

# The Powys Review

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# The Powys Review

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Correspondence, contributions, and books for review may be addressed to the Editor,  
Department of English, Saint David's  
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Cover: Margaret Jones, illustration to The Lady of the Fountain: the blackman (courtesy the Editor)			

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# Mark Patterson

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## The Origins of John Cowper Powys's Myrddin Wyllt

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In a diary entry dated 23 April 1945, written at a time when he was working and reworking the first nine chapters of *Porius*, John Cowper Powys declared: "Yesterday was a memorable day to me as *I became Merlin* ... I was describing him to such an extent that the curlews, wood-pigeons, and a wild rabbit behaved as if Merlin was there by me!!!"<sup>1</sup> The figure of Merlin possessed an enduring appeal for Powys, and this diary fragment exposes the two distinct ways in which he represents the arcane prophet and magician within his writing. Firstly the statement alludes to the elemental, tutelary mage who is in the process of being drawn into his "Romance of the Dark Ages". Secondly, and in a manner typical of Powys's use of the character in his autobiographical writings, Merlin is cast as an inspirational entity, whose magical wisdom and guidance evokes Powys's imaginative powers. When Powys recalls his earliest motive aspirations in the *Autobiography*, he defines the creative powers common to both magician and writer:

As I have insisted from the start, my dominant life illusion was that I was, or at least would eventually be, a magician; and what is a magician if not one who converts God's 'reality' into his own 'reality', God's nature into his own nature?<sup>2</sup>

The magician, like the writer, stands for the fulfilment of imaginative potential and the ultimate goal of transforming a predefined world into a uniquely personal creative vision. Powys chose Merlin as a muse to follow in his quest to transform and revitalize the sphere of apparent reality: "I can well recall waking up one morning ... and thinking to myself that I must and would bring into my real life those fancies about being a magician, like Merlin ... which were forever hovering in my brain ... I wanted to call up demons".<sup>3</sup> As a writer who chooses the isolatory, and outcast, role of the magician, Powys sees himself as an inheritor of veiled, powerful and socially dangerous knowledge: "The prophet, the magician drew his ins-

piration from what had gone before. All progress in ideas is spiral forever returning upon itself".<sup>4</sup> Merlin becomes both an instructor, relaying the "gathered wisdom of the old times" and an embodied character in Powys's fiction. However, just as the quest for Merlin the inspirator remained forever a goal, the presence of Merlin the character proved elusive until he emerged into the foreground of *Porius*. In *Wolf Solent* Merlin is linked with the character of Christie Malakite. Whilst his presence is understated it contributes to the attributes of mystery and distance that draw Wolf to Christie:

'My mother was Welsh,' she went on. 'She used to tell us the wildest stories about her ancestors. Once she actually told us she descended from Merlin. Merlin's mother was a nun. Did you know that Wolf?'

'No wonder you're a bit inhuman,' he said.<sup>5</sup>

References to Merlin's Welsh lineage, and the connection between his wisdom and 'feminine' perception, prefigure major themes developed around the character in *Porius*. In *Wolf Solent*, however, these issues are not pursued. Merlin remains in the background, a figure associated with the mysteries of the Glastonbury landscape, beckoning Wolf towards a consideration of the remote and pagan past.<sup>6</sup> In *A Glastonbury Romance* Merlin is again identified with the powers inherent in the Somerset soil: "In Glastonbury, where he had disappeared from view, Merlin must always be the 'numen' or the 'Tremendum Mysterium' that can be second to none".<sup>7</sup> There are repeated references to Merlin in *A Glastonbury Romance*. The story of his incarceration as narrated by Malory captivates the imagination of Owen Evans, and acts as an anodyne, offering a brief respite for his tortured soul. (178) In connection with Evans's planned work on "The Life of Merlin" we are offered an insight into Powys's knowledge of the many forms of tale and legend within which Merlin has been represented. Occasional references to the Welsh Triads (120), Malory (176), and the

writings of Roger Sherman Loomis and John Rhys (807) greet the reader. From these scattered points of reference to specific traditional sources one is made aware of a mythic personage who, though infrequently alluded to, is as essential to the deep religious and psychological undercurrents of *A Glastonbury Romance* as the legend of the Grail itself. He is a focal point for both poetical attention, and religious feeling. Edward Athling writes a poem entitled "Merlin the Enchanter" (328). John Geard, purportedly ignorant of the written variants of the Merlin legend, including Malory (885), considers the magician essential to his dream of a 'New Jerusalem' that is to be founded on Glastonbury soil (163). As with other Arthurian characters in *A Glastonbury Romance*, references to Merlin are allusive, and although strongly urged in the chapter 'Marks Court', the actual figure of Merlin is as tantalisingly distant as in *Wolf Solent*. However, in the fantasy of *Morwyn*, Merlin is allowed a more central position. Here the Marquis of Sade acquaints the narrator with an account of the bard Taliesin's perennial quest:

But what they *say* is that he's been seized with that weird passion for a Quest to which his fellow-countrymen are so prone. The 'Quest' in his case is to hunt high and low for the great enchanter Merlin, who, as perhaps you are aware, since you come from his country, has not been heard of from any quarter of the visible or invisible world since his affair with that remarkable girl.<sup>8</sup>

When Merlin is located beneath hell, sleeping in the hiding place where "that remarkable girl" Ninue has banished him, the narrator meets a recumbent figure of "superhuman dignity" with a beard "grizzled rather than grey" stretching the length of a white woollen mantle.<sup>9</sup> Although, at last, the Magician has been solidly represented, Powys wryly refuses to give him a voice. The 'Quