

Powys Notes

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Powys Notes

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US and overseas:
Nicholas Birns
205 East Tenth St.
New York, NY 10003

CANADA
Michael Ballin
Department of English
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5

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Founded in December 1983, the Powys Society of North America seeks to promote the study and appreciation of the literary works of the Powys family, especially those of John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), T.F. Powys (1875-1953), and Llewelyn Powys (1884-1939). The Society takes a special interest in the North American connections and experiences of the Powyses, and encourages the exploration of the extensive collections of Powys material in North America and the involvement of the Powyses in American literary culture.

Between Myth and History: Problems in the Sacrifice Theme in *Owen Glendower*

Peter G. Christensen

Owen Glendower represents a particularly fascinating novel in the John Cowper Powys canon, as it combines mythic and historical materials to describe events that do not belong to a mythic past. Yet it has not been admitted to the ranks of Powys's greatest novels—*Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Maiden Castle*, and *Weymouth Sands*. The revolt of Owen Glendower against Henry IV and Henry V from 1406 to 1415 is a documented event which Powys has filtered memorably through his own religious, political, and literary concerns. For Powys the way out of the disappointments of contemporary and past history can come only through myth, and thus, despite its immense vitality and scope, *Owen Glendower* represents a failure in the way it unites mythical and historical materials.

What is the nature of this failure? The problem is not that Powys uses too much imagination to swamp what amounts to too few facts.¹ Instead, he tries to solve the problem of connecting the two realms of myth and history through the use of the theme of sacrifice, a topic which has already been identified by Roland Mathias (1972), Ian Duncan (1992) and Janina Nordius (1993) as a crucial trope in *Owen Glendower*. Yet the theme of sacrifice needs further explication, for we need to understand how Powys sets up *Owen Glendower* as a sacrificial figure in a way that at times reveals and at times conceals the nature of ritual violence operative in political rebellion.

Mathias argues in "The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of *Owen Glendower*" that Powys's novel does not succeed in part because of Powys's failure to underline sufficiently the sacrificial theme and his dispersal of it among too many characters. According to Mathias, the minor character of Adda ap Leurig, the seneschal of the castle of Dinas Bran, who hopes that the English and Welsh can live side by side peacefully, "is more sacrificially treated than ever Owen is." Mathias also feels that Broch o'-Meifod, a giant-like miller, "embodies the death-ideal, the sacrifice of his people," which Owen only intermittently embraces.²

Mathias objects to the apparent absence of a collective force to elect and sacrifice Owen:

Sacrificial inaction can only be made plausible in a future battle leader by the supposition that fate, the unseen direction of events, will 'elect him' as Prince and carry the sacrifice to a conclusion by some sort of corporate will.³

I believe that although the corporate will is not designated as such, we can see it indirectly. The community itself creates the situation whereby Owen chooses self-sacrifice.

In "The Mythology of Escape: *Owen Glendower* and the Failure of Historical Romance" Ian Duncan looks at sacrifice in terms of the Freudian scenario which informs the novel. Rhisiart has an epiphany in which he becomes convinced that he is dying for Owen and sacrificing himself for him. Duncan feels that in Rhisiart's fantasy, "Erotic sado-masochism is equated, once more, with martyrdom on the scene of history, both now 'resolved' in the mode of sacrificial submission to the father".⁴ Although I do not adopt a "family romance" approach to the novel, I agree with Duncan that the issue of sacrifice takes the reader to a point where the question of sacrifice can not be resolved, "only deferred beyond the book" and the "consolatio" of its ending (72).

Janina Nordius in "Prince and Outlaw: Visible and Invisible Solitudes in *Owen Glendower*" sees the novel as more centered on Owen's internal situation than Mathias, Duncan, or myself.⁵ She writes that in undergoing the process of what Rubin Goretsky describes as "attainment-isolation" Owen sacrifices one part of himself for another part (73). Owen's "gesture of breaking his crystal ball becomes a ritualistic manifestation of self-mutilation, a dismemberment of self" (74). Owen finds that the "inner world of dreams and imagination will have to be sacrificed for the isolation that goes with princedom" (75). The conflict in the novel in part centers around the fact that in becoming a political man Owen faces losing the solitude that allows him to "sink back into the collective experience of the past generations" (84-85). Nordius (95), in showing some reservations about Mathias's criticism of the novel, indicates that she does not consider the novel quite so problematic in its treatment of history. Consequently, she reads *Owen Glendower* as more of an artistic success than Mathias, Duncan, or myself.

This essay will take a new approach and analyze the sacrificial theme in *Owen Glendower* from the framework of René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*. After summarizing Girard's position on the sacrificial crisis and indicating that Powys's Welsh community is in such a crisis, I will follow the plot to show how Owen is developed as the main sacrificial figure of the novel. At times Powys asks us to see how a community can attribute to a deity the desire for violence for which they are unwilling to accept responsibility. At other times, however, rather than expose this situation, the characters and the situations unfortunately promote the belief that we should admire rather than condemn the sacrificial action.

Writing in *Violence and the Sacred*, published in French in 1972, the same year as Mathias's essay, Girard explains the connection between violence and the sacred that we have been accustomed to keep from making:

... the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the god who supposedly demands the victims; he alone in principle, who savors the smoke from the altars and requisitions the slaughtered flesh. It is to appease his anger that the killing goes on, that the victims multiply.⁶

Girard claims that in Judaism and Christianity this misunderstanding is finally disclosed in a new way which is liberating to humankind. In his later work *The Scapegoat* he writes that in the penitential psalms, Job, and especially the New Testament Passion narratives, the victim is identified as the guiltless scapegoat, one who has done no wrong but has nevertheless been designated as the cause of the community's dire situation.⁷ Girard believes that even though Christianity often ignores its own message and initiates persecutions, the appearance of Christianity in history has led to a general progress away from scapegoating the innocent. It is a step away from mythic thought into the rationality which enables us to see that the innocent are not magically to blame for the crisis in the community.

In reading Owen as a sacrificial victim, I am trying to both disclose Powys's intentionality and create some distance from it by using Girard's paradigm. Powys offers no major statements of intentionality about Owen Glendower other than the Argument, which treats the novel on a realistic and historical level, not on a mythical one. The discourse on sacrifice would be hard to focus on except through the lens of a theory such as Girard's which postdates *Owen Glendower* by over thirty years. In the 1930s the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* would have provided a key frame of reference, but it would not offer today the distance needed to analyze the complexities of Powys's investigation of violence.

In *Owen Glendower* Powys describes the sacrificial crisis and attempts to show a peaceful resolution of it in Owen's chosen death. In order to do this, he has to appeal outside of history to Owen's identification with both the Celtic hero Bran and the peaceful aboriginal peoples. The situation in *Owen Glendower* parallels in many ways the situation in Girard's version of the sacrificial crisis, but it also departs from it in crucial ways to offer an ahistorical escape at the end of the novel from the system of violence. This escape is centered on Owen's transcendent association with the legendary figure of Bran rather than on descriptive analysis of a devastated country.

At the beginning of the novel, however, Powys has established the Wales of 1400 as a country in the midst of a civil and religious crisis. We are presented with threats of violence against the Lollards, the rich, and the English overlords. Many people, particularly the Franciscans, hope that Richard II will return from the dead and restore Wales to order. The fear of heresy and the challenge of the Avignon papacy to the Catholic Church also upset the Welsh. Blood feuds may break out between the Derfelites and the families of women they have raped. The Parliamentary system of justice has broken down, as Owen cannot get a

fair hearing for his complaints against Lord Grey in a land dispute. Even the women are seen as potential members of a mob. After the Battle of Bryn Glas they go around the battlefield, kill the dying soldiers, and strip them of valuables. Later the French allies commit even more violent acts.

The community looks for help from the dead, the saints, and legendary heroes. Richard II, deposed and killed, is viewed with hysterical devotion as a God-chosen sacrifice by the unbalanced Franciscan, Mad Hugh. The women whom the Scab's men seek to rape are sacrifices to St. Derfel, a horse divinity who has been adopted as a Christian saint. Bran the Blessed, hero of the second branch of the Mabinogion, has quasi-sacrificial qualities. His head is supposed to have magical powers to ward off any plague, as long as it remains buried in London and facing toward France. In life, he led the invasion of Ireland to save his sister Branwen. A giant chieftain of the Welsh, he lay down his body as a bridge over the Shannon so that his army could cross it. In the big battle in which all but seven Welsh warriors were killed, he was wounded in the heel by a poisoned spear. The part-Welsh Rhisiart considers him a great hero.

Early in the novel as Rhisiart travels to Dinas Bran from England, he finds Simon the Hog trying to burn Mad Huw at the stake. Although part of a larger attempt by Henry IV's supporters to eliminate any opposition still backing Richard, such violence evidences individual persecutions. The Droog, or "sin Eater," one of the strangest characters in the novel, is a man expelled from the community for making love to a plough-boy. Eventually he becomes a half-animal creature who eats bread and meat placed on the bodies of the dead in order to absorb their sins. Owen himself is rumored by the people to be a necromancer and someone who has sold his soul to Satan. Once, when his campaign is going poorly, he wonders whether the Welsh will eventually turn on him. In short, both social situations and characters reveal that the community in crisis needs to choose a victim to deflect the violence from it. Community desire for a victim is then displaced so that it looks as if a god not the community has called for a sacrifice.

That the rebellion itself is not presented as entirely justified also brings the sacrificial crisis to our attention. One of the Cistercians calls volubly for the killing off of all the English. Philip Sparrow, the defender of peasants' rights, looks forward to the murder of those born above him on the social scale. Although Owen does represent the victory of Bran over Derfel, these other two forces of violence are not entirely brought under his control. Powys resolves the sacrificial crisis for one man, Owen, only, and not for the community, for he does not show the destruction brought to Wales from 1406 to 1415. Nor does he present the insurrection as a civil war in which families were split up. Powys believes that the ideals of the rebellion ultimately outweigh the uncontrolled violence that went with it. So he prefers to write an Epilogue centered on Owen (who has mysteriously been in hiding for several years) rather than one about the Welsh yeomen.

A close reading of the novel will show many points in Girard's hypothesis about ritual violence which can illuminate the depiction of the rebellion. Chance and fate are presented as versions of the sacred cosmic force, and they apparently, but not in reality, designate the surrogate victim to be sacrificed. A self-sacrificing person from within the threatened community takes on the role of the surrogate victim, and the victim is considered by the group to be the incarnation of violence and a possessed figure combining qualities of god, man, beast, and king. In the community's eyes, the victim brings the community's bad situation to a good one, and mass violence is deflected from destroying the whole group, thus allowing the people to feel that they have been reborn.

We can now trace this type of plot throughout the action in *Owen Glendower*. Powys shows that the First Cause is given the attributes of the violent community by its members. In other words, they project their anxieties onto the unknowable deity, here presented by Powys under the designation of First Cause:

Every mortal object of human interest, Welsh independence, revenge upon the English, the reign of justice, the advisability of burning Ruthin, the sweetness of slaughtering every living soul in Chirk, all fell into their places, all became parts and parcels of the complicated nature of the unknowable First Cause!⁸

In this passage Powys exposes the link between the idea of the sacred and group violence that Girard maintains has been covered up by many myths. Owen prays to the First Cause in one of its unknowable forms for guidance:

"Oh Unknown Spirit of the Universe, build up before me, before the soul of Owen ap Griffith Fychan, like the rampart of an unassailable fortress, the unbroken, the undisturbed, the absolute darkness of your impenetrable purpose!"⁹

Owen thinks of himself as the tool of the unknowable. He complains that he does not know entirely the reason he has been chosen. The narrator, however, distances the reader from Owen so that we do not assume that his reading of events is necessarily the correct one.

