R. James providing an exemplary instance. I'm not sure that subsequent chapters always confirm this observation: to take one case of special interest to readers of *Powys Notes*, Cavaliero rates *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius* very highly, as he does a number of other longer books. In any case, I would like to know more than he tells me about the relation between tale and novel, particularly in the supernatural fiction of our own fading century. Some preliminary considerations: Tales are nearer to a world where oral recitation is preferred to the written record, nearer (by the same token) to a folkloric realm where supernatural experience is almost a norm. And novels? Maybe the point about something like *Porius* is that it isn't a novel at all, but a romance. However, the change of terminology does not in itself clarify the nature of the book. JCP was generally impatient with short fiction. Length was crucial. To sustain a supernatural atmosphere for a thousand pages is an achievement different in kind from that of Bowen, de la Mare, or Kipling, writers whose artful brevity leaves us looking into a sort of abyss—the blank space beyond the story's end. To keep calling the ghost, never to shut the incantation off, is another matter altogether.

The question of length is closely related to the crucial topic of Cavaliero's book, the problem of ontology and the supernatural. To make the argument briefly, the more one talks about something, the more substantial its claim to reality becomes; it is being called into existence, as it were. At the same time, the shorter forms have their own ontological power, a power associated with the campfire, or with the moment of rest and contemplation before bed. One must tell the tale before the fire burns down or before one's auditors simply go to sleep. Otherwise it will remain unheard (or unremembered). Brevity, therefore, has its peculiar effectiveness and its own power to

represent or embody the disruptive visitations of the ghostly. To my mind, the gap between tale and novel reveals and is entangled with these conflicting demands. There is no doubt more to say about the aesthetic of longer and shorter forms in the extraordinary body of work treated by Cavaliero. It would be interesting to hear him speak (or see him write) further on these matters, as on many others raised by this shrewd and elegant book.

Richard Maxwell  
Valparaiso University

## Observations, Bibliographic and Social

AMOCO STRIKES. Amoco wants permission to build a 150 foot onshore oil rig along the Purbeck "heritage coast" in Dorset. Margaret Marsh (of Dorset) has sent out to members of the British Powys Society a bulletin on the project, asking for letters of protest. She includes what we take to be John Batten's protest letter—as he notes, "All three Powys brothers wrote extensively about the area involved in Amoco's plans for oil extraction." She also includes with her communication a piece by David Harrison (*Observer*, 29-9-96), who writes as follows: "Amoco said that if the drilling was successful it would seek permission to build a production complex 'just outside' the protected area. Huge trenches would be dug for pipes to take the oil to the complex. 'We haven't given any thought to that yet,' said project manager Neill Carson." Harrison's piece implies strongly that there has been a fair amount of funny business going on between local government and Amoco: rushed applications, unfair secrecy, and some particularly smooth public relations.

JCP AND STEVIE SMITH. Katie Trumpener (University of Chicago) draws our attention to the following passage from Stevie Smith's 1936 novel *The Holiday* (London: Virago Press, 1979):

"It is the writer John Cowper Powys who has this fullest free feeling of the pleasures of *instinctuality*, the fleering humble cold fish that he is, the wily old pard of the rocks and the stones, the Welsh carp fish in his British pool." (p. 124)

This comment of Smith's reminds us once again that we don't fully understand the contours of Powys's British (or American) reputation: To what extent is JCP taken at his own (high) evaluation by his contemporaries? What really were the advantages and disadvantages offered by his own--apparent--marginality in the literary scene of his time (at least the British one)? We hope to hear from readers with a good grasp of literary sociology and literary politics on this delicate topic, which continues to mystify us.

JCP: SIGHTINGS. Some readers of this journal may have seen Margaret Drabble's sympathetic "reconsideration" of Angus Wilson in *The New York Times Book Review* (29 January 1995). "He could be read both as a realist and as a fantasist," writes Drabble of Wilson: "his own literary heroes includes Dickens, Proust, Ronald Firbank and John Cowper Powys." Also of interest is Harold Fromm's review of Morine Krisdottir's selection from JCP's diaries, in *The American Scholar*, summer 1996. Fromm, we are glad to say, is more sympathetic to Powys than the last reviewer of his work in *The American Scholar*, Vernon Young, who some years ago produced an ill-tempered commentary on the novelist and died (splenetically or perhaps triumphantly) before anyone could get a reply into print.

THE OVERLOOK GLASTONBURY. We have just received the Overlook Press catalogue for 1996 and are glad to see that Overlook has brought out its sumptuous edition of *A Glastonbury Romance* in paperback (\$23.95, 1120 pp., 0-87951-681-x). "Powys's rich iconography interweaves the ancient with the modern, the historical with the legendary, and the imaginative within man with the natural world outside him to create a book of astonishing scope and beauty." Overlook also publishes a favorite book of the editors of *Powys Notess*, Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (see below).

