

# Powys Notes

the semiannual journal and newsletter of the

Powys Society of North America

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### THE POWYS SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

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, particularly of John Cowper and Llewelyn, in American literary culture.

POWYS NOTES, the Society's publication, appears in Spring and Fall issues and presents scholarship, reviews, and bibliography of Powys interest.

## IN THIS ISSUE

Will the real John Cowper please stand up. Such might be the demand of many an exasperated reader of John Cowper Powys, particularly if he or she has delved beyond the novels, and entered the realms of the Autobiography, or the popular essay-books, or the voluminous correspondence. Powys appears to us in these media in so many forms, presents so many luminescent but evasive facets of his mind, his sensations, his creativity, that--as A. Thomas Southwick readily admits in his discussion of the Autobiography--"confusion" often results.

Our fare in this issue consists of three explorations of this thoroughly open, yet paradoxically enigmatic figure. When he wrote Autobiography (which figures prominently in two of the discussions), Powys appears to have been in the midst of a span of relative calm and stability. In 1932 he told an interviewer: "My first stroke of prosperity came when I sold my manuscript of Wolf Solent. . . .With the money I bought seven acres of ground near Albany, with an old house on it. It is beautiful country, like Derbyshire where I was born. . . .I can be quiet as I like. I read and write and enjoy the country and mix with my farm neighbors, and I can live in that fashion on the return from my books." For all this bucolic testimony, however, Ben Jones asserts there are good reasons to debate Powys's alien status, not just in terms of his personal position, but more specifically in the way that "the idea of the alien...informs us of Powys's narrative gestures and strategies." A. Thomas Southwick reminds us how curiously protracted Powys's childhood was, and how it seemed to last almost into middle age. And in her personal recollections of JCP (and of Llewelyn), Hildegarde Lasell Watson provides a further view of John Cowper: as friend, as actor, and (apparently) as devourer, both of audiences and sugar. [D. L.]

On the Cover: Sketch of John Cowper Powys by Ivan Opfer, 1934. Courtesy of the Colgate University Powys Collection; Melissa McAfee, Special Collections Librarian.

## Powys's Alien Story: Travelling, Speaking, Writing

BEN JONES

Autobiography (1934) is an entrance point to the study of John Cowper Powys not only because of the information it provides. It is a rich source of biographical detail, but we know it also for its narcissistic fictionalizing, its ingenuous confessing (with its many references to cerebral sadism), and for its evocation of British and American literary culture--more often the margins of that culture than its center--in the first three decades of the 20th century. It is regrettable that Paul Fussell in Abroad (his study of Modernist literary travellers) missed the Powyses, John Cowper and Autobiography in particular. But the Powyses were often missed. "Being missed," I suggest, has something to do with being alien, and this is what I shall talk about here.

Autobiography is most significantly an entrance point because as a text it testifies to Powys's attempt to re-orient--partly to de-mystify--himself, to reform his imaginative life and work. While it records the initiatives of this imaginative re-orientation, it also, with the novels of the period, demonstrates such re-orientation. It provides a statement of Powys's alien status from his childhood onward. The discourse is formed by the repetition of the alien scene. Although it is dedicated to his mother, suggesting an affiliation to his home, she is deliberately left out of the text. Her absence is, as he says, the "the only reticence in this book," a reticence that paradoxically remains a reminder of a primal alien scene. Arrival and departure form the procedure of the story. Motion through space is the recurring act. Autobiography celebrates the alien status that he assumed to be his own particular way, or that he invented as his particular way. He said elsewhere in about the same year: "The wise man spends his life running away" (1933).<sup>1</sup>

The novels, particularly those written in the years just prior to and following Autobiography carry out the alien theme: the return of a native from foreign places, where he has in most cases followed

intellectual pursuits, to re-establish a claim to his inheritance. But the return becomes the discovery that the "native" ground is not familiar, indeed that it is hostile, even conspiratorial. As Freud has shown us in the essay on the "Uncanny," the "heimlich" is indeed the "unheimlich." The expected inheritance, even if it could be "identity" instead of money, is illusory. The revelation is that life proceeds from exile to exile: this is the continuity of a Powysian narrative. It is demonstrated in the first instance by Adrian Sorio in Rodmoor (1916), that strange "romance" dedicated to another alien, Emily Bronte. Adrian starts the line of wanderers, and it continues with Richard Storm in After My Fashion (written about 1919), and with Rook Ashover--in Ducdame (1925)--who is less a physical than a mental traveller. Rook is identified in the dedicatory epigraph of Ducdame as one of those who

GO WHERE THEY ARE PUSHED  
FOLLOW WHERE THEY ARE LED,  
LIKE A WHIRLING WIND,  
LIKE A FEATHER TOSSED ABOUT,  
LIKE A REVOLVING GRINDSTONE.