The "absolute darkness" that Owen invokes is not the Devil, although rumors fly about that Owen has sold away his soul. Rather, significantly, the unknowable god chooses him to be a medium for its will. After this invocation Owen flings over his magic globe. With a battle axe he strikes it three times, and the crystal falls into fragments. This act of violence indicates that he must never look into the future. However, later he is moved by the prophecies of the bard Hopkins concerning a Welshman being crowned in London to take action to become that Welshman. He makes the mistake of signing the Tripartite Indenture with Northumberland and Mortimer, an agreement to divide England. Not only does this act turn the defensive war into an aggressive one, but in order to set up the alliance between himself and Mortimer, he marries his young daughter Catherine to Edmund Mortimer without giving her a chance to object.

Although the plot tells us to think of Catherine as a sacrifice to her father's ambitions, the story of Rhisiart's relationship to Owen keeps the Prince in the foreground as the accepted sacrificial figure of the community:

Owen's presence affected him with the tremulous heart-beating feeling such a young savage might experience who finds that the god of his race—upon whose rough image he had long cast a negligent and even critical eye—has suddenly appeared to him in the wistful and helpless beauty of his real identity out of that familiar and neglected shrine. It was partly the scrupulous delicacy of the man's forked beard and of the thin gold thread round the brow that evoked this feeling, for in some curious way these details bore an infinitely pathetic look, as if the figure thus adorned and tended had been prepared or had prepared himself for some mysterious sacrificial rite.¹⁰

Here Owen is not only connected to sacrificial rites, but he takes on a double aspect for Rhisiart, that of a god and that of the adorned victim. The agent of the sacrifice is not stated. The use of words such as "adorned" and "tended" call to mind images of animal sacrifice.

The ritual animal which may stand in for the surrogate victim is identified with Owen when he journeys to the castle Mathrafal, which has rich associations for the Welsh. Here Owen has one of his "attacks," a type of possession which often characterizes the surrogate victim, and he lapses into something like a coma.

His countenance, however, had suddenly grown stupid and dull, like the drugged and helpless countenance of a sacrificial animal. And thus he lapsed, even as he stood, into one of those singular trances that had caught Rhisiart's attention when they first met.

Had the continuance of this queer coma, like the sleep of a beast who sleeps as it stands, been threatened by the familiar knock of his surly sentry he might not have been roused. . . .¹¹

At points like these *Owen Glendower* has severe problems at making sense on both the historic and the mythic level that Powys has devised for it. On the historical level, we are not just watching a military leader given to seizures but someone able to communicate with the dead. It is, as Mathias notes, almost impossible to imagine Owen as any type of military and political leader. What makes sense on this other mythic level cannot offset the strain we feel if we read this novel with more realistic expectations about the account of the Welsh insurrection.

The ritual victim, an animal, according to Girard, is blurred with the sacrificial victim, a human. In later stages of the sacrifice an animal can come to replace the human surrogate victim. At even later stages a statue can be the surrogate. Later in the same chapter, Owen is again described from Rhisiart's viewpoint, this time as some "delicately-carved statue, hung with sacrificial wreaths, awaiting the ritual dance."¹²

Once when Rhisiart thinks of Owen as a sacrifice, he has a hallucination of St. Derfel and Bran. Apparently Bran is offering Owen an alternative to the violence of St. Derfel. The hallucination of the old horse divinity shows both holiness and violence combined in the idea of the

sacred, one of the keys to the lost history of sacrificial violence already evoked in the previously quoted paragraph on the First Cause:

The smoke of the bivouac fire as it swept away into the darkening sky had been for some while taking strange shapes, but now it took definite and recognizable shapes. It took the shape of a gigantic figure, in the armour of the ancient days, mounted on a huge war-horse, and the word "Derfel" came into his mind, coupled, however, not with the word Saint, but with the word Gadarn, the Mighty, and following Derfel Gadarn was the wraith of the old poet he had seen die so hard, and the grotesque figure of the preposterous Scab; and along with them, leaping and bounding, was the wolfish appearance of Rhys the Savage.¹³

Derfel as horse divinity transformed into horse evokes the kind of sacred awe which is characterized by the mixture of good and evil subsumed under the word "gadarn." In having to choose between Derfel and Bran, Owen is characterized as "tragic," and now this tragic quality is connected to his role as a "figure decked and adorned for sacrifice."

When Jimmy Mummer shoots Owen with an arrow and Owen in return kills him, Rhisiart finds that the sacrificial figure is not entirely passive. He incorporates the union of violence and the sacred with had previously appeared in the hallucination of St. Derfel.

[Owen] seemed to resemble at the same time a sacrificial god and an avenging god; with every movement he made, the arrow—point which stuck out of him and the arrow—feathers which stuck out of him moved with him, giving to his appearance a ghastly element of the grotesque.¹⁴

Not only is Owen a type of avenging god who revolts against the English overlords, but he incarnates the sacrificial victim, whose essence is to combine the evil and the good as in the psychomachia of Derfel and Bran.

When Owen wants to make Tegolin a sacrifice by using her as a standard bearer in battle who will renew the violent impulses of his forces against the English, he is opposed by both his wife and Mad Huw. Once he realizes the sin he is committing, he immediately marries Tegolin to Rhisiart in the hope of making her sexually unavailable to himself. Knowing himself to be a sacrifice, he can ultimately save Tegolin from his cruel drives.

As soon as he had decided this he noticed quite calmly—as a drugged sacrificial animal might notice the scent of flowers round his neck—that he was in a hurry to get them wedded and in a hurry, too, to receive, like spears in his flesh, the looks of Catherine and the Arglwyddes.¹⁵

Powys highlights Owen as both the perpetrator and recipient of violence here through his desire for the fiercely disapproving look of his wife.

Owen remains the incarnation of violence even as he brings the beneficent out of the maleficent and deflects violence from the community. This paradox had already been illuminated earlier in the novel by the words of Morg, Broch's wife:

... "take him away and murder him [Broch], my man, my marrow, my life! You

shall have him, Owen the Accurst, Owen, the Bane of Cymru! But take this with you. As long as you destroy, you will succeed. But try to build up again what you've torn, what you've burnt, what you've ravaged, and then will be the end! New-comer you are to this land, Brython the Accurst, with your spear of iron and your sword of brass; and I tell you to-night that the wheel has turned against you. You conquered us by your force and your cunning and your talk of the good and the evil; and so shall the English conquer you!¹⁶

For this passage to make sense, we must remember that the ancient people of whom Morg is a remnant lived entirely peacefully. They existed before or outside the system of sacrificial violence, possibly in connection with the Great Mother. Morg believes that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword. Her appearance, preposterous on the realistic level, again indicates the limits and dangers of the system of ritual violence even as we are pulled in the opposite direction to accept Owen as a sacrifice.

Sixteen years after being cursed, when Owen is about to die, he destroys the pardon delivered to him by Talbot from Henry V. He succumbs to ailments of several different organs at a place sacred to the aboriginal race. It is here that he declares his own victory. Or it could be that he serves as the medium through which a godlike voice declares its victory. The voice proceeding from Owen engages those around him in a moment of fantastic hesitation.

To Father Sulien, who had laid his hand upon the shoulder of the little boy, it didn't seem to come from the Prince at all, but to Talbot it did, and to Judge Rhisiart it certainly did.

But Glyn Dyr still had his arm out-stretched. "Prince of Powys—Prince of Gwynedd—Prince of Wales—" and then in a tone that made the boy stop crying and made even Lord Talbot cross himself, "Prince of Annwn!"

A deep silence followed and Father Salein said to himself: "He was dead before he spoke. A spirit spoke through him. They're holding up a dead weight now."¹⁷

At this point Owen's personal victory in becoming Bran the Blessed is seen as a symbolic saving of Wales. By burning Henry V's seal, Owen declares Wales eternally independent in spirit. Since Powys focuses in the last chapter only on Owen and his friends, the plight of Wales after the rebellion is obscured.

Again the mythic and historical levels of the story are at odds. Owen does bring the maleficent to the beneficent because he draws into the public realm the ideals of self-representation and nationalism. He deflects the violence in the community away from the persecution of the Lollards, the burning of supporters of Richard II, and the raping of women. He channels the violence into a campaign with a legitimate purpose. The Welsh community is reborn as a nation with its own heritage, even if it is politically defeated.

Powys does not make it appear as if Owen can take upon himself the sins of his people and thus free them from personal guilt for their misdeeds. The character of the Droog, or "Sin-Eater" reveals that he cannot totally absolve them. This homosexual outcast parodistically

reminds us that for all the talk of fate in the novel Powys on some level still does hold individual deeds to account. The "Sin-Eater" cannot really take away the sins of the living, no less of the dead.

Hooted out of society for causing the living to sin, he now took upon himself up and down the land the sins of the dead. Reduced by the harshness of humanity to sub-humanity, he was now transformed from sub-humanity to super-humanity. From being a creature below human pity he had become a god-like being who bore human sins. From being a leper reduced by men to a condition lower than Hell, he now stood like Aaron between God and the Devil, turning the wicked into the innocent by taking upon himself their guilt.¹⁸

Like Owen, the Droog incorporates both the sub-humanity (animal and/or pariah) and super-humanity (godhood) of the scapegoat. The Droog accepts his position on the fringe of the community without question. So too does Owen, whose doubts are about individual actions not about whether he should abandon his role as leader of Welsh independence.

In the ending of the novel Powys wishes to escape from the pattern of sacrifice indicated by Girard. Intuitively, he does not want to obscure the relationship between violence and the sacred. At the same time, he wants us to accept Owen as a sacrifice. Owen is psychologically connected to the peaceful aboriginals, he mystically recalls the figure of Bran, he limits the bad forces of St. Derfel by killing the Scab, and he is not murdered by the community. The first three assertions can be made in a novel, but they are not part of history. Neither the aboriginals nor King Bran nor the Derfelites are the key players in this rebellion. Furthermore, Powys devises a death scene without historical precedent to justify Owen as a great leader. However, this scene asks us to put out of mind the economic destruction of the community, and we move away from history again. Fiction triumphs over fact—something not necessarily bad in the historical novel. Unfortunately, in this case, we are so drawn to accept Owen's view of himself as a sacrificial figure that we forget the more complex attempt to understand the relationship of violence and the sacred which had informed much of the novel.

I hope that even for readers who do not subscribe wholeheartedly to Girard's theories that they have still been useful in pointing out unresolved tensions in *Owen Glendower*. Girard's ideas have attracted many followers and detractors. For our purpose here we need not become totally immersed in the debate, for I am not offering his paradigm in terms of either a defense of Christianity nor as an all-encompassing anthropological theory of violence.¹⁹ Instead, I have tried to show how it offers a new entry point to the peculiar mix of the mythic and the historical in the novel.

The narrowing of the conclusion to a focus on Owen personally at the expense of an investigation of the aftermath of Owen's revolt is a mistake in a novel which has tried hard to explore sacrificial violence in a community. It asks us to accept Owen not just as a well-intentioned, defeated leader but as a sacred human sacrifice.

