

## Powys and America

A Panel Discussion, with Peter Powys Grey, Ben Jones, and Michael Ballin (from the May 1992 Conference of the Powys Society of North America)

Since this panel discussion, like most of its kind, resisted direct and literal transcription, we have provided a summary--in the case of Peter Powys Grey--and two documents to represent something of the tone and content of the occasion. The assembly room of the Society of Friends provided a cavernous and beautiful setting for a discussion which involved not just the three speakers represented here but most of the others attending the conference, and which turned--as the remarks below will indicate--on issues of nationalism and imperialism currently much in vogue, but not for that reason less pertinent to the case of John Cowper Powys.

**Peter Powys Grey** recalled how his mother's lace shop was opened with a \$500 loan from Theodore Dreiser and a \$500 loan from Isadora Duncan. In Marion's business dealings, there was "a sort of vulgar will to conquer America—which she would never admit. There was the image of 'I muddle through,' but behind this a diamond ambition." It was the same, Peter added, with John. He would chant the names of the states—"a kind of high mass." On the other hand, "JCP was an exile, however much he would put on the garb of Whitman celebrating America. He chanted the names of the states from a vast distance. He elided the definition of his relation with those states and maintained an inviolable privacy." Peter also remembered a story or two about JCP chatting with American troops in the West of England. The troops would hear that "there's an old guy in Corwen who's been to your hometown." Soldiers who went to see him were told about their hometowns. (Later in the discussion Ben Jones picked up on these anecdotes about Powys and the troops, using them to characterize Powys as a kind of colonizer.)

**Ben Jones** submitted a written statement, which then served as the basis for a set of largely untranscribable improvisations. The title of his manifesto was

## UP FOR ADOPTION: POWYS IN THE COLONIES

But what else could an educated, and unemployable, Englishman do for a living?

JCP's American experience comes at a moment of disruption in the "colonial" enterprise. He was too English—too grounded in the language and myths of the center—to break away from the imperial mode. In spite of devotion to the landscape and marginalized groups (Negroes, Jews, communists), and a wonderment at the vastness of American space, he retained, for a long time (how long?), his loyalties to the Oxford Extension Society and what it stood for. He was a cultural import (particularly in Chicago, with Maurice Browne and the Little Theater, and with Arthur Davidson Ficke), but he was unadoptable. Theater, including "mime," was certainly an important part of his American adventure. Here's an example from *Autobiography* (586-87):

I have got a curious satisfaction in my wanderings about these Shropshire-looking hills from my passion for giving names to the anonymous. [Anonymous to whom?] Wordsworth was a great one for this exciting trick of scrawling out poor human signatures, like so many lover's tokens upon the many breasted mother of men; and I too have derived no small comfort from it. "Merlin's grave," a great mossy natural knoll, covered in the spring with the carmine flowers of the wild cyclamen, finally became so real to me that I fell into the habit of burying my face in its damp rubble and invoking the great magician, as if, while awaiting his deliverance from his mysterious "esplumeoir," he had been really present here.... I was rewarded in a most practical way; for never have I smelt such indescribable fragrance, as if from the deep-zoned bosom of Ceridwen herself, the immortal inspirer of Taliessin, as I used to inhale from that bed of moss.

Powys wanders between "colonial" and "post-colonial" sites. His American experience is grounded in "mimicry," as in the passage above. But, as the emissary of the imperial center, JCP practices a mimicry different from that of James and Eliot—different, inverted, yet still mimicry, an acting out of the imperial design. Consider this observation on the "colonial" imperative:

Literature was made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation. So when elements of the periphery and margin threatened the exclusive claims of the center they were rapidly incorporated. This was a process, in Edward Said's terms, of conscious affiliation [association] proceeding under the guise of filiation [direct parentage], that is, a mimicry of the center proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English.' We see examples of this in such writers as Henry James and T.S. Eliot. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* 4) [London & New York: Routledge, 1989].)

In discussion, Jones added: "When his colonial enterprise was over—he left.... He was unadoptable."

Michael Ballin read a short paper which suggested that he might have certain differences with the position taken by Jones. His revised version of this essay is titled

#### JCP'S AMERICA AND THE RECLAMATION OF THE SELF

At a time when I presume Powys had returned from America to the United Kingdom and was living in Wales, he wrote a thirty-seven page holograph manuscript about American and English relations called "Getting Together." It refers to Winston Churchill, the second World War and the Welsh; it attempts to develop Powys's thinking about the role America had in establishing his own sense of self.