More aliens follow: Wolf Solent, John Crow, John Geard, Persephone Spear, both Magnus Muir and Sylvanus Cobbold of Weymouth Sands, Dud No-Man and the equestrienne Wizzie Ravelston of Maiden Castle, Rhisiart ab Owen of Owen Glendower and Porius, too, divided as he is between Rome and Wales (not to mention time and space). The structural repetitions that give the novels form identify alien status as central to Powys's achievement.

Let me outline two uses of the word "alien": both lead to potentially valuable areas of exploration. First, "alien" gives us a sense of Powys's own life, a life marked by exile. Autobiography, as I have indicated, is the most obvious source of information for this area of study, but with it we include his extensive correspondence, the commentaries on him by his family and his personal and literary associates, and his journals. We are beginning to know how much of this material is available, particularly in American university libraries. Travelling is often conspicuous in his letters. Even letters from later years, after he settled in Wales with Phyllis Playter, seem to be written as if he were still travelling (a

point which does require more discussion, but for which we shall have to wait). He seems to have travelled constantly from the time that he began his studies away from home during his years in Cambridge, years which comprised a kind of walking tour ("'Yes!' he says in Autobiography, 'wherever I go I shall carry with me to the end what I learnt from Cambridgeshire while I was at Cambridge'"<sup>2</sup> (my emphasis). And after Cambridge, he travels as tourist and/or lecturer through Europe and North America, to the final settlement among the slate tips of Blaenau Ffestiniog.

The letters identify the alien status: how much he hates Memphis, how much he likes Arkansas (just across the river), how difficult the Chautauqua circuit is, how close he feels to certain minority groups, how impossible it is to digest food. And there is other evidence: the itinerary itself, the pressure of finding engagements, the failure of the managers, the realization in the late 1920s that he could no longer support himself, not to mention his family at home, by his lecturing. His health was deteriorating, the audiences were gone. There is the fascinating, if somewhat "antiquarian," discovery of the many manuscript pages, particularly of Wolf Solent, written on hotel stationery. The letterheads attest to the itinerary, and to alien status. One of the most interesting documents on this theme of the alien is the short essay "An Englishman Up-State," written during the years that he lived near Hillsdale, New York. In it he talks as if Upstate New York, Columbia County, his house Phudd Bottom, would be his final "resting place." It would appear as if the wandering years had ended: "And certainly among all the floating vignettes of rural scenes, those airy memory-pictures from innumerable train-windows and from innumerable explorations on foot through secret by-ways and hidden trails, that come crowding in upon my mind when I am in a mood for calling up the past, not one reminds me of England as does Columbia County, New York."<sup>3</sup> Here was the place, he says, "to lay his bones!" But only after a short--if prolific--stay he decided to sell Phudd Bottom and return to the Land of his Fathers. Even his adopted Wales, as Roland Mathias has suggested,<sup>4</sup> remained an alien world, in spite of the homage Powys paid it in Obstinate

Cymric. The correspondence to Arthur Davidson Ficke, his neighbor in Columbia County, tells some of the story. Phudd Bottom, indeed America, provided the site for an extraordinary achievement, but it did not provide an end to his alien status.

My second use of "alien" identifies important elements in his imaginative achievement, the alien status that resides in the text. I have already referred to the thematic repetition of "exile's return," perhaps more appropriately called "return to exile." But even more important to our discussion is the idea of the "alien" as it informs us of Powys's narrative gestures and strategies. This element of his achievement--the narratorial formulation--has been until recently insufficiently studied, and often misunderstood. Granted, there is some accuracy in the judgement that Powys's fiction is "rhetorical." "Overly rhapsodic" is what J. B. Priestley said, and he was a friend; "prolixity and rhetorical vagueness," said the Times Literary Supplement reviewer of A Glastonbury Romance. But now the rhetoric of Powys's fiction is becoming a primary topic of Powys studies.

I said earlier that Autobiography is a representation of Powys's re-orientation, an attempt at a de-mystification of himself. But what changes of direction was he trying to articulate, and what mysticism was he trying to undo? He has provided a text for this, written in the same year as Autobiography:

If I were to attempt a personal and yet a detached criticism of my book-history up to date I should unhesitatingly put down the improvement in the quality of my work to two things, to my good fortune in having assistance of expert criticism; and to the fact that I have been enabled to live a more or less retired life in one spot and to cease from lavishing my sensations and ideas to the four winds in the less careful and less measured art of speech.<sup>5</sup> (my emphasis).