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

NOTES

1. See my article, "The Role of Fate in History: *Owen Glendower* as Epic Historical Novel," *Powys Review* 8.1–2 [Nos. 29–30] (1995): 8–13.
 2. Roland Mathias, "The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of *Owen Glendower*" *Essays on John Cowper Powys*. Ed. Belinda Humfrey. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), 240.
 3. Mathias, 20.
 4. Ian Duncan, "The Mythology of Escape: *Owen Glendower* and the Failure of Historical Romance." *Powys Notes* 8.1–2 (1992): 53–81. See p. 69.
 5. Janina Nordius, "Prince and Outlaw: Visible and Invisible Solitudes in *Owen Glendower*." *The Powys Journal* 3 (1993): 69–88.
 6. René Girard, *Violence and The Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
 7. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
 8. John Cowper Powys, *Owen Glendower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 187.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 393.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 710.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 432–33.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 925–26.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 670–71.
 19. Walter Burkert, in "The Problem of Ritual Killing" in *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1987), 149–76, notes that Girard's theory like his own theory that sacrificial ritual is derived from Paleolithic hunting (164), is one that must be understood to have recourse to "an 'original scene' of necessary violence that became the foundation of human society" (162). Thus the theory cannot be taken as a legend, but rather as a "projection of relations onto an image from which the original functions as well as the later displacements should become more clearly visible" (163).
- Eugene Webb in *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1993) maintains that "Girard's conception of sacrifice is as restricted in its own way as is Heidegger's of existential authenticity" (244). For Webb, Girard reduces the idea of sacrifice too exclusively to victimization. Lucien Scubla in "The Christianity of René Girard and the Nature of Religion," in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1988): 160–78, argues that Girard makes a major error in extending his theories to claim that "... of all religions Christianity is ... the only one to reveal the violent foundations of every human society and most, importantly, the only one to point to a remedy" (160).
- Burton L. Mack in "The Innocent Transgressor: Jesus in Early Christian Myth and History," *Semeia* 33 (1985): 137–65, criticizes Girard, claiming that in his apology for Christianity, Girard fails to account for the difference between the "time of Jesus and the time of the Gospels" (156).

Romance and Realism in John Cowper Powys's *Owen Glendower*

by Robin Wood

If *Owen Glendower* is both romantic and "escapist", in its concern with late medieval Wales, it is realistic and modern--Nietzschean, Dostoyevskian--in its concerns with the psychology of sex and violence. First appearing in print early in 1941, it is, amongst other things, a war novel¹. While Powys believes, that "all the great story-tellers of our race [From Homer to Hardy] are "Escapists" (Pleasures 621), his novels deal with major human dilemmas, and with real contemporary issues: the word "escapist" is juxtaposed with the names of major writers. Powys writes romances, because he believes that the more realistic-minded tradition of the novel fails to adequately present the whole of human experience; too closely reveres science, society and materialism, at the expense of the imagination, individuality, and the spiritual.

The novel begins with the law-student Rhisiart's journey, from Oxford University to Wales, in support of Owen Glendower's impending rebellion against England, at the end of the fourteenth century. Like his precursors, in novels written since Cervantes' classic of the early seventeenth century, Powys's young protagonist's mind is colored, as was Don Quixote's, by books of knightly romance: Don Quixote might well have recognized in the gaunt piebald horse that carried young Rhisiart "... a true cousin of Rosinante's" (Owen 3).

Foremost amongst these books, through the influence of his Welsh nurse Modry, had been the early-medieval Welsh Romance, *The Mabinogion*. Rhisiart also resembles Peredur, the idealistic quester from *The Mabinogion*, who similarly to Rhisiart grew up in a world dominated by women, and who also presents a ridiculous appearance, when he sets out on his quest, in his case, on his "bony piebald horse" (the words used to describe Peredur's horse in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation, 178). Powys, however, is not writing satire, but romance, and indeed his own head is full of *The Mabinogion*. Powys boldly states, in his Autobiography, that *The Mabinogion* contained "a nearer approach to the secret of Nature than anything you could learn by vivisectioning dogs" (287). An assertion that should be seen in the context, firstly of Powys's hatred of vivisection, and then secondly his firm belief that myth and the imagination are of more importance than science and reason. Several of Powys's novels are directly described as romances, and he refers, in a letter to Iorwerth C. Peate, to "my romance about Owain Glendower" (Peate 4).

While working on *Owen Glendower* early in 1938, Powys was also writing an essay on Cervantes for *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938). In this essay he argues, that "Don Quixote is free from satire" (490), and notes how Cervantes carefully "discriminates between ...

Books of Chivalry," some of which he "condemns," while others "he warmly and eloquently praises" (489). Powys also states, that Cervantes makes it plain, that he is both "an imaginative, romantic and passionate reader as well as ... writer" (489). Again writing on Cervantes' classic Powys comments:

What I feel when I close Don Quixote is, that we are all the imaginary characters of some great Cervantes of the Cosmos, and that nothing in the external world ... is as real as the passion, or mania, or the illusion, that we each of us carry in our own head! (Pleasures 502-3).

Powys in his romances is, as he says in the unpublished "Preface" to *Porius*, both "romantic ... and ... realistic-minded" (Powys Newsletter 4:8). He is romantic in his emphasis on the worth of an individual's inner imaginative life, his deepest personal values, his life-illusion, but he is psychologically realistic, and modern, in his exploration of the real emotions, that underlie apparently noble, idealistic, or heroic actions. In an essay on Nietzsche in *The Pleasures of Literature* Powys comments:

we should apply to the spiritual drama of our own life the searching psychology Nietzsche applied to his, and let the arctic wind of his relentless purification blow free upon us (555).

While *Owen Glendower* invites comparison with the novels of Sir Walter Scott--and Powys calls Rhisiart, in his 1937 diary, "My young Edward Waverley" (June 4)--Powys regarded Dostoyevsky as the greatest novelist:

[Dostoyevsky] does not content himself with revealing ... any one coherent vision of life, but several contradictory visions, and for this reason approaches more closely than any other novelist to that 'real reality' for which ... Nature herself finds utterance" (Powys, Dostoyevsky 8).

Soon after entering Wales Rhisiart has a chance of exhibiting his knightly valour, when he rides forward in face of the soldiers "fifty arrow-shafts," to rescue Tegolin and Brother Huw from being burnt as heretics. This is the beginning of Rhisiart's attempt to restore his family's honor, lost by the traitorous behaviour of an ancestor. In Rhisiart's imagination Tegolin becomes his "Princess Myfanwy" of Dinas Bran (36), and his deepest "life-illusion" takes as its ultimate symbol the ancient ancestral fortress of Dinas Bran:

A fearful turmoil now began in young Rhisiart's heart. He felt that if he didn't ride forward ... he would be burnt too ... by a remorse worse than his ancestor's in Dinas Bran (42).

There is, however, nothing noble about Rhisiart's feelings when he sees the archers arrows pointing at Tegolin's bare shoulder:

What did he want? That was the questions. He wanted to protect the owner of that bare shoulder; and yet he want to see that shoulder pierced (35).

Tegolin is the first woman in Rhisiart's life, apart from his mother and nurse Modry, and an ex-harlot in Oxford ... whose outrageous tales of her first experience of men's desire [Rhisiart remembered] with a certain glow of unholy pleasure (23).

Just prior to this we learnt, that Rhisiart "could hardly be called a normal youth in his relations with women," rarely feeling even a "flicker of natural lasciviousness" (23).

Rhisiart is awakened to a new knowledge of himself, and life, by his sado-masochistic feelings, as well as the way "a place of execution could act like a magnet upon human nerves" (41). The conflicting nature of Rhisiart's feelings towards Tegolin--on one hand his desire to be cruel, and on the other to be tender--reflect a disharmony within him. While this could be innate in Rhisiart's character, there does seem to be a relationship between it and his upbringing; that his desire to inflict pain relates to his lack of a father, and the way he has been treated by his mother, and relatives. Early in the novel the following images cross Rhisiart's mind:

Of himself exercising arbitrary power . . . [and] revenging himself upon multitudes . . . for every rebuff he had suffered from his Hereford relations, who regarded him as a fool ... [and] even upon his mother (14).

Rhisiart's ambivalent feelings of cruelty and tenderness reflect, on one hand natural sexual desire, and on the other, the aberration of sadism. The disharmony in Rhisiart's sexuality is reflected in the fact, that while he has tender feelings towards Tegolin, he is also sexually aroused by the thought of an arrow piercing her skin and causing pain.

When Rhisiart rides forward, so that the arrows are now pointing toward him, he experiences another entirely new experience:

And though the feeling it gave him had nothing of that dark trembling he had felt when he thought of the arrow in the girl's shoulder, it did bring with it a wild and desperate exultation (44-5).

This marks a further stage in Rhisiart's path of self-discovery, for it takes place in an automatic, trance-like state:

And then 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 (45).

Rhisiart has difficulty understanding this experience, and in his attempt to explain it to Tegolin, he talks of panic, and automatic action--because he and his horse had so often played in the past "their familiar game", of riding forward against an imaginary enemy. Tegolin readily understands this experience:

'I'm just like you,' she whispered. 'I'm always begging the Friar not to come to these places and not to cry his message where there's such terrible danger; but when we do come I seem to turn against all I've said and something in me pushes me on, and I push him on, and so it happens.'

And she continues her explanation:

'When these moments come,' she said, speaking slowly and very emphatically, 'I don't think it's ever we who're brave. I think it's something inside us' (54).

Tegolin's understanding forges a deep bond between them.

A further dimension is added, by the allusion from the world of romance--from *The Mabinogion*--in the quotation, "like a clap of thunder and a fall of mist" (45). Lady Charlotte Guest's translation reads: "behold, a peal of thunder, and ... lo, there came a fall of mist" (50). The significance of this lies not in any direct parallel with events in "Manawyddan the Son of Llyr," but in the association of Rhisiart with Pryderi's experience of enchantment. Rhisiart has undergone the equivalent of Owen Glendower's strange fits or shamanistic trances, and has experienced "another dimension"; that is Annwn, the Welsh Otherworld.² Rhisiart is acted upon here, just as Glendower feels he is, by a powerful force, "something" which was in him and yet outside him" (54), a necessary step in his path to maturity. Yet he is enchanted, like Pryderi and Glendower. While Powys's use of Annwn belongs with the supernatural trappings of romance, he is exploring real, not fictive, states of altered-consciousness, for which he found the psychological terminology of the twentieth century inadequate.

These references to other dimensions, and mythology, should not, however, obscure the fact, that Rhisiart is as foolish, and out-of-date, as Don Quixote riding against the windmills, and that the odds against him are overwhelming. When Rhisiart rides forward, with his old-fashioned crusader's sword drawn, he is literally out of touch with normal reality--in a trance. But in a further sense he is out of touch with reality, that is trapped in a world of romantic illusion, enchanted like Pryderi. Yet this is a positive experience, because in following his "life-illusion" Rhisiart has been true to his deepest Self³, and whatever may have been the ambiguity of the emotions, that led him into this action, he has gone through the experience of coming very close to death, and found himself in the hands of a strange power, "which was in him and yet outside him." He has learnt much, because in his attempt to explain his actions to Tegolin, he talks of the part "in which panic . . . played the part of courage," and of his sword drawing itself, in his "weakness and cowardice" (54).

The most important result of Rhisiart's "heroic deed", however, is to initiate a friendship between him and Tegolin. This develops further when he gives her as a token a wild flower--the meadow orchis. But most significant are the events which lead up to Tegolin kissing Rhisiart's sword. Rhisiart is initially in doubt about letting Tegolin touch "his precious sword," because to let her do so at this turning-point of his life would be to commit himself to her in a way far beyond the flower in her braid or his hand against her bosom! (56).