The chapter about America in Powys's *Autobiography* had introduced the theme of self and rediscovery of identity: "'And why, I ask myself, Should I not be what I was born to be in my deep heart?'" It seems that the experience of America provoked the question and was a catalyst for Powys's own self-reclamation. *The Autobiography* was, after all, written in America and can be regarded as a product of the self-liberation which America made possible. *The Autobiography* served the purposes of Powys's self-definition.

Ben Jones introduced in the panel discussion the interesting issue of Powys's "colonialism." Mature reflection leads me to the

conclusion that Powys wrote both outside and within the colonial experience—that is, he is indeed a product of a colonialist system and sometimes a promulgator of its values. At the same time he shares the experience of those who are imperialised. He is absorbed into them as much as they are absorbed into him. In fact, this mutual exchange of identities is the theme of the essay "Getting Together"; the title itself fosters the notion of mutual exchange rather than imperialist takeover.

I therefore wish to examine this theme of self-knowledge and self-definition and explore the thesis that America gave a consciousness of a true self to Powys in two ways: first, by allowing him to abandon a false self associated with the world he had left in the United Kingdom and then by confronting him with the colonialist loss of the self.

When Powys asked in *The Autobiography* why he should not be what he was born to be in his deep heart, there was a presupposition that before Powys came to America he was somehow not his real self. That true identity had been clouded over by the masks of upper/middle class social distinction and family constraint. One of the more memorable paragraphs of "Getting Together" dramatises and critiques the British class system:

The class system in this island has made life richer, thicker, more subtle, more dramatic, more picturesque, more like a fairy-story; but it has also made it more monstrously unfair. It has made every man's position infinitely more complicated, has given us more exciting windows to look out of and more wonderful circuses to watch. Yes, it has made "the state of life to which God has called us"—to quote the catechism—far more like a tragic or comic play than it is with you; but it has also made it well-nigh impossible to change the cast.

*The Autobiography* mentions social distinctions, castigates deep-rooted snobbishness and laments at "how afraid of each other we all are" on this island of Britain. But the above paragraph fills in the picture and paints a vivid vignette of English social life from a Powysian romance perspective. Although it is possible to observe the members of a social class recognisably above you as filled with god-like or magical beings who lead lives of untold glamour, such a romance narrative is falsified by its injustices and limited by its constraints. There are social as well as literary limitations to the mode of romance.

The comparative lack of social restraints was obviously

liberating for Powys in America. He revels in the human social accessibility in the United States. "Getting Together" affirms the virtues of American "frankness" and Powys reveals his envy of Americans' ability to talk to perfect strangers about details of their lives. Powys contrasts his own attitude: "I can't tell you the truth of my life, he declares, particularly if he has "a perfect stranger" for his audience. Powys is relieved by the absence of British snobbishness and values deeply the "admirable custom considered from any philosophic detachment, of accepting every man and woman at what might be called their face value." Yet he confesses that the American frankness is hard to understand and that he has had to muse long about the mystery it conceals.

Powys experienced self-revelation in his relations with Americans as a very external affair. This externality is revealed in the topics the American male will choose to speak about: his wife, parents, children, business affairs, property and material conditions of life. Powys's self-confessed "English reserve" prevents him from revealing his life to a stranger. However, Powys is unnerved by what the representative American Midwesterner holds back:

But behind the lips of the Indianapolis's "poker physiognomy" it peeped out—this hidden soul—cold, fierce, reckless, disillusioned and with depths of cynicism in its inmost marrow that would make Diogenes in his tub—if all were known—look like a YMCA Secretary.

Powys is obsessed by what he terms the "red Indian detachment" of the American soul. JCP seems to diagnose what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to in *The Empire Writes Back* as a major feature of post-colonial literature. A crisis of identity would appear to be the hallmark of the post-colonial experience; the crisis is connected to the individual relation between self and place. The introduction to *The Empire Strikes Back* suggests that "a valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation or "voluntary removal for indentured labour" (9).

Significantly, Powys's *Autobiography* is full of a similar sense of identity crisis and displacement. Powys shares with James Joyce the characteristic modernist experience of exile. The American experience, though liberating, must have been dislocating too for Powys. Added to the basic radical transplantation of the "Oxford Extension Lecturer" to American soil and the "Chatauqua" circuit or "circus" was the whirlwind nature of JCP's lecture tours which left

him depleted and, no doubt, feeling uprooted or rootless. The experience forced a radical confrontation with his own inner self, a self clouded by family and social constraints in England. (Powys had had a difficult time establishing his own identity in the face of the established tradition of clericalism in his family.)

Powys explored the theme of identity and the process of discovery of that identity beneath a false self in his creative fiction, most notably in *Wolf Solent*. American certainly liberated Powys and gave him the opportunity to find and express his own true nature. But the American experience also forced the recognition that individual and social human survival depends upon that recognition. Conversely, psychological and social catastrophe proceeds from the repression of the self.