Acknowledging himself to be a "windy oracle," he adds: "I am anxious that my books, unlike my words for thirty years, should not melt into thin air."<sup>6</sup> These spoken words of "thirty years," delivered "in the less careful and less measured art of speech," were his

public lectures, the source of his fame, which was considerable, and the source of his income. Lectures were the medium for the expression of his popular philosophy, the expression of his anarchistic pluralism based on an active life of sensation and touched with tendencies towards cosmic mysticism and magic. To an extent, he was at home in his lectures. But "writing" was a different world. The reviewer of Wolf Solent in the New York Bookman raised the point, and even gave warning, that the novelist was different from the lecturer.

Several things will make the cautious reader of Wolf Solent uneasy while forming his judgement upon it. Probably he has heard the author lecture and will associate a tendency to theatricality in certain pages of the novel with a rapt vehemence of manner on the part of the platform speaker. Later reflection, however, will persuade him that Mr. Powys has sharply checked his writing before it could break into melodrama.<sup>7</sup>

His lecturing was his fame, and, in spite of the reviewer's caution to the reader, Powys did not live it down. He would be thought of as a "speaker." Compounded by his reputation for agreeable popular philosophizing, Powys as "speaker" still had currency throughout the 1930s. The correspondence with W. W. Norton, one of Powys's most devoted publishers, is interesting on this point (the Norton correspondence is at Columbia University).

But fame as a "windy oracle" did not (and will not) provide the base for a genuine response to Powys's commitment to prose narrative. The art of speech was not the art of fiction. Powys would satisfy neither those who wanted oracular speech nor those who wanted disinterested, "Modernist" narrative. He remained an alien. He was neither "at home" in the United States nor in Britain, and he was certainly not at home in literary Modernism. The prevailing critical doctrines of the time did not want a voice that issued forth--or seemed to issue forth--from the platform. The author as identifiable entity was anathema, and the TLS reviewer of A Glastonbury Romance showed this to be so: "Adopting a convention little in favour nowadays Mr. Powys boldly presents himself in the foreground of his story, in the role of the omniscient narrator

prepared to explain and comment on the behaviour of his creatures."<sup>8</sup> A "Modernist" writer could not carry such a burden of omniscience (or so it was proclaimed). We need not repeat here the strategies of distancing, obliquity, impersonality, lyricism, artifice and supreme fiction that characterized the literary dogma of Modernism. Needless to say, this dogma did not come to terms with Powys's writing. But I believe that there is a special reason for this. Powys was remembered too much for the authority of his speech. In a sense he was as a writer an alien, cut off from the familiarity of lecturing and not received into the house of fiction as then conceived.

There have been excellent critical studies of Powys, but more often than not it has been the figure of Powys himself--the oracular figure--rather than the figures of the text that have been magnified. So we move from "Old Earth Man," to Saturnian knight, to demoniac, to novelist as preacher, to one of the heroes with a thousand faces. To which, some may say, I have merely added the figure of the alien. This is true. But I use "alien" in a special sense: alien as a narrator within the text who is at once the organizer and the observer--sometimes an astonished observer, as in Glastonbury--of the action, who speaks with many voices, who familiarises and de-familiarises, who as alien "makes strange," or is perceived to be strange, and who passes that strangeness along in the progress of the narration. The TLS reviewer was wrong. He placed Mr. Powys in the foreground, in the rôle of omniscient narrator, but the procedure is not as simple, or as simplistic, as that.

The term "alien" has taken us to the territories of contemporary criticism. It has already been established that the various perspectives of current critical theory provide valuable insights into Powys's narrative. Yet there is still a problem: reception of Powys's fiction has been inhibited by failures of critical practice, failures in specific areas that some current critical theory attempts to expose and correct, specifically in the area of narrative structure. We have already seen that the concept of "dialogic" structure seems particularly cogent for the reading of Powys's text.<sup>9</sup> And we have been reminded

that among Powys's chief models were, in varying ways, Rabelais, Sterne and Dostoevsky. While we are challenged to make thematic comparisons, we may find structural comparisons also provocative. Polyphonic voicing, "dialogic" structure, and the Formalist's concept of "making strange," ostrananie (which "aims at creating the greatest possible effect by overcoming the automatism of perception")<sup>10</sup> are Powysian enterprises, and, certainly in the case of ostrananie, are forms of alienation.

Powys studies will and must remain varied: there is more than enough material for mythographer, bibliophile, editor, biographer, explicator, antiquarian, and ideologue. But there are some points for concentration. The figure of the alien provides a wide range of interpretation. Powys is conspicuous as intellectual wanderer. His travels, connected as they are with his lecturing, identify him as an alien intellectual figure. But it is possible--even necessary--to take this wandering into his achievement as narrator. It is, after all, his work as a narrator that gives him a place in memory, that transforms him from an oddity--albeit a notable one--on the lecture circuit to a profound delineator of the human situation.