Rhisiart is at a crossroad in his life that touches the deepest levels of his being, involving both "his secret mania for Dinas Bran," as well as, "the most dangerous thing in him," and "it was as if the imaginary arrow had been in him instead of in her, so much did it cost him" (57). Tegolin does not, however, just touch the steel blade with her fingers, but "she

bowed her head over it and pressed it upon her open lips." By allowing Tegolin to do this Rhisiart has deeply committed himself, as the sword symbolizes the knightly quest of his Dinas Bran 'life-illusion'--when she kisses his sword Tegolin becomes, in chivalric terms, his Lady.

Though it is possible to discuss Rhisiart's sword in terms of knightly deeds, and his masculine Will and Self, it must be remembered that it is equally an instrument of violence and pain, and so linked with "the most dangerous thing in him"--his sadism. Tegolin is important in helping Rhisiart come to terms with this and gain in maturity. That she should be such a positive influence is to be expected, for she is a follower of Bran the Blessed, who is associated with the pacific Welsh aboriginal wisdom in Powys's mythology.⁴ The painfulness of Rhisiart's decision is seen in the way he imagines the arrow, that he had earlier imagined piercing Tegolin, entering his own skin. The love and tenderness, that Tegolin brings, symbolized by the loving and gentle act of kissing the sword, acts as a force against Rhisiart's cruel streak.

Subsequently the young couple sealed their relationship further by sleeping together, though "A maid she lay down, and a maid she rose up" (70). The chastity of this night together is in keeping both, with Powys's own reverence for chastity (*Autobiography* 520-1), and the knightly romance of Rhisiart's "life-illusion." It is also in keeping with the character of Pwyll, in *The Mabinogion*, with whom Tegolin early in the novel associated Rhisiart (53). Powys suggests in his book *Dostoyevsky*, that in *The Mabinogion* the whole Western tradition of romantic, or chivalrous love has its roots:

In 'the Four Branches of the Mabinogi,' stories evidently drawn from a life-stream far earlier than the Arthurian Chivalry, we touch that curious passion for sex-purity and virginity. . . . Pwyll Pen Annwn, for instance, who spent all the nights of an entire year sleeping by the side of the beautiful Queen of the Underworld in the form of her husband, had sufficient self-control never once to touch her. Here perhaps is the fountain-source of that Celtic-Nordic, Parsifal-Tristan, desperate and delicate love, as much the off spring of chastity as Eros was the child of the Cyprian. (48)// He further suggests its ultimate source, as the "matriarchal system of the aboriginals of Wales."

All the same, although all these comments are perfectly relevant, the real cause of the chastity of these young lovers, is rather, perhaps, their innocence and inexperience:

The thrill of being attracted to a feminine creature was so new to him that he had no idea how to steer his emotion into the channel where it would give him the greatest pleasure. And indeed, if the truth must be told, he had even less of an idea how to steer it so as to give the object of it the corresponding pleasure! (Owen 71)

Rhisiart comes through this experience, not only with his life, but also without becoming cynical and disillusioned: "In traditional romance no one is ever disillusioned" (Beer 41)⁵. Once again Powys skillfully mingles romance and realism, and it is interesting to see how he uses allusions to mythological elements in a romance, such as *The*

Mabinogion, in a way that indicates that it is as valuable an imaginative source for him, as his immature protagonist. Indeed it is Rhisiart's immaturity, both as a man and reader, rather than *The Mabinogion* or romance, which is the subject of Powys's gentle humour. Like other Powysian protagonists, such as Wolf Solent, Rhisiart has to test his deepest personal values, his "life-illusion," against the so-called real world.

Rhisiart has other even more disturbing encounters, as he continues on his spiritual journey. The most important of these involves the novel's central character Owen Glendower, but his sadistic nerve is greatly disturbed, and his integrity threatened, by Tegolin's mother Lowri. Before these crises, however, Rhisiart's his encounters with Father Pascentius helps to provide him with imaginative insight, that make him better able to deal with both Glendower and Lowri.

The most striking aspect of Father Pascentius is his eyes, which are described as "life-devouring". Powys also says, that "in Pascentius's case, his sight seemed to feel and smell and hear!" (466). The knowledge that Rhisiart gains, from Father Pascentius, has to do with the way the theologian looks at things with his "singular luminaries." Father Pascentius obtains, for example, deep satisfaction from contemplating Tegolin's "wisp of blood-red hair," and somehow communicates this experience to Rhisiart, so that "by degrees this look . . . became [Rhisiart's] own look!" Rhisiart relates this experience to the earlier one of the arrow:

There was nothing that it communicated comparable to the dark emotion he had felt when he thought of the arrow in the girl's shoulder; but it was an exultation of the senses (91).

There is plainly a sensual or erotic element present, for "his cheeks grow hot," and he discovers new unsuspected kinds of feelings towards Tegolin:

It struck him as amazing that he could feel like that under the influence of another person, especially when his own feelings when she lay in his arms had been so very different (91).

Yet it is not lust but rather "free desire," and he does not feel any remorse in connection with this experience, as he had with the image of the arrow, and words like "free," "freedom," and "liberating" dominate Powys's description of the effect of this experience on Rhisiart. Father Pascentius's "Phorkyad"⁶ eyes "not only [give Rhisiart] the courage to be himself, but reveal[ed] to him a self that it would certainly need some courage to be!" (91-2). This is reminiscent of the "premeditated ecstasy," described in Powys's work of popular philosophy *A Philosophy of Solitude*, which is "an erotic embrace of the not-self by the self." The premeditated ecstasy "embraces the not-self by touch, by taste, by smell, by sight, by hearing" (88,99). Here is another of Powys's psychological techniques--like the exteriorizing of the soul--a psychic device for coming to terms with life, and finding happiness, that he shares with Owen Glendower. Both techniques are forms of meditation, in which the self

seems to escape its ego-dominated prison, and enter into a relationship with the non-self.

There is, however, some difference between the experience of Father Pascentius and that described in *A Philosophy of Solitude*, for the good Father is "an inebriate of the madness of life," and thus does not confine his experience to the inanimate. Father Pascentius's attitude to the evil aspects of life, its "madness," is rather surprising. He listens, with "lascivious interest," to "a tale of blood and rapine," and Rhisiart fancies he sees Father Pascentius's eyes, on another occasion, "roving wantonly . . . towards the serving-wench and the mead-cups" (143, 167). These Phorkyad eyes look at the world like a god, who as the Creator naturally accepts, indeed enjoys everything, even life's "madness." Rhisiart recognizes this:

It was, Rhisiart impiously decided, just as if God had burning black eyes that enjoyed every thing as it was on the easy ground of its being all "relative" (188).

But Father Pascentius's detachment is not complete, as like Rhisiart he is troubled by Gilles de Pirogue's vivisectionist experiments (623-6).

This young quester, Rhisiart, does not fight the dragons of romance, but inner demons, and his greatest peril comes from his obsessive lust for Tegolin's sadistic mother Lowri. She plans to allow Rhisiart to make love to her, in front of her husband Simon the Hog, and then murder him. What saves Rhisiart from death is the sadistic voyeurism of Sibli, who watches Lowri and the bound Simon through a window. Rhisiart joins Sibli, and overhears Lowri plan. Watching the perverse, sado-masochistic relationship of Lowri and Simon has a very powerful effect on Rhisiart, as in his voyeurism he identifies with the sadistic nerve of Lowri:

Each convulsive shudder of that beautiful form . . . was like a spasm of his own; and the tension between her and that unsightly torso was like the tension between the most reckless, the most desperate, the most instinctive desire in him and something, some Person, some indescribably Reciprocity that had been escaping him every since he set out on his quest (335).

The vicarious enjoyment of the forbidden pleasure in fact vitiates its temptation once and for all.⁷ A strange series of ideas seemingly rise from Rhisiart's unconscious and pass through his mind, as a result of this voyeuristic experience. This whole experience is related to the first strange fit that Rhisiart suffered, when he rode forward to rescue Tegolin and brother Huw, for he sees his strange images "through a mist," "like the mist between the spears and the arrows." The irrationality of the images suggests the world of dreams, and undoubtedly deep levels of Rhisiart's being are being touched. These images belong to a non-rational state that cannot be completely explained. What has taken place is not an hallucination, but a descent into Annwn, the Other World. The imaginative, vicarious experience of the sexual perversion of Lowri and

Simon stirs the deepest energies in Rhisiart, yet he integrates the good and the evil within himself, through the image of Owen Glendower, who he sees as a sacrificial, Christ-like figure. The idea of sacrifice and humiliation connects the apparently irrational pattern of images, that Rhisiart experiences: Rhisiart's limbs, Efa's virginity, the ploughboy, Owen Glendower, Christ. G. Wilson Knight gives a clue to the source of the spiritual power, that Rhisiart gains from his experience, by pointing to "the Church's emphasis on the Crucifix," as "a supreme example . . . of psychological insight," for

The devotee is invited to entwine his own instincts, either sadistically or masochistically or both, with the supreme exhibitionism of this figure in naked torment; identifying himself with the cruelty, the suffering, and the shame; and also in some strange way, the glory. The result has been, for centuries, an influx of spiritual power (185).

The climax in the growth of the relationship between Rhisiart and Glendower comes when Rhisiart sucks the blood from Glendower's wound. Significantly Glendower warns him to spit out the blood, for "A man's blood's a man's soul" (388). When he sucks Glendower's blood Rhisiart symbolically melts, and merges with his hero and his god. There are parallels between Rhisiart's experience and the symbolism of the Christian mass.

Rhisiart's experience of life develops further, when he has his first experience of war; of seeing friends die, and of killing someone himself for the first time. Then, after the battle at Pilleth, he watches with both fascination and disgust as Lowri and the women of Pilleth mutilate the bodies of the dead English soldiers. Rhisiart's experience of this horror deepens his understanding of life, as he realizes that the men are being sexually mutilated in reprisal for their creation of war.

Although Glendower assumed a god-like form for Rhisiart, in his strange visionary experience, their relationship in real life is frequently more like that of father and son, and there are three important occasions, when Rhisiart comes in conflict with him. The Rhisiart rebels firstly against Glendower's decision that Catherine shall marry Mortimer. This does not, however, become a serious matter, because, despite the tenderness of Rhisiart's feelings for Catharine, their relationship does not touch the deepest level of his nature. It is an idyllic friendship and not linked to his "life-illusion," with its ambiguous bond with his sadistic nerve. Rhisiart realizes that opposition to Owen would be an act of deadly treachery, because "The liberation of Wales depended" (592) on the marriage of Catharine and Mortimer--who is a possible claimant to the English throne.

Rhisiart's part in stopping the vivisectionist experiments of Gilles de Pirogue does, though, bring him in direct conflict with Glendower: "'You took Catharine from me,' Rhisiart's brain was answering, 'but my honor you shall never take!'" (668). The third and most serious conflict between Rhisiart and Glendower, however, arises when Glendower decides to put Tegolin into armor, and take her into battle with him (685). Rhisiart, because of the affinity between his

sadistic nature, and that of Owen, recognizes the "damnable and lecherous wickedness," which underlies Glendower's plan, though at the same time he recognizes that,

Owen with the Maid at his side would . . . raise such a tide of mystical loyalty that it might easily sweep these Grendors and Talbots and Codnors and Charltons out of the country once and for all! (699).