Powys denies that he sees evidence of this self-suppression in Britain. For example, in "Getting Together," he contrasts "the self-centered egotism and richly sensitised narcissism of British men" with the "grim, stoical, patient, practical quality of American men." The terms are critical as well as descriptive; Powys suggests that the ideal blend of both natures would make for richer relations in general and marriage relations in particular between men and women. It is significant that Powys's presentation of marital conflict in *Maiden Castle* ends with the female protagonist, Wizzie Revelstone, abandoning the male protagonist and going off from Dorset to the United States with another woman—perhaps because the men wish to possess them and take no interest in their separate lives. In fact, in "Getting Together," which was probably written not long after *Maiden Castle*, Powys presents a transatlantic contrast between the "merged" marriage relation into a single unit (typical of British marriage models) and the parallel development of separate lives typical of American married couples.

Powys was willing to recognise the extent of the impact of climate and geographical conditions on the human psyche. D.H. Lawrence, a writer whom Powys respected and was influenced by, also recognised this geographical impact and radical stifling of the inner self in America. In *The Spirit of Place*, Lawrence writes more violently and excitably than Powys does, but, in probing into the mystery of what it means to be free, Lawrence is led to proclaim the central importance of the process of getting down to the deepest self.

This difficult process of arriving at the depths of one's own identity yields the only genuine freedom for the individual in Lawrence's view. Lawrence refers to the deepest self as IT: "IT being the deepest whole self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic halfness" (302).

Powys's *Autobiography* contains similarly insistent

statements that, though American men speak freely of themselves, "Their real soul, their inmost soul, they keep entirely to themselves. Not only are they close with their own inmost selves, they are unaware of so much as the existence of this inner being of theirs" (412). I think that Powys responded to this inner experience of self-dislocation in America, even though it may be a product of colonialisation, with a poignant perception reinforced by self-projection. What the colonials had experienced he, the coloniser, had also experienced. Hence he identified sympathetically with and adopted the Welsh on his return from America to the United Kingdom. His feeling for the Welsh was reinforced by his recognition of the extent to which they, as a nation, had also been conquered and self-estranged.

"Getting Together" was a piece of journalistic ephemera inspired by the circumstances of World War II—circumstances which gave a renewed urgency to the issue of the American/British entente, in Powys's view. He therefore proclaims at the beginning of the essay: "Upon the coming together of the people of Great Britain and the United States, or at least the diminishing of the psychic gulf between them, depends—it may well be—the whole future of the world." This large claim is rational enough in a world where one major European power and one demagogue was imperilling the freedom of the democratic values of the whole world. However, the commonwealth of democratic interest is not only a political vision; it is a human and a moral vision as well. For Powys offers a third perspective on the view that history of humanity has been marked by an alternation of creative and destructive processes. Powys's individual contribution to a view of human nature is that humankind has a unique ability to enjoy, in its senses and cerebral consciousness, the experience of simple being. The spirit of competition destroys that innocent pleasure and Powys argues that "getting together" means doing things together for purposes of enjoyment.

"Getting Together" seems to have been written in Wales; in the essay "Wales and America" in *Obstinate Cymric*, Powys comments on the "curious resemblance in certain important aspects of life between the people of Wales and the people of the United States" (64). Powys dwells on one theme in discussing this relationship: the praise of "political democracy" defined as "an ideal of life free from the snobbishness of class and yet full of imaginative discrimination." He even suggests that this ideal, present in America, may owe something to Welsh influence.

It is significant that Powys left America to return not to the imperial center but to celebrate a conquered race, to dwell among

the Welsh, to learn their language. However colonialist JCP may be said to be in America, he had a respect, entirely missing in Matthew Arnold, for the Welsh language which he tried to learn and taught himself to read and write to some extent when he was over seventy. In contrast, Matthew Arnold in "On the Study of Celtic Literature" states:

I must say I quite share the opinion of my brother Saxons as to the practical inconvenience of perpetuating the speaking of Welsh. It may cause a moment's distress to one's imagination when one hears that the last Cornwall peasant who spoke the old tongue of Cornwall is dead, but, no doubt, Cornwall is the better for adopting English, for becoming more thoroughly one with the rest of the country. The fusion of all of the inhabitants of these islands into one homogeneous English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between us, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends . . . the sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of practical, political, social life of Wales, the better. (10)

Powys, an outsider in England, learned in America the value of the Welsh. He would, I think, have had little sympathy for Arnold's homogenised view of culture. Although he wanted to break down barriers, he did not want to destroy individualities. Finally, he was a man more at home on the margins than in the centre.