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#### Notes

1. John Cowper Powys, "The Magic of Detachment," The Aryan Path, 4, 10 (1933), 659-663; this quotation is taken from an excerpt published in Derek Langridge's John Cowper Powys: A Record of Achievement (London: The Library Association, 1966), 128.
2. Powys, Autobiography (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1934), 185.
3. Powys, "An Englishman Up-State" (London: Village Press, 1974), 5; first published by Colgate University in Philobiblon, 8 (1966).
4. Roland Mathias, "The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of Owen Glendower," in Essays on John Cowper Powys,

ed. Belinda Humfrey (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), 243-244: "Even more, I would suggest, the landscape of Wales and its myth-impregnation...did not afford JCP the degree of sustenance which he had readily obtained from the chalklands of his childhood. This again, need not be matter for surprise. Anyone of sensitivity who has contemplated those south lands in silence and alone, noting their swelling feminine breasts and the dramatic bareness which seems to whisper continually of the Bronze Age Celts or pre-Celts who once were there and now are not, might--according to background and disposition--either share JCP's sense of deprivation in Wales or breathe a sigh of relief."

5. Powys, Introduction to A Bibliography of the First Editions of John Cowper Powys, compiled by Lloyd Emerson Siberell (Cincinnati: The Ailanthus Press, 1934); this quotation is taken from the excerpt in Langridge, 132.

6. Langridge, 132.

7. Grant C. Knight, Review of Wolf Solent. The Bookman (July, 1929), 557.

8. Review of A Glastonbury Romance. Times Literary Supplement (6 July, 1933), 460.

9. M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 1 (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981). The departure point for continued discussion along this line is Charles Lock's "Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and A Glastonbury Romance," University of Toronto Quarterly, 55 (Spring, 1986), 261-81.

10. Gleb Struve, Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin, 1917-1953 (Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 207.

"The People We Have Been":  
Notes on Childhood in Powys's Autobiography

A. THOMAS SOUTHWICK

I have some remarks to make on the view of early childhood in Powys's Autobiography and then some comments on the way that Powys presents it. I would be interested to know if others share my confusion or if there are wiser heads with surer vision.

First of all the reader of John Cowper Powys's Autobiography has a sense of the awesome power of a very young child's imagination. It is boundless, infinite in its power to create a reality. The young child is a magician who can work his will over matter. He can feel himself to be like God. However, wonderful as this power is, it is horrible as well. The other side of the imagination of infinite power is fantasies of fear and cruelty. The danger to the young child who can create his world through his desires is that he can just as easily annihilate it. The unhappiness of the very young child is boundless too. Powys characterizes his early years by their unhappiness. The magician that he must develop into a human self.

Powys is fortunate in having as his teacher and model his father. In the Reverend Powys explosive forces are controlled. Rules govern his actions in creation. But his enjoyment is great and childlike. He is not a civilized, scientific man, separated from nature, but a primitive, following traditional practices.

Several tokens of his father remind the adult John Cowper of the ways his father embodied. One is the laurel ax. An ax is an instrument of destruction, but of purposeful destruction. It is a reminder of the interdependence of the human and the rest of creation. Powys thinks of the ark of the Covenant and the music of the spheres when remembering this laurel ax (I, 3). Another token is his father's thick bootsoles. They are his point of contact with the earth and his conveyance over it. But their significance is also extrapersonal. The secret that they represent is the feeling of contact with past human lives which is part

of the experience of objects in nature. In place of the exclusiveness of the power that the infant magician has over his creation, there will come in later years a sense of memory and relationship to past lives.

It is fitting that the Reverend Powys should be associated with this feeling. He opposes the new-fangledness of the modern age. He is described as a proud exile like the Highland rebels defeated by the English in 1745; like them he is loyal to a romantic lost cause. He is frequently likened to a Homeric hero. He seems to represent the old adaptation of human nature over ages of primitive life.

The child John Cowper needs to grow into this sense of relationship. To do so he must have a self that is differentiated from the rest of creation. He must have memory and self-awareness to help to define his relationship to other beings and to enrich those relationships with a personal dimension. As a young child, though, his connections are of a wholly different kind. On the one hand are highly vivid sense impressions, especially of color. There is also the total subjectivity that takes toys and projects onto them exactly what is desired. On the other hand, if desires can be so intensely realized, so can fears. And desire itself, if it cannot recognise the otherness of its objects, will amount to fantasies of domination and destruction.

In the Autobiography Powys moves to self-awareness and fuller awareness of creation. He writes that a human soul represents a fountain. It must be cleared of debris, and it must be banked up against "invasion" by "dead sea" waters to achieve its "predestined flow" (I, 39). He needs to reach a definition of self and a control over destructive impulses such as he sees in his father. His life story is a quest to reach that goal. Like the hero of a quest Powys has high origins, since his father is descended from the ancient kings of Wales. The goal of his quest will be to come into his father's kingdom.