GARLAND ARTHUR. Garland Press's huge *New Arthurian Encyclopedia* originally published in 1991, has been issued in a paperback edition. The entry on John Cowper Powys, by Amelia Rutledge of George Mason University, treats the expected novels, concluding: "The difficulties and infelicities of Powys's prose style will keep his works from the status of great fiction, but they must be reckoned with in any study of twentieth-

century Arthurian literature."

A FEW CULTURAL CONTEXTS. It occasionally occurs to us that a certain sort of wide and highly eclectic historical reading not always undertaken in connection with literary criticism would illuminate the study of John Cowper Powys's novels. With this thought in mind we note a few titles of possible interest to our readers: on wife-selling (and buying)—re *Maiden Castle*—E. P. Thompson's *Customs in Common*; on water and healing—re *A Glastonbury Romance*—Christoph Ribbat, "Shows, Sandals, Sauerkraut: the 'Water Doctor' Sebastian Kneipp" (*IN: German-American Review*, 2/94); on the provenance of English folk customs (especially on the Cerne Abbas Giant, that favorite Powysian icon), Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*; on women's clubs (cf. Constance Harsh's essay in our double issue on Powys and America, 1992), Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*.

RANSOM ON THE WEB. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, has launched a new web site presenting information about its collections, events, and exhibitions. The Center, which includes a notable range of Powys holdings, can be explored at <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/Libs/HRC/HRHRC/>. Among the features of the site is a new HTML version of the Writers and Their Copyright Holders file developed in conjunction with the University of Reading Library in Sussex.

A BIG PROBLEM WITH THE POWYS WEB SITE. A letter from ASSET, a software company in West Virginia, informs us that a "viable Web site" for the Powys Society could cost well over \$100,000 per year, but that with assistance from ASSET our Web expenses would be much lower. We are, however, taking other bids before committing ourselves to this particular project.

JOURNAL WATCH. *The Powys Journal* (1996) prints, among other items, a group of pieces related to the architectural work of A. R. Powys. Heading these is Peter Burman's "reading" of Powys's books. Burman shows in compelling and informed detail that A. R. Powys "belonged to a philosophical, literary and technical tradition directly involving not only Thomas Hardy but also John Ruskin, William Morris, Philip Webb, W. R. Lethaby, [and]

William Weir." His article places Powys's career directly in the context of the "'great tradition' of the Arts and Crafts Movement." There are also a number of sketches and photographs by A. R. Powys, and a selection of letters between A. R. and John Cowper. Melvon Ankeney, a reference librarian at Ohio State, writes on an eccentric American promoter of the Powys family, Lloyd Emerson Siberell. There is a particularly wonderful moment towards the end of this essay, when Ankeney describes Siberell's founding (in 1953) of the "Anglo-American Powyseana Society." The thought of such a Society seems to have made Powys very, very tired. This volume of the *Journal* provides in addition essays by Michael Ballin on JCP's *Autobiography*, by Richard Maxwell on *Porius* and Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, John Williams on T. F. Powys as "a strengthening antidote," and Peter Foss on the Kirchner portrait of Llewlyn Powys. There is also a piece by Llewlyn and a review by Martin Green of *Reading George Steiner* (a collection which includes John Bayley's piece on Steiner and Powys).

We have also received *The Powys Society Newsletter* for July 1996, which includes W. J. Keith's essay, "Editing for Whom?: A Responsible Reader's Notes on the Complete *Porius*." Keith argues, in brief, that John Cowper Powys was, as he wrote to Lowerth Peate, "a lecturer, a storyteller, preacher & speaker (even an orator!) first, & a writer secondly," and that, largely for this reason, he was "unconcerned about the finer details of preparing and presenting a finished text." The Syracuse/Colgate *Porius* is therefore misconceived in presenting the text without substantial editorial intervention, of a kind that Powys would normally have expected. Keith makes his case in some detail; his essay is an important addition to recent studies of the new edition. The *Newsletter* contains much else of note, such as a powerful memoir of Violet Powys by Theodora Scutt (Susan Powys) and Stephen Powys Marks's learned family tree for the Montacute Powyses. There is an announcement that John Williams will be the next editor of *The Powys Journal*, after Peter Foss finishes his second term in that position next year.

JCP AT THE LIBRARY. Margaret Maxwell sends us a brief History of the New York Society Library, written to accompany an exhibition at that venerable institution. The library was founded

in 1754 and has been called the first Library of Congress. Among those who have used its more than 200,000 volumes was John Cowper Powys, whose signature is presumably extant here and there on the check-out lists. We don't know if anyone has looked into the Society record with JCP in mind, but hope that any such person will drop us a line.