Still Rhisiart feels that he cannot let Glendower have his way this time. He had endured the loss of "his love," Catharine, "But Tegolin was more than his love. 'She's part of me,' he thought. (699) Therefore, Rhisiart is prepared to put himself, his own life, which was Tegolin's, his own honor,

which was Tegolin's, between his Prince, and his one grand chance of saving Wales (699).

The point here is, that Owen's plan will not save Wales, if by Wales is meant the land of the "old people," the Aboriginal Welsh, and their pacific beliefs. Indeed his rebellion can only bring death and destruction, and a loss of the old ways. Powys's story is one in which Owen Glendower finally accepts that his rebellion is fueled more by egotism, and the sexual perversion of sadism, than his desire to give the Welsh greater freedom.⁸ In opposing Glendower Rhisiart is true to himself, for he thinks that, Tegolin, "[is] part of me." The strength of this Self is shown by the fact that Rhisiart is able to make his stand in opposition to Glendower. Of course, though Rhisiart is unaware of this fact, Glendower, in allowing his sadistic nerve to dominate his personality, is being completely false to his true destiny, to his Self. For all the inner strength, that Rhisiart has acquired at this point in his life, the conflict with Glendower provides a major crisis in his life: "never had Rhisiart reached such a level of humiliation" (705). This low point in Rhisiart's life is, however, suddenly and almost miraculously reversed. Firstly Glendower modifies his plans, and decides that Tegolin shall marry Rhisiart, and then, when Gam makes a sudden murderous attack on Glendower, it is Rhisiart who saves his lord's life. Thus,

The two irreconcilable longings that had consumed the young man for the last five years were assuaged at last. He was master of his own true-love and he had saved his Prince (717).

Although Glendower feels that his decision about the marriage is entirely the result of his own free-will, Rhisiart's opposition surely was an important factor in causing Owen to change his mind, because, given the close affinity that exists between the basic psychological nature of these two men, Glendower cannot ignore what Rhisiart's opposition means. Rhisiart, the novel's Peredur, prevents Glendower, the Fisher King of Powys's Grail Romance, from irrevocably taking a Waste Land path of war and violence. In Powys's version of the Waste Land myth, the maimed sexuality of Glendower, that leads to "blackened towns and ruined villages . . . the waste-lands of ashes and blood," is his sadism (644). Certainly

Glendower has not yet given up his rebellion, but the decision he makes here surely prepares the way for his later, much more significant decision at Worcester, that effectively ends his rebellion.

Following his marriage Rhisiart assumes a minor role in the novel's action, although important events take place in his life as he, Brut, Tegolin, and Brother Huw become prisoners of the English. Both Brut and Rhisiart face probably death, Rhisiart as a traitor on the gallows, and Brut as a heretic by fire. Tegolin's agreement to live with Master Shore, however, saves Rhisiart's life, while Brut is saved the horror of a heretic's burning when Rhisiart poisons his friend's drink.

When Tegolin comes to Rhisiart in the prison with the phial of poison she puts him to a "crucial test . . . namely, whether he considered his life more important than her honor" (836). The phial of course is meant for Brut as Tegolin has already slept with Master Shore. Tegolin, however, clearly expects her Norman gentleman indignantly to refuse her offer, for

it was unthinkable to Tegolin that [Rhisiart] . . . would be able to fish up from the shifting sands of moral casuistry a sufficient reason for the sacrifice of honor to life (836-7).

Once Rhisiart had refused, Tegolin could then have explained, that she had already done what was needed to gain his reprieve. All the same, the presence of the poison phial does provide Rhisiart with the possibility of making the heroic gesture suitable to romance. The young knight's failure can be explained by the fact, that on the one hand Rhisiart cannot really imagine Tegolin giving herself to Master Shore, while on the other hand, he vividly remembers, from his Hereford childhood, men being hung, drawn and quartered. Then surely a decisive factor is, that from the first time they met [Rhisiart] had been conscious of something in Tegolin that was stronger than himself. (837)

Furthermore, it is significant that when Rhisiart acts most courageously, for example riding forward against the arrows, fighting for Owen against the English, and standing opposed to Glendower's plans for Tegolin, the dark evil sadistic nerve of his nature is involved, as it is not in the matter of Tegolin and Master Shore.

Rhisiart may 'fail' Tegolin, but he does, however, find the courage to poison Brut's drink, and save his friend from the flames of the religious sadists.

Powys's unromantic treatment of his young protagonist continues, for the young 'knight', who set out to fight with Glendower against the English for the Welsh cause, ends up as an English judge. This does not, however, indicate a failure by Rhisiart, any more than does Glendower's equally unromantic retreat from battle to live like a hermit, because this novel's central concern is not nationalism, but Welsh aboriginal wisdom, which is essentially pacific and introverted, not a political movement, but a state of mind, a wisdom that Powys found in his favorite romance, *The Mabinogion*.

In discovering the Welsh aboriginal wisdom, Rhisiart has found his own deepest and most essential nature, his true *Self*, soul, or identity. The novel's other major character, Owen Glendower, also undergoes a

very similar spiritual journey, involving both sadism and aboriginal Welsh wisdom. It is in the pursuit of Justice for all *Britons*, rather than in the needless killing of *Englishmen*, that Rhisiart has found the goal of his quest, for he has learnt "with Welsh knowledge that the things which are seen are un-essential compared with the things that are unseen" (934).⁹

Hence Judge Rhisiart "gave the most patient and penetrating consideration" in his legal cases

to the pitiful prejudices which qualify and complicate a clash of opposed interests, rather than to the more obvious causes of quarrel (934).

Rhisiart's knowledge of himself is such, that he can see through the "pitiful prejudices"--those elements in human nature which act without our conscious control--which it is necessary for a man or woman to overcome, in order to discover his or her true Self, and thus act with wisdom, justice and humanity. Like Don Quixote Rhisiart followed his deepest 'life-illusions,' to complete his quest for honor.

Memorial University (Newfoundland)

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NOTES

1. According to Dante Thomas the American edition was issued on January 24, 1941, and the English on February 6, 1942 (55).

2. See my essay "Owen Glendower: Powys's Faustian Prince", in *The Powys Journal*, 1995. This essay and the present one are closely related. The essay in *The Powys Journal* deals with Owen Glendower's spiritual quest which involves his sadistic feelings, and insight into Welsh aboriginal wisdom.

3. "In modern psychology the notion of the self has replaced the earlier concept of the soul. ... According to Carl Jung the self is a totality consisting of conscious and unconscious contents." (*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition). I have capitalized to emphasize the special use.

4. Central to Powys's Welsh mythology in *Owen Glendower* is the idea that the ancestors of the Welsh were a pacific, pre-Celtic, "Iberian" civilization. See Wood 1.

5. "Now the one thing most alien from the soul and style of Cervantes ... is this same cynicism" (*Pleasures* 490).

6. The Phorkyad, daughters of Phorkys a sea god (that is an underworld god), are the Greae --the Three Grey Ones -- who had a single eye and tooth amongst the three of them. The hero Perseus has to seize the eye and the tooth, as they are being passed back and forth from one sister to the other, in order to force the Greae to give him information that will help in his task of defeating Medusa and cutting off her head. In *Owen* Lowri is described as the "Medusa like mother of Tegolin" (68). Rhisiart has to gain knowledge--in particular self-knowledge--if he is to defeat Lowri.

7. G. Wilson Knight has some important things to say on this aspect of Powys's psychology: see *Neglected Powers*, pp. 195, 220, for example.

8. This is more fully dealt with in my essay "Owen Glendower: Powys's Faustian Prince", in *The Powys Journal*, 5, 1995.

9. For Powys, both the medieval Welsh, and the English, across the border between England and Wales, are British, descendants of the pre-Celtic, pre-Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Britain.

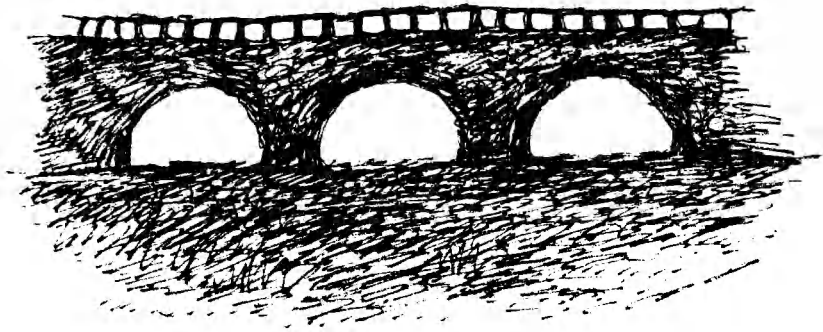
John Cowper Powys. *Elusive America* Ed. with an intro. by Paul Roberts. London: Cecil Woolf, 1994. 251pp. £ 19.95

Elusive America, the first of three volumes of "The Uncollected Writings of John Cowper Powys," offers a useful collection of short pieces that are not otherwise readily available to most readers. The thirty-one articles, the majority of which were published in the popular press during JCP's lifetime, have been grouped by the editor into five categories: "The American Scene and Character," "Theodore Dreiser," "Edgar Lee Masters," "The Arts in America," and "Farewell to America." With a few exceptions, these materials are the products of Powys's life in America from 1905-1934. Roberts provides a biographically informative introduction that also offers some general observations about America's influence on JCP.

The best of these essays give us the passionately engaged man of letters who enthralled American lecture audiences for thirty years. "The Real Longfellow" (1923) makes a forceful and persuasive attempt to rescue Longfellow's genuine poetic achievement from the morass of the poet's own sentimental spirituality. JCP helpfully recommends to readers "the deliberate skipping of all passages where the words Angels, Paradise, Life, Liberty, God, Flowers, Death, Truth, Will, Endeavour, Harp-strings, Time and *The Poet* occur" (164). Instead, he argues, readers should focus on those poems in which Longfellow's nostalgic sensuousness comes to the fore unburdened by theological pretension. Later he humorously speculates on the reasons for Longfellow's great weakness: "One can only suppose that in reaction from the tough-ribbed narrow hearts of his puritan ancestors his religious sense had 'gone soft,' like a bruised apple, or like a salt cracker removed too long from its tin box" (168).

In "Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*" (1926), JCP provides a deeply felt defense of Dreiser's artistry. I for one have always seen Dreiser's writing style as embarrassingly leaden, but Powys's conviction almost sweeps away my reservations, in the following passage:

An American Tragedy is the other side of the shield of that "plain democratic world" whereof Walt Whitman chanted his dithyrambic acceptance. And we may note that just as Whitman took ordinary human words and made them porous to his transcendent exultations, so Dreiser has invented a style of his own, for this monody over the misbegotten, which is like nothing else in literature. I think it is a critical mistake to treat this Dreiserian style as if it were a kind of unconscious blundering. If it is unconscious it certainly could find a very sophisticated defence; for who is not aware today of many recondite craftsmen who make use of the non-grammatical, the non-rational, and even of the nonsensical, to most refined aesthetic results? It is much easier to call Dreiser naïve than to sound the depths of the sly, huge, subterranean impulses that shape his unpolished runes. (95)



When JCP's enthusiasm serves his fine critical abilities, as in this essay, the result is critical advocacy of a high order. Less felicitous are those moments when Powysian sensibility whirls off into effusive giddiness, as it does most obviously in "Maurice Browne and the Little Theatre" (1915). Yet it is good to have access to this register of JCP's critical voice. Similarly, it is diverting and even instructive to encounter such a piece of cranky ephemera as "Friendship in America" (originally published in 1924 in the *San Francisco Examiner* as "American Women have Killed Genuine Friendship among Men, says British Critic") or the expansive philosophizing of "In Spite of Civilization." (JCP offers readers of *Wine and Good Living* what must have been the heretical suggestion that there are beverages at least as important to the good life as wine: "It is after drinking tea that we feel ourselves inspired to penetrate into the mysteries of the great, simple, subtle things . . . It is after drinking coffee that we feel inspired to utter in our own manner original oracles of our own" [75].)