From home, the journey goes downward. At school and then in young manhood Powys has to pursue an inner life of relation to nature like his father's while

struggling with the outward roles that the modern world offers him. Then there is the hero's journey to a strange and distant land. For Powys, this is the United States. Here he will perform feats of speaking to those oppressed by a violent, materialistic society. Through these deeds he attains his identity.

The deeds of the quest hero involve a descent into the underworld. For Powys this is the "burning crater" of World War One and his personal misery in the war years. Finally there is the movement upward, the climax, in the chapter titled "There's a Mohawk in the Sky!" Powys has risen to the primitive awareness that his father had. It is a kind of homecoming that imaginatively reunites him with his father.

Having presented this interpretation, which I believe is true of the view of childhood that Powys has to offer and of the general design of his story, I have to add that I don't think what I have said is particularly true to the experience of reading the Autobiography. My explanation of the book is clear, maybe even simplemindedly so. It suggests a coherence to the book that is not really there. In fact I've had to turn the book over and inside out quite a few times to be able to get the understanding that I've just presented. And I'm certain that, in part at least, I'm reading into it. I'm suspicious of a book where the act of interpreting has to be continuous—I mean interpreting not to arrive at a deeper understanding but simply to get the point of what is being shown at a particular moment. I know that gives me a grand opportunity as an interpreter, but it also raises some questions about Powys as a writer.

When I look closely at the Autobiography I find it fragmentary and obscure. The kinds of transitions I am used to finding in continuous prose either aren't there or, where they are, they are not helpful. I'm convinced that Powys's principle of organization, despite appearances, is not logical but associational. The impression that the style of the Autobiography gives is of spontaneity, not premeditation. That is true of its underlying organization as well. Powys reaches his meaning through sets of oppositions, contrary to what seems to be the movement of thought in his prose. His meaning does not really develop.

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Rather, out of recurring juxtapositions, it accumulates.

Let me take one of my favorite sentences in the Autobiography to try to show what is going on. What Powys is remembering occurred when he was three. "I recollect very clearly the panic I felt when, playing the role of a hangman with the great bell-rope--I suppose it was originally used to summon people from garden or stable--that hung in the passage at the top of the stairs, I remarked that my brother Littleton's face had suddenly assumed a swollen and purple aspect." (I, 5-6) For me, it's both amusing and horrifying to note how long this sentence takes to get from "panic," "hangman," and "when" to poor Littleton, and then how detached the words such as "remarked," "assumed," and "aspect" are in registering what's happening. The delay and the detachment show how cruelty can come of an imagination that will not recognize others and its relation to them.

I wish that all of the Autobiography were written so concretely and cleanly. But the preceding sentence reads, "My earliest impulses of a morbid or anti-social kind must belong to my third year of life upon this freak-bearing planet." This sentence does not seem useful as a way of connecting this paragraph with the previous one, on the secret contained in his father's bootsoles. As an introductory sentence it is not helpful either. It is wordy and not relevant to the issues that are portrayed in the incident. The comment that follows the description is much more to the point: ". . . it is the terror of having gone too far in a life-and-death game that remained in my mind." Here is the fearsomeness of the power of a child's imagination to create and destroy realities. The meaning of the incident is crystalized--and even italicized--but then it is passed over.

The context of the remark is distracting. The preceding clause is: "My screams brought assistance quickly enough, and no doubt I was soundly slapped." Then, after the comment about his terror, Powys ends the paragraph by saying that "The punishment left no memory." But why does he bring up the punishment at all? Because then Powys can bring his father into the account. The next paragraph begins: "My father

must have been devoid of the least trace of sadism." Like the sentence before it about "punishment," this denial is not called for, so it seems like protesting too much. But the idea isn't to show how Powys's father treated him but rather to contrast his father's awareness and deeds to his own. Instead of commenting himself, Powys uses his father to suggest a comment.

All along, while the writing is supposed to be about something else, there are these pairings of elements that indirectly contrast father and son: colored locomotive engines and telegraph wires; the Alice books and The Scottish Cavaliers; pirus Japonica and cuckoo flowers; green sky and sunlight on the sea. These pairings seem bewildering or inconsequential on the surface but, cumulatively, they push the idea of radically different phases of consciousness: on the one hand, solitary, magical imagination; on the other, primitive, related awareness. The meaning of the bell-rope incident depends on its being on one side of one of these pairings.

I could almost claim that Powys had innovated a prose technique like that of his contemporaries among the poets, especially, in English, Eliot and Pound. That would be brilliant of him to do and clever of me to point out. It's a teasing thought, but there is too much verbal waste around the really illuminating moments in Powys's writing--too much for the general reader to plow through, too much for the interpreter to have to account for: stuff only sheer ingenuity could see as valuable.