POWYS IN ALBANIA: A FURTHER WORD. Several issues back, we promised to send the strangest Powysian object we received in the mail to the Powysian who sent us the best tidbit of news. After some consideration, we awarded the prize to Meri Lalaj, who, readers will recall, has been translating *The Meaning of Culture* into Albanian. We were going to give her an odd little clock stamped with the name of the Powys Society (sent to us by a company which promised to make us many more of them, for a price) but we couldn't figure out how to get the clock to work and finally realized that it was a hollow shell, without any functioning or potentially functioning works. (No saving Saturnian charm here, to rescue time from the abyss.) For this reason, we have sent Meri Lalaj a Powys Society *calculator* acquired from another company of the same kind, and hope that it saves her five minutes now and then, so that work on her translation comes along a bit more swiftly than it otherwise would. The news from Albania, as we write, suggests that the country is in a state of deep civil unrest—not a good time for quiet work. We trust, however, we will hear more of Lalaj's translation when it is finished. The international nature of the Powys Society of North America—despite its geographically-restricted name, it has members all over the world—is certainly one of the most pleasant and most intriguing things about it. Here is to Powysians in Albania and everywhere else.

A LETTER FROM JCP. In 1991, Brad Payson of Minneapolis "bought a copy of *The Meaning of Culture*...at a local used bookstore. The book was a signed copy and inside was a letter apparently written by John Cowper Powys." We love stories about finding things in books. Moreover, the letter appears to us genuine. Since we don't recall having seen it in print anywhere else, we republish it here, with thanks to Mr. Payson for sharing this discovery:

February 6, 1939

Dear Mr. O'Connor,

How dilatory in reply to your good letter you must think me now that I note that its date is January 21st but I swear to you across my heart, I only received it this very morning - it came with two others, one from my sister Marian in New York and one from a friend in Baltimore and they were both dated Janaury 21st and here they all three came on February 8th. They must have all been put into the same incredibly slow or storm tossed ship, for the average time of the mail is much less, But this letter, Mr. O'Connor, is one that I shall always keep. Oh, you don't know the tiresome, silly letters that I get from "artistic" people and psuedo-literary people - - - CURSE THEIR BLOOD. But I believe you can, from your knowledge of human nature, guess the conceited, sentimental, tedious ramblings to which I refer!

Your letter is, if you don't mind my saying so, a real masterpiece of how a letter (an honest, unaffected, unegotistical letter) can effect [sic] a person. I am so particularly thrilled by the books you refer to as your special favorites; and how few select them! I only know one other person - - - save my brother Llewlyn - - - as devoted as I am to Marius. I begin to think that if a character is strong and subtle enough to stand it, a business life like yours, sir, must be a valuable asset in real culture by killing off sentiment, affectation, silly posing and conceit and that particular tone of superiority to ordinary humanity that I am being deluged with from so-called "artistic" and so-called "sensative" [sic] people, who in reality are as thick-skinned as so many little rhinoceruses. [sic] (I forget if that word has a "c" or "s".) Aye! Mr. O'Connor, you little know how your letter impressed me or how it affected me. It just shows how a real passion for literature can exist actually better and in a deeper and more authentic way in the business world than among the so-called artistic "intelligentsia."

That paragraph about the lake and the muskrat making that V on the surface - - - aye, how excellent it was! You aren't a "man in the street" my dear sir, for with all my respect for him, I am absolutely certain he doesn't read Epictetus, but you are a man

whose real, true, authentic culture has been luckily protected from being swamped and wallowed and frivolved and squandered and clevered by "artistic circles" and their damned silliness and conceit. Protected by Business, nothing more or less, just as Charles Lamb the most perfect, after Sir Thomas Browne and Walter Pater, of our stylists was protected by having to be a clerk in that old India office from 10 to 5 every day - not very long hours for an American office but long enough to give that peculiar and beautifully original, unspoiled touch to his work.

And acedemic [sic] circles are nearly as bad as artistic circles, tho' not quite, for at least they dare not in their impertinent whimsies declare that Goethe & Milton have no value for our day, as I have heard very clever men say. Think of the conceit such effronteries betray!

Well, I must stop but please do write to me again sir, and do let us keep in touch with each other and keep each other on our "mailing lists".

Yours gratefully for your encouraging words,

JOHN COWPER POWYS

P. S. Your letter-head gave me a sudden home-sickness for U. S.A.





## Library for sale: Powys books and related materials

Approximately 45 hardbacks, 45 academic-quality paperbacks, assorted pamphlets, and periodical journal issues.

- Books by John Cowper, Llewelyn, and T. F. Powys
- First editions (e.g., Colgate University Press, MacDonald and Co.)
  - Publisher's proof, signed by Kenneth Hopkins
  - Scarce copies for scholarly research
  - Village Press and other rare pamphlets
- Village Press and other academic-quality paperbacks
  - Powys Review* early issues
  - Related materials
- Books by Kenneth Hopkins, some signed
- Pamphlets by Louis Wilkinson, signed with dedication by Kenneth Hopkins

Direct queries to:

Melinda Barnhardt  
15327 Waterloo Road  
Amissville, VA 20106

phone (540) 937-3701

Electronic mail: [barnhart@mnsinc.com](mailto:barnhart@mnsinc.com)