It seems almost churlish to observe that as a whole *Elusive America* has some weaknesses. The thematic organization of the essays works only intermittently. While it is helpful to group together the essays on Dreiser and Masters, the other headings are less useful. How, for instance, do JCP's general observations on wine and the good life bear on "The American Scene and Character"? Is his critique of the notion of "the Judaic strain" in modern literature really a commentary on "The Arts in America"? If the goal of the book was to provide examples of Powys's American journalism, why include a 1957 letter to the editor of the *Observer*? Nevertheless, one cannot help sympathizing with the editor's need to impose some order on intrinsically heterogeneous materials.

The editorial apparatus at the back of the book focuses on indicating each essay's place of publication. In many cases additional information would have been useful. For instance, "A Protest" is evidently a manifesto drawn up to challenge "The attempted suppression of Mr Dreiser's book *The Genius*" (86). It would be valuable to know something of the critical and legal reception of this novel, even if nothing can be said of the particular occasion of this document. (Incidentally, it is awkward that dates for this piece and the other previously unpublished materials are provided without explanation in the table of contents and nowhere else.) In the case of "Edgar Lee Masters: An Appreciation," the notes misidentify the location of the manuscript, which is not in the possession of Colgate University Library.

Most readers will find that these problems do not preclude appreciation of the volume. *Elusive America* will be of significant interest to those who already have an interest in the work of John Cowper Powys.

Constance Harsh
Colgate University

THE MYSTIC LEEWAY, by Frances Gregg

Edited by Ben Jones. With an Account of Frances Gregg by Oliver Marlow Wilkinson. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995

Some time in 1938, Frances Gregg, "challenged" by John Cowper Powys in a letter to write a book, ("I am so scared you'll go & forget some of these things & scenes & incidents & gestures & backgrounds...") answers with some trepidation: "I think I shall get a huge map and draw a line from here to here and there. It will be a mystic pattern of my wandering soul. Are they wandering stars? Or do they abide a course that is rational and apparent?" (*Letters*, II, 134)

The book which was finally retrieved among the ruins of bombed Plymouth (where Frances Gregg lost her life with her daughter Betty and her aged mother Julia, in 1941) with its enigmatic title deserves all our attention. It has at last reached us, thanks to the combined care of Oliver Wilkinson and Professor Ben Jones. The book has an elegant and unusual format, ensconced between the Editor's preface and introduction, Oliver Wilkinson's memories and Endnotes, with many photos of Frances, her children, her mother, Hilda Doolittle, Ezra Pound, John Cowper and Llewelyn Powys and others. And it might well come as a shock to readers of Autobiography, who would remember, recounted by John Cowper Powys, the Venetian episode with the lithe, ambiguous boy-girl who, at the suggestion of her demented lover - already married - , had accepted the bonds of marriage with Louis Wilkinson, his best friend, and was nevertheless bringing John Cowper and Llewelyn to near folly. That had taken place in 1912, eons of time before. Whereas this book is the spiritual testament of a woman almost thirty years later, who has lived a life of trials and hardship and is trying to take stock of herself in a kind of cleansing ritual, under the understanding eye of John Cowper, her "Side-tracker" as he terms himself.

It is a difficult and exacting book, written by a difficult and exacting woman. In spite of her importance in the life of John Cowper, I think we should try to put into parentheses their complicated relationship, concentrate on the text itself and follow Frances for her own sake in the intricate journey she undertakes through her life examined in a spiritual light. As Oliver Wilkinson, at the beginning of his moving account of his mother, explains, the title is arresting for the different meanings it implies: "Lee is the quarter from which the wind blows. It is also the shelter against the wind. A ship drifts to leeward. There is the leeway of overtaking, the leeway of work not done.(...) There is the shelter before God's storm : unsustained tranquility, temporary shelter." (17). Frances never knew anything but "temporary shelter", the whole course of her tumultuous life was that of a gypsy, as she recognises from the beginning: "I am like them. I have something in common with jews, and gypsies. I want to claim no country for my own, and to take the whole world in my stride."(55) The eleven chapters which compose this strange "quest" unfold a disorderly tale, but one in which, unmistakably, the voice of a proud, passionate and disturbing woman emerges in search of ... herself.

I had been summoned to be a Woman, unknown, unnamed forever. It seemed to me a grander destiny than that of any queen or goddess or magicked witch.(105)

She shows redoubtable strength (her life is testimony to this) and she makes choices by rejection. Away with love, art, bourgeois comfort, marriage, literature, religion! After a late start, learning through bitter experience, she abandons one after the other her illusions, her innocence. And she deliberately always chooses the arduous way. There is in her a seething mixture of luciferian pride and the humbleness of a Prince Myshkin, The Idiot. In fact the radical American Frances Gregg, seeker of ultimate values, strikes me as the female counterpart of the Russian, plebeian, cruel and compassionate Dostoevsky. Like him, she shows ability to "feel ideas" as others feel cold or heat. Like him, in the midst of her earthly adventures, as muse, lover, wife or mother, she shows an unquenchable thirst for "the Real", which for her is the life of the spirit, with as its Messenger, Christ.

He (Christ) had seemed a man to me, one who scorned any divinity except such as he found in his manhood. He had relied upon himself, accepted responsibility, foresworn God, and abandoned the Church. He, and his companions, had seen life grandly, as eternal: and themselves, humbly, as ephemeral, yet they had the courage and the honour to love others as they loved themselves. There was no pity, no patronage, no far-Godheadness in that love, the "love of the saints." (105)

As we try to follow her in the meanderings of her reasonings, we are spellbound and fascinated by the burning force of her arguments, the lava which spills forth from this terrible mystic mind who knows nothing of middle terms and compromise. She must have been a formidable person, not afraid to lash out unpleasant facts with cold fury to all concerned, not sparing herself, forever argumentative, unsatisfied, always putting the bar higher and higher. She was also ambitious, in her cosmic awareness of the evolution of man in the future and severe with what she called the "ape" in the present time, including her own self.

No, my problem was (...) only how to be the woman that had been summoned from space. Woman, or highly evolved female ape, that is the dilemma that faces a girl with her first kiss. We are before our time in saying that we "are descended from the ape." We are ape yet.(94)

She rejects the "life of the senses" which she sees as a kind of bondage. Sex, she says, should be done with while very young, so as to have time to deal with more serious matters. She also made a certain number of rules for herself, including "to meticulously fulfil all duties, all responsibilities pertaining to my relationship with my fellowmen" (117) This point of view led to many passionate discussions with her intimate friend Hilda Doolittle for whom nothing was more important than dedication to art and who was ready to sacrifice personal relationship for it. Frances counter-attacks with a terrible- and funny - definition of the artist, "one of that company of ghouls at work upon their spiritual offal" (127). In spite of

her frightful iconoclasm, the way she tears off all little niceties like a wild cat, she can show terrible humour which makes one chuckle *malgré soi*. This is what she has to say about one of her earliest friends (and for a short time suitor):

I could not believe that so gauche a creation as our Mr Pound was due an esquire upon his letters. He explained to me fully, foully, and with rude emphasis that it was his due and that I was an ignoramus.(p.142)

I also relish her description of John Cowper playing the part of Lorenzo, in tights:

Those legs were out of a nightmare of Durer's. They suggested a monstrous offspring of Don Quixote and Rosinante. Lucrezia could, and did, fold her garments round her in swathes, but I don't know what held those tights up.(p.81)

Or, about a visit Hilda and herself paid to George Moore:

I don't know what we thought genius was. I do know, however, that genius should never be seen at home.

And I am not forgetting the delicious fragment of comedy (in Chapter 2), when, with unmistakable Jamesian understatement, she transcribes, she says, "the only conversation with Hilda she remembers with almost verbatim vividness", about certain "woolen combinations"...I will let the reader discover for himself her talent for the absurd.

Although the eleven chapters are written in defiance of any chronological order, her "frantic memories" are far from a rambling rough copy. She writes with distinctive care a prose of sustained tone, professing candidly that she is ignorant and never boasting about her culture, but springing sometimes the surprise of a few antiquated or strange words: "It is a street that has wandered out of the quartier and taken to itself an English sobriety that sets quaintly upon its askewities"(158). Each chapter in turn was sent to John Cowper for eventual comment and criticism. As Oliver Wilkinson remarks, they were written in the most unpromising circumstances, after her hours of work, in utter poverty and discomfort, first in a caravan, then in a seaside bungalow, then in an "ugly shack" in Buckinghamshire, where she was tidying two acres of land to turn them into a market garden and finally in a holiday cottage in Cornwall. And always John Cowper's response was warm, appreciative, encouraging:

If I can get into your proud-humble criss-cross no-compromise Skull that this book is going to SURVIVE all our deaths I don't worry about it's being written at odd times; only I don't like you to go to bed at one and get up at 6 o'clock wh is only Five Hours Sleep (Corwen, April 19, 1939)

The reader who is ready to follow Frances in her analysis of herself will not be disappointed, for her "excursion of the soul" offers food for thought, and from these pages emerges the full stature of an implacable Deity in arms, with high aims for that poor humanity in the making, a challenging and exasperated mind groping for a moral, even

messianic world of love and compassion, to replace the dark "jungle" in which we are entombed.

Man, if he could but be persuaded to accept his destiny, is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is born on this planet. What the past holds in secret, and the future in promise, is not for him; those are the spoils of death. His destiny is to live, and he has to do it by the rules evolved from his brain, his soul, his conscience, the - for lack of a better phrase - the God-within-him - which is his sole endowment from the mystery from which he has sprung, from which his planet has sprung, from which all life comes.(63)

Behind this high-strung woman we also detect the little girl of unusual sensibility who had to find her own answers to all the enigmas of the crazy world she was witnessing. Although she is in fact rather discreet about her first years and her education, we cannot but be struck by the fact that to be descended from a long line of pioneer women in whose world men seem to have been non-existent, and to find oneself the only child of the ever-present, strong-willed and exasperating "Mater" Julia Vanness Gregg must have been quite a trial. We suspect that some nerves of that intelligent little girl were scorched and damaged early. Hence her tenderness for and understanding of little children, which surge sometimes along the pages and are like milky pools of "human kindness", in the middle of her feverish quest.