One of the key ideas in the Autobiography is that adults carry with them "the ghosts of children" (IV, 150). Powys writes that "The people we have been are lost rather than fulfilled in what we become." The indirectness of his writing respects in a way the strangeness of the earlier stages of consciousness, even though the cover for this indirection can be noise.

[Citations are from John Cowper Powys, Autobiography (1934; repr. London: Picador, 1982)].

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## Friendships:

John Cowper Powys, Llewelyn Powys, and Alyse Gregory

## HILDEGARDE LASSELL WATSON

When John Cowper Powys first came to tea with me it was at our house on 19th Street in New York. As he entered our living room I felt slightly embarrassed. John was tall and impressive, with a mass of dark curls over his large head. (He reminded me with his exaggerated gestures, of my sketch of John the Baptist, made in Oberammergau at the Passion Play). All the Powys men, he most of all, seemed out of place indoors. We had met many of his family in England where they were born, over the chalk cliffs by the sea in Dorchester. The vast open country was a natural wild background for this learned but simply brought-up family.

I had timidly enquired, "Mr. Powys, how many lumps of sugar in your tea, one or two?"

"No," he answered, "four, please."

Marianne Moore, to my delight, once quoted my remark that while conversing with John Cowper Powys I found him so intense I could not tell whether I was listening to him or talking to him. I had a sense of being devoured. I mention this because, of all people to come calling that afternoon, it had to be a well-known hunter (better left unnamed) who gave us a description--a horror, I thought--of capturing a baby polar bear and dragging him on a rope behind his boat on one of his Arctic expeditions. I was afraid Mr. Powys, with his passion for animals, would rise and kill him.

John was a famous lecturer. No one ever saw a more fiery delivery on any stage. It is no exaggeration that he had frightened some of his audiences. Brilliant as he was, and picturesque, he could also be dangerously lewd. A few ladies had been seen to rise and indignantly depart.

His vocabulary and imagery were incomparable. He was a poet, philosopher, writer, and scholar and, as E. E. Cummings had called him, the greatest actor on any stage. Estlin had such respect for him that if

they happened to meet on the street, he'd step off the sidewalk and let him pass. This would sometimes happen when John Powys and Phyllis Playter were living in the apartment above him on Patchin Place. Of course, it was all part of Estlin's superb mimicry, and he would invariably make us laugh.

When I first heard John Powys lecture it was in Aeolian Hall. It was about Thomas Hardy and he found it difficult to begin because of their intimate friendship. We were afraid that in his dramatic way he'd break down. He wore a black gown given him by Miss Spence, the headmistress of a girls' school in New York. He paced nervously back and forth, his robe flying behind him. At last, pulling himself together, his rush of words filled us with rapture. Suddenly having switched to a word about Thackeray, he shouted at us in his rich English voice, "I suppose that Vaa-nity Fa-ar is the greatest novel ever written--but I don't like it!"

When he came to lecture in Rochester we invited him to dine with us. His talk was about the ten books he'd take with him to his Desert Island. His favorite play was King Lear, he said, almost admonishing us in case we had not read it recently or at all!

During the Second World War he left with Miss Playter for Merioneth in Wales. When he wrote me from their small one-room stone house, I felt a desire to communicate with him, and among other packages of food we were all sending our friends I would always include tins of his favorite tea, difficult for them to procure in England. He wrote me in ecstasy of this, his elixir! Just before he died he sent me one of his favorite little books, The Borrowers by Mary Norton, with an inscription in his dashing uphill handwriting on the flyleaf--and a poem:

For Hildegarde and Sibley Watson

from

John Cowper Powys

and Phyllis Playter

Xmas 1957

"Blow winds and crash your cheeks!

Rage, blow, you hurricanes!"

So cried King Lear; more gently murmur I,

While the winds howl  
Our little book will fly.

Llewelyn Powys, the eighth of his parents' children, was twelve years younger than John Cowper. He was picturesquely handsome, his head covered with blond curls that were not, as a rule, so closely cropped as his brother's black ones. He carried a thorn walking stick, and the aroma of peat wreathed his well-cut tweeds.

Like John Cowper, he had begun as a lecturer. The one time I heard him talk in public [was] at the Players Club on Gramercy Park; his strong, down-country English accent seemed incomprehensible to many in the audience. I remember he consulted my husband, then a senior in medical school, on account, so he said, of some trouble with his "yardrums." Only by pointing did he make us understand that he was talking about his ears. It was at about this time that he gave up lectures for a career as a writer.

I used to go for walks with Llewelyn in and about New York. Once at the Bronx Zoo as we faced a monkey cage, one of the monkeys began talking to me. "He recognizes you, he recognizes you!" shouted Llewelyn to the amusement of the crowds around us.