I think we may safely assert that the only man who really counted in Frances's life was her son Oliver, for whom bravely she tried to be mother and father, and to whom she certainly said:

You are now approaching manhood, a state of consciousness dragged over from the unknown by the sufferings, the passionate enterprise of millions of forebears. It is a sacred heritage and life's greatest gift. Protect it, young knight, add your own riches to what is already glorious, for well we know, we educationalists, we priests and prelates, how your young spirit aches for high and noble deeds, how your young eyes search the universe for beauty. You are ape, but you are also man. Go in peace. The ape must die in you, just as thousands of lives have already died in your making, from that protoplasm which was your first beginning, through reptile, fish, and eyeless newt, through the stage when you might equally well be cat or dog, or fox or tiger, up to the point in which you are projected upon the universe in the guise of man.(140)

I have not yet said anything of the last chapter of this disturbing work. It is so daring and strange that it alone would justify reading the book for its sake. It is the inspired peroration of a high priestess delivering her vision to the world. And what does Frances prophesy, in that terrible month of January 1941? Nothing less than the advent of a new religion, which will save the world from madness, murder and chaos. As she sees it, after having examined the failures of America, Europe and Asia, she predicts that it is bound to come from the East, and more precisely from the Jewish people itself. There is, deep in her, a puzzling conflict, an ambivalence which Ben Jones names her "philo/anti-semitism". She can bluntly declare "I do not like Jews" and in the next sentence proclaim that the Messiah to be will be Jewish and a woman. She also has this curious remark:

We Jews, and we women, know these things. We are the betrayers, but through us alone will the way of salvation be found.(173)

As always with her, the message is baffling and offers difficulties of interpretation. She proffers strong words against Paul and boldly claims that

The early Pauline Christians were Jews and remained Jews, and the present Christian Church is the living embodiment of the Jewish curse.(171)

Therefore we must now hope for the emergence of a new religion, some time in the mysterious future, which the visionary Frances counts in thousands of years, "these will be the years of Jewish-matriarchy, the years of the Christian era, when men will seek God anew".(172) Ben Jones, in his brilliant introduction, analyses her thought thus:

The history of Judaism and the history of woman are parallel - both have been betrayed by the master lover. Betrayal has been accepted, but it must be overcome. The Jew and the Woman, released from mutual bondage in history, will relieve the world of its insanity.(14)

We should not fool ourselves in thinking that John Cowper (so apt to decipher human frailties) was mistaken when he wrote to Oliver Wilkinson, at the death of Frances Gregg:

But who could really understand her. She was the greatest woman of genius I can imagine or have ever supposed was possible.

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Jacqueline Peltier
Lannion, France

T.F. Powys, *The Sixpenny Strumpet*, ed. by Ian Robinson, asst. by Elaine Mencher, with a textual history by J. Lawrence Mitchell, Denton, nr. Harleston: The Brynmill Press, 1997, 437 pp., £ 25.00, ISBN 0 907839 41 X.

This book is a pleasure to hold and to read. It is the fourth of Brynmill Press's T. F. Powys series, which began in 1990 with *Father Adam*, and it is the most carefully prepared and printed of them all. The editors have included an afterword on 'T. F. Powys's Style', a textual history, twenty pages of textual notes and thirty pages of 'Notes Explanatory and Critical'. The quality of *The Sixpenny Strumpet* would ensure success, if quality were all that counted. It is apposite to wish Brynmill the best of luck, so that their T. F. Powys series may continue.

The first three of the stories included here were published under the title *The Two Thieves* by Chatto and Windus in London in 1932 (and in New York by Viking Press in 1933), and are reprinted unchanged. The title story is published for the first time, taken from the author's manuscript. Each text derives from the early 1930s, when Powys decided to concentrate on long short stories. These tales represent the culmination of Powys's writing, from the early commentaries on the Bible, through the allegorical novels of country life, to these late works which combine both forms.

The opening story, 'In Good Earth', is a variation on the Parable of the Sower, and also on the fall from grace. John Gidden works barren land on the downs, but 'his destiny must be to sow in far richer soil' (p.4). This richer earth appears to be at Church Farm, at the village of Adams Folly, and later becomes the body of a rich farmer's daughter, whom Gidden desires with a steamy instinct reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence. It is, however, a frail, poor girl who receives 'the good seed from [Gidden's] loins', and his destiny is not fulfilled. Finally the only 'good earth' at Adams Folly is to be found in the churchyard; Gidden shoots himself in order to 'sow himself in good earth' (p.91).

Folly drove Adam out of the garden and caused him to till the ground for thorns and thistles; John Gidden, in an idiosyncratic literal reading of the Parable of the Sower, regains grace by returning to the ground. The most prominent feature of T. F. Powys's theology, that death is the greatest reward, is again given expression in this tale of passion.

'God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform', begins a William Cowper hymn, and T.F. Powys's 'God' illustrates the fact with gentle irony. The hero is a top hat, which is taken by Johnnie Crew to be God. This is Powys at his lightest, but not lightweight Powys, and the mysterious way in which the hat rescues Johnnie from penury shortly before it is burnt represents a final sentimental twist in the tale. That the sacrifice of God is the salvation of mankind is a theme Powys often combines with some bathos, but here, in 'God', it is humour which carries the day.

'The day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night', but George Douse is unprepared. This village loafer has made a pact with another thief, the Devil. Tinker Jar, one of Powys's chief incarnations of God, is the thief in the night, and when he surprises George Douse the latter takes his own life. 'The Two Thieves' is perhaps the most transparent story in this volume, but the plot is enriched by Powys's somber prose.

Ian Robinson, in his afterword, discusses T.F. Powys's style, including the frequent use of parenthesis, which interrupts the prophetic voice with relativizing asides. This is the most obvious technique in the title story, 'The Sixpenny Strumpet', to the extent that it becomes repetitive. In sentence after sentence, subject and verb, or verb and object are separated by relative clauses. 'The Sixpenny Strumpet', this edition claims, is one of T.F. Powys's great works. That it was perhaps not only the shocking nature of the story that prevented it from being published in the 1930s, but also the unfinished nature of the text, can only be a matter for conjecture. 'The Sixpenny Strumpet' reads like a draft for a novel, awaiting stylistic refinement and a further working-out of the plot. Equally, it could be seen as a new departure in Powys's work, in which the monotonous rhythm of the style corresponds to the concentration on the bare bones of a simple story.

Mary Trimble begins adult life as an innocent village girl and ends it being saved by a Jesus figure who comes on an ass to take her to heaven. In the meantime she has become the village prostitute. Her image of hope is of the cross on Easter buns, which she was once forced to eat stale by her fellow villagers. This story contains all that Powys ever wrote about the brutality of village life as human life, and as much evil as was in *Mr Tasker's Gods*. It contains a class politics, that is more direct than anywhere else in Powys's work, for the author leaves no doubt that the baseness of those who persecute Mary Trimble is attributable to greater social injustice. The unusually high number of concrete references to late nineteenth-century politics and society cause the tale to waver between naturalism and religious symbolism in an uncanny manner. T. F. Powys never gave up hope in his fiction, however unpleasant events on earth may be.

In his afterword, Ian Robinson sees Powys as a modernist, who contributed to a 'change of expression' (p.370) in English prose. Far more fruitful is Robinson's idea that 'the evolution of the Protestant psyche from prophecy into art is [...] still one of the great untreated subjects' (p.368).

This strikes at the heart of T. F. Powys's work. One reason why Powys was never a successful mainstream writer is that he so heavily relies on the English Protestant tradition. If Powys was a writer whose profession was listening to and talking to God, readers today can share in a precious dialogue about meaning which has become so very rare.

Greg Bond
Sprachenzentrum
Technische Fachhochschule Wildau

NOTES AND COMMENT

by Nicholas Birns, POWYS NOTES Editor

Future Developments

Although I had subscribed to *Powys Notes* since 1989, it was not until I had received the avalanche of back issues whose possession is evidently one of the perquisites of this position that I fully realized how good this journal has been over the past decade and a half. Denis Lane and Richard Maxwell have done such an impressive job of assembling first-rate material and inspiring a tone of camaraderie and enthusiasm about the Powyses that it will be all I could do to attempt to equal their achievement. Thus I have no desire to radically change the journal as it has been going very well in the past. But it does strike me that many of the articles (for instance in the current issue) we run are conference papers or even longer essays--perhaps, in partial tribute to the name of the journal, literal "notes", that is to say shorter, more informal interventions (as in the 1995 *Porius* issue) might well be welcome. Historically, *Powys Notes* has been the most theoretical of the journals devoted to the Powyses, and the most attentive to Powys's place in the debates surrounding deconstruction, postmodernism, and historicism. This is a tradition I would like to continue, though it could be averred that the moment of straight "Powys and postmodernism" essays has perhaps passed, and that theoretical considerations of Powys texts might do well to ensconce themselves in more local contexts, whether historical, spiritual, interpretive, or cultural. This is partially due to the inevitable familiarity of postmodernism, which has been around for a long time even if you are outside academe, much within its groves. It is also always questionable to bring a less-than-canonical author before the bar of critical theory when his or her primary academic or popular "readability" (in the most literal sense, the availability of his books, as well as the larger question of canonicity) has not yet been well established. Nonetheless, if you want to do a flamboyantly high-theoretical exegesis of, say, *Maiden Castle*, I do not mean to imply that it will not be received with open arms. (Indeed, Harald Fawcner is contributing a long theoretical reconsideration of *A Glastonbury Romance* for the Winter 1999 issue, though Fawcner's phenomenological approach is the exact reverse of ordinary postmodernism!).

Of course, I would also like to encourage submissions on members of the Powys family other than JCP--Theodore and Llewelyn, of course, and I am pleased to run Greg Bond's incisive review of *The Sixpenny Strumpet* in this issue--but also any member of the extended network that centered around the Powys brothers. I have become far more familiar with the diaries, letters, and other biographical productions of

the Powys family in the past few months, and there is so much material there that could be profitably discussed. For instance, I find Marian Powys an intriguing figure, and I am sure most of my readers have a similar figure in the extended Powys world that strangely compels their attention. I also encourage submissions on writers related to the Powyses not only by genealogy or friendship but also by their place in the canon--that assorted and sometimes motley crew that must be termed under-appreciated British Modernist writers. Such writers--one might mention Dorothy Richardson and Sylvia Townsend Warner--have of course achieved a certain amount of mainstream attention recently, but it might be that *Powys Notes* could provide a more congenial, less insistent context for such work than the alternatives. Since I mentioned back issues, we have many available, so if you are interested in acquiring them please write me! And I would appreciate any comments people might have about the journal or its future direction--suggestions are always welcome.

Letters to Glyn Hughes

Frank Warren has edited a new collection of John Cowper Powys' *Letters to Glyn Hughes* (Cecil Woolf, 1994). This volume has already been splendidly reviewed by Peter Christensen in *Powys Notes* 10.2, but it definitely bears a brief further mention in this space. Powys' letters offer readers a rare chance to know the writer more intimately; those who are put off by the sheer vastness and prodigality of Powys' major and even minor fiction. His correspondence with Glyn Hughes is especially interesting because Hughes, who died at 1972 at the age of forty after being active (and peripatetic) in many walks of life, seems fundamentally such a Powysian spirit. Even though Hughes was sixty years' Powys' junior (a stunning generation gap indeed!) the affinity they had for each other shines through Powys' letters, which are wise, compassionate, and often funny. Powys' willingness to commit so much time and emotion to his correspondence with Hughes shows what a democratic figure Powys was. Hughes was not an editor, a prominent critic, a wealthy benefactor, any sort of mover or shaker. He could do nothing "for" Powys other than offer appreciation of his work and a sense that there were readers in the world who on some level understood JCP, and, for JCP, that was evidently all he needed. Powys seems to have realized that his audience was, in the end, individuals who brought their own personal meanings to bear on his works. In these letters, JCP displays his exemplary selflessness--yet paradoxically he is full of self. There are many revealing vignettes of his life as an elderly man in Blaenau Ffestiniog as well as cultural references ranging from Dostoyevsky to Huysmans to Charlie Chaplin. Despite his age, JCP keeps his feet firmly on the ground in these letters, thus providing a good corrective of any overemphasis of the surreal mood of the late Fantasies.