His naiveté in certain directions was a delight. On one of his visits to New York he and John Cowper shared an apartment with a parquet floor in the Chelsea section of the West Side. "What are those strange balls of fluff blowing about the floor?" he asked his sister Marian. She told him they were the natural result of bachelor housekeeping, and obligingly gave him a demonstration of how to sweep and dust.

He used to entertain us with stories of his life as manager of a stock ranch in British East Africa where he was often alone. He had been sent there in the hope that the climate of the high plateau would permanently arrest his tuberculosis. On one occasion a tall dignified Negro had appeared at his door requesting a place to sleep. Llewelyn handed him a blanket and pointed, not too cordially, to an adjoining barn. The next day the visitor was gone,

leaving a folded blanket. But during the night Llewelyn had been horrified to see a panther making its way through his bedroom. He believed magic had been used to rebuke him for his inhospitable treatment.

In the summer of 1924, Llewelyn and my husband went on a camping trip in the Rockies. Before setting out Llewelyn went to see a specialist in diseases of the chest who approved the camping trip but warned against too much exertion at high altitudes. Once in the mountains, however, it was impossible to get him to be prudent. Instead of viewing the rugged country from muleback he insisted on making his excursions on foot. He would leave camp right after breakfast, climbing or descending at a slow but steady shuffle, carrying a stick and a sandwich, and return at dusk to report intimate glimpses he had gained of the family life of badgers and birds.

Llewelyn had a passionate interest in nature, a feeling of kinship with animals that was almost Oriental, though he was by no means a vegetarian. His feeling of kinship did not prevent him from savoring slices of the liver of a freshly killed yearling deer, shot at his request.

He had begun the trip clean-shaven, but ended it with the beginnings of the full beard that he allowed to grow and wore for the rest of his life. Shortly after his return, he suffered a severe hemorrhage that kept him in bed for months.

After several months more in New York with his wife, Alyse Gregory, also a writer and for a year the editor of The Dial, he decided to return to England and his old home, Chydyok, Chaldron Herring, Dorsetshire. Living in the adjoining stone house were his two maiden sisters, Kate and Gertrude Powys, and in the town of Dorchester, three or four miles away, his other famous brother, Theodore, and his wife.

At last he wrote: "I often feel inclined to make a dash for Switzerland. I do not like having to lie, lie, lie, like a lion with porcupine quills in my paws. I wish I could live all the years I spent in New York over again! I would prefer a desperate

remedy to 'Jack Spry, neither live nor die.' And yet my mind remains vigorous and the force of life in me unabated."

Later, he wrote from Davos Platz: "Venus was in the sky and looked wonderful as we came up the mountain, shining over the tops of very slender snow-covered firs. I looked with wonder at the mountaintops as the sun went down. The same, the same as I used to see it when I first got here as a young man. People talk of Platonic eternities but I understand well what the patriarch Jacob meant when he declared that his blessing would last as long as the eternal hills. There is surely a material eternity--the same all the time I was in Africa--it was shining so when I read an article to Sibley and he accepted it for The Dial--and all these dozen and a half years when I have been sick."

On one of my concert tours I stopped off to visit him. I had never happened to meet his wife, Alyse Gregory, and this was an amazaing encounter to have happened for the first time in a railroad station at Davos Platz. I am right there again--overwrought with excitement and the charm of her presence. She spoke words as from an inner consciousness, talking immediately of the weirdness, the wildness, the wonder of meeting there, for the first time, in that vast cold snow-covered hugeness of a winter day, surrounded by forests and high ranges of the Alps. This all might have ended in a few minutes for, while motoring up a winding road in deep snow to the sanatorium above, our reckless driver almost ran his car over the edge--horrible experience. In a second I saw the whole account, in a newspaper, of our death.

But arrive we did at last and I found myself in a so familiar-looking surrounding that I turned to ask Alyse where I had seen that stark long building before, the scattered chalets about us. It was, of course, in Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain.

Llewelyn met us--so frail, but still able to walk about. Alyse and I talked late into the night in my bedroom, she so brilliantly and out of another world, far from her present existence. A full moon was shining in my window.

Switzerland was as if one were suddenly transported to another planet swept bare of all unnecessary conveniences as well as many of the worldly inconveniences of living. One used what there was just to live by. For safety's sake alone, the spikes were sharp and strong on shoes and staff, to keep one on the path from some instant death below. The food was elementally pure: goat's cheese, homemade bread, and wild strawberry jam. I missed strong Paris coffee, however, and seasoning accents on our food.

For some, there was life in that transparent, glasslike air. For me, it would have meant less than that--a kind of decalomania of shadow and white edges of moon and stars too sharp. Some were exhilarated in these contrasts. Llewelyn loved his great mountains and it was because of this and a long walk he had taken, drawn higher and higher, that this, his last illness, was brought about. He wrote from Davos Platz: "Oh! I have been disappointed by this relapse. It was caused, I think, by my infatuate walks of last summer. I will show you the top frame of glass of the window." I came once more and brought my two children, Jeanne and Michael, to meet him and his wife.

In one corner of his chalet room was a great tiled stove, his only source of heat. A window was always kept wide open to a row of snow-covered mountains he never tired of watching day and night. He was sitting in bed wrapped in a beautiful Scottish plaid shawl. It is not the slightest exaggeration to say that Michelangelo's Moses could be an identical portrait of Llewelyn Powys--the great shock of thick hair over his low brow, his deep-set blue eyes, the curling beard over his chest, left long because of his weakened condition.

As I entered, he pointed to a translation of Homer beside him and asked me, please, to read him a few lines from the open book. This broke the stillness of that room with its sweep of confortless icy air.

We felt sad after a day or two to leave him and his wife. I never have seen greater selfless devotion than hers--that brilliant woman, shut off from the intellectual world she had known so well. When

Marianne Moore was traveling in England with friends I hoped she might see her friend and ours in Devon. It was a marvel that she did. I received a letter from her and one from Alyse, both written the same day of their meeting.

[Excerpted from Hildegard Lasell Watson, The Edge of the Woods: A Memoir (Lunenburg, Vermont: The Stinehour Press; privately printed, 1979), copyright James S. Watson, Jr. Used by permission.]

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CHARLES LOCK

To Turn and Re-Turn: A Review

Mary Casey. The Kingfisher's Wing. (Crawley, U.K.: Rigby & Lewis Publishing, 1987). Distributed in the U.S. by Phanes Press, P.O. Box 6114, Grand Rapids, MI 49516.

This extraordinary book, a visionary telling of the life of Plotinus, deserves wide acclaim. Its author, Mary Casey--niece of J. C. and T. F. Powys--published only a handful of poems during her lifetime (1915-1980); since her death the Enitharmon Press has brought out two substantial collections of her poetry--Full Circle and Christophoros, both 1982--and now a new publishing house has issued the first of Mary Casey's three historical novels. The Kingfisher's Wing bears few marks of its posthumous publication, and is unmarred by lacunae or lack of revision; it is also handsomely printed and presented.

Mary Casey's poetry has been well received by such poets and reviewers as Kathleen Raine and Jeremy Hooker. A sense of the mystic in-twining of history and landscape, of concreteness and flux, of nature and the divine, is characteristic of these poems. Their literary descent is from Hopkins, late Eliot and David Jones, their tense philosophical construction is derived from Mary Casey's exploration of neo-Platonism and Buddhism from within a rooted placement in Christianity. Mary Casey appreciated the Incarnation as a scandal, this late in the epoch.

There is therefore, to those familiar with Mary Casey's poetry, an appropriateness, even an inevitability in this novel based on the life of Plotinus. Born in Egypt in 204. A.D. of partly Jewish descent, Plotinus studied first at a Jewish school before moving to Alexandria and mastering Greek philosophy to a depth at which he was able to transmute it. The label "Neo-Platonism" should indicate that Plotinus was one philosopher who did more than contribute footnotes to Plato. From Alexandria Plotinus developed an interest in Persian and Indian thought, and he travelled with the Emperor Gordian to Mesopotamia. His last years were spent in Rome as teacher and advisor to emperors.

All this is outlined, shadowed and limned in Mary Casey's novel. That the outline is not filled in, that details are spare, can be attributed to the shortage of biographical facts. But to accept that shortage, to make of it a virtue, is to be most true to Plotinus whose neo-Platonic contempt for the body made him reluctant to write down anything (the Enneads were a compromise for they established his earthly fame), and made him reluctant to have his biography written or his portrait sculpted. Such would be mere images of a mere image. To go in pursuit of "the real Plotinus" in his historical, individual existence thus involves paradox, and disrespect. It is, we might say, the conventional procedure of the historical novelist, incapable of imagining anything more than how it would have been to have been one of us then and there. Mary Casey knows that notions of history, and of individual existence, and indeed of things and actions, are historically variable. What she tries to present is Plotinus as he might have seemed to himself, and life as it might appear through the mental categories of a neo-Platonist.

The novel, prose fiction, prose itself, are all anachronistic and incompatible: poetry is not. This book's prose is wrought as poetry, its diction and syntax compressed and shaped as if by forms and forces unknown to the reader. The opening paragraph:

A faint wind moved through the rushes, they swayed, forgetting the stillness which had held them through the night frozen and silent. The boy in the boat opening his eyes at that whisper