Warren, who has compiled this collection with affection and diligence, presents the reader with an extra gift before the *Letters* themselves begin: a three-stanza poem, "John Cowper Powys at Blaenau" of his own composition which sums up so much of Powys' life.

An old man sits by the window
Watching the lights appear
As evening falls he is writing
To friends of yesteryear...

Writing, forever writing, to Louis,
to Kenneth, to Glyn
Remembering the days at Sherborne,
Weymouth, and St. Paul Minn.

Lying back he watches the Moelwyns
Fade into the dark
Memories, forever memories, of Corwen,
Brooklyn, and Central Park....

The skein that comprised Powys' experience has never been more splendidly or economically captured.

Powys, the Celtic, and Political Criticism

Joe Boulter's article "Subversions of the Celtic", which appeared in the previous issue of this journal, may yet prove to be one of the most important recent essays in Powys studies, and not just because of Boulter's deft sketching of the ethnic multiplicity of *Powys*. The concept of the "Celtic" so long pushed to the margins, is now very trendy in American literary-critical circles, especially on the Left. A glance at any current academic journal will reveal in almost every case an article claiming previously neglected Celtic qualities in some great canonical work, or making a claim that the phenomenon of the Celtic lies at the base of a major cultural movement, be it Modernism, Romanticism, or so on. In Cannon Schmitt's *Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), it is stated that "the way for the Welsh, Irish, and Scots to become British, was in effect, to become more English" and that this process of involuntary Anglicization was a crucial ingredient for the emergence of the Gothic as a literary form. Schmitt bases his argument on the work of Linda Colley, and, implicitly, Benedict Anderson, two names have been among the most popular citation sources for American literary-academic work in the 1990's. In a recent issue of *American Literary Realism*, Hugh Dawson argues that Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* has a background and character laden with the "distinguishing marks of Irish-Americans". This new prominence of the Celtic is not hard to explain. Celts, as victims of English imperialism, are colonized subjects, and are symptomatic of the positive valence accorded in today's academic environment to any group that can claim a formerly subordinated status. Similarly, their victimization inflects not only literary works that are explicitly Celtic but those which aspire to a kind of metropolitan, philosophic universalism.

It might be argued that the category of "Irishness" has always been used in this way, particularly in the positioning of Joyce and Yeats within academic Modernist studies in the US going back to the 1950's. Perhaps the difference is that now Scotland and Wales are accorded equal status with Ireland as pillars of the valorized Celtic. This is not unconnected with the political growth of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and has reached virtually the speed of light since the successful devolution votes in Scotland and Wales of September 1997.

This Gallo-Scottish resurgence is pertinent to the status of victimization in contemporary discourse. Neoconservatives and other right-wing types both in the US and Great Britain like to accuse the Left of having a cult of the victim, but really this is hardly true: the only victims of interest to the contemporary Left are those whose very victimization can, in a Hegelian way, mobilize them as potential instruments of revolution. Thus it is not the victimization of the Welsh and Scots--no more or less prevalent today than a generation or for that matter a century ago--that accounts for their trendiness, but their potential power. The proof of this is that the last time devolution referendums in Wales and Scotland were held, in 1979, both actually getting a majority of votes but failing to generate the necessary two-thirds), the American literary left was nowhere to be found in support of Scottish or Welsh nationalism, indeed being conspicuously silent. It might be argued that in 1979 what we call cultural studies, with its exuberant mixture of the literary and the socio-political, had not yet come into being as a discursive mode, and thus disabled the literary Left from showing in print where its political sympathies lay. But surely this did not prevent the clear impression that the American literary left was fervently in solidarity with a whole host of Third World national liberation movements. "*A Luta Continua*" in Mozambique, or so it was hoped, but there were few cries then of the imperial ruthlessness attendant on the remote English victories at Catraeth, Flodden, and Culloden.

And yet, even now, is the 1990's invocation of the Celtic wholly serious? Is it not just another way of twitting "the English" ("the English" coming to stand not just for the English, but for mainstream, bourgeois sentiment everywhere). When the Celtic ceases to be trendy a few years from now, will not another potentially powerful victim group be found, with the promise to make intellectuals feel that they are subversive of the surrounding society, somehow better than the rest of mankind in their beauty-seeking celebration of the marginal?

So we are really left with the Arnoldian view of the Celtic as representing a stratum of poetry just a tad more rarefied, if a bit less solid, than our own workaday Anglo-American selves (whatever our literal ethnicity). Gallo-Scottish marginality turns out to be another version of the sentimentality Boulter uncovers under the mantle of *hiraeth*, and the sudden empathy on the part of the cognoscenti for Celtic subordination turns out to be another opportunistic gambit that does little to help actual people in the lands in question. *Plus ça change. Hélas.*

And where is John Cowper Powys in all this, you might ask? Surprisingly, not as central as one might think. Obviously, Powys wrote two huge novels not just about Wales but in large part concerning Welsh nationalism. Yet aside from Boulter's piece, and a related essay written by Boulter for the *Powys Journal*, I have seen little work connecting Powys to these sorts of issues. (If there is any, readers are kindly asked to bring it to my attention!). One can see why Powys would not be a poster boy for the left on these matters, because, as has been noted many times (most recently by Denis Lane in *Powys Notes* 11.1) Powys, despite his surname, had little actual Welsh ancestry, and his basic regional orientation was with the West Country, not far different from that of Thomas Hardy, seldom claimed as a subversive Celt. As Barry Cronin opines in the April 1998 *Powys Society Newsletter*, Powys is "an English novelist who, amongst his many books, wrote two significant Welsh-based historical novels". Powys moved to Wales in old age, and made a deeply emotional and heartfelt attempt to realize the residual Welshness he felt inside him, not only by writing his two great Welsh novels but by attempting to learn Welsh from reading the Welsh Bible (getting as far, as revealed in the *Letters to Glyn Hughes*, as Isaiah 47)--a task he attended to diligently despite his impaired sight. Yet one does not hear much of Powys in recent academic exaltations of the Celtic. Part of this is that Powys is part of that (to ethnic purists) suspicious "Anglo-Welsh" category of writer, represented today by figures such as Jeremy Hooker and Gillian Clarke, who write geographically in Wales but linguistically in English for a largely Anglophone audience. Powys certainly could not be used in a Plaid Cymru party platform. However much books like Herbert Williams' recent monograph try to cast Powys as a Welsh writer, Powys is rarely claimed for Welsh nationalism the way the superb poet R.S. Thomas has been. Not that American academics write about R.S. Thomas, much less writers who primarily write in *Welsh*, but only about how Celtic Wordsworth and Huck Finn are.

One also feels, as Boulter implies, that Powys's Welsh writings point too incisively at the basic heterogeneity of the Celtic, that the demographic, linguistic, and religious boundaries between and among English, Scots, and Welsh people are too complicated to be simplistically exploited by the melodramatic rhetoric of the contemporary Left. A prime example here is the strong evangelical Protestantism of many Welsh, frequently noted by Powys in his letters from Wales, paralleled by the Presbyterianism of many Scots. No comfort to subversive aesthetes here--nor to most American academics! (In *Owen Glendower*, this religious tension among the Welsh themselves is displayed in the debates between the Lollard, Walter Brut, and the Roman Catholic, Father Pascentius).

This heterogeneity and multiplicity of the Celtic is displayed not only in *Porius*, but in the beginning and end of *Owen Glendower*. The articles by Wood and Christensen in this issue, and by Lane and, especially, Ian Duncan in earlier issues of this journal, have fortified Glen Cavaliero's claim for this novel's pivotal importance in the Powys canon. But the geographical universalism of the opening Argument,

which sees Glendower in the context of the entirety of late-medieval European culture, is decidedly cosmopolitan. Powys's evocation of the Celtic sounds depths that range far above, beneath, and beyond the political sentimentality of contemporary criticism. One suspects JCP's neglect by today's idolators of the Celtic is a testimony to the daring of his vision.

Minor Delights

And now on to more pleasant matters. Indeed, Littleton Powys' *The Joy of It* is an unusually pleasant and serene book, and reading it is a genuinely soothing experience. The Powys Society, on the person of Stephen Powys Marks, has kept the original format and page-references of the 1937 edition, which enabled the Society to reprint the book at the lowest possible cost considering the select audience available for its appreciation. The book principally chronicles Littleton's upbringing, education, and career as a headmaster of several schools, (Bruton, Llandovery, and Sherborne) all of which he speaks of with amused, sometimes bemused, affection. There is not much of his personal life in the book (the book was written before his second marriage to Elizabeth Myers), but there is much on the Powys family. Littleton was the brother closest in age to JCP, but there is a striking lack of rivalry between them. Their divergent tonalities are well illustrated when Littleton provides a list of their readings in adolescence, Littleton enjoying mainly books on fishing, JCP perusing volumes of religious doctrine. Indeed, Littleton, one senses, finds his brothers' peculiarities so simultaneously baffling and absorbing that he has little time for competitiveness. *The Joy Of It* also provides delightful excursions on a variety of subjects, such as the unexpected value of maiden aunts, the way to know a country through its rivers, and the path to happiness (to be found primarily in solitude). It is interesting to see the torrential psyche of JCP appear in so steadfastly "minor" a context. Speaking of minor contexts, I noticed while reading Carl Carmer's 1964 anthology of Upstate New York literature, *The Tavern Lamps are Burning*, that John Cowper Powys is included as an Upstate New York writer (curiously, with a description of the Mohawk Valley, not anything evoking the far more central Phudd Bottom). As this was a principal concern of my 1992 article in this journal to place Powys in this light, I am most gratified by this. It would be interesting to find out whether Carmer, who lived in New York City for a while, ever knew JCP personally.

Treasurer Sought

The Powys Society of North America is still seeking a Treasurer. I have been serving both as Editor and Treasurer for the past six months, and these dual responsibilities have strained the amount of time I am able to devote to the journal. The Treasurer position is,

in line with the savage irony that pervades our world, unremunerated, but provides the more insubstantial rewards of holding a position with an academic organization and, more altruistically, performing a vital role in the sustenance of Powys studies in North America. Qualifications should be: North American residence, honesty, and competence, a set of criteria I am more than confident can be met by many of our members. Volunteers are urged to contact me at the earliest possible moment.

Powys Notes Website

This journal has a website, indeed has had for some months before I actually took over as editor. Its address is <http://www.users.interport.net/~nicbims/powys.html> or it can be found by entering "Powys Notes" or my name on any of the major search engines. The website features a list of articles of past and current issues, as well as links to other sites relating to the Powys family, short biographies of the three Powys brothers, and also miscellaneous notes, announcements, and other items of interest to a Powysian readership. At this point, I am not putting any of the actual contents of the journal on the site. Given the fact that we have a small subscription base (and are always trying to increase our subscriptions--so if you know any possible subscribers, please recruit!) to dilute this by putting articles on the Web would at this point be imprudent. But I think it is important to maintain a website to communicate breaking news, if there is such a thing in Powys studies, to our ever-eager readership.

Anyway, I hope you have enjoyed this issue and these Notes. See you next time!

**"I want Blake's world of the spirit. Not
a world in which T.F. Powys is out of
print and they won't bring him back
because he doesn't sell"
--novelist Barbara Hanrahan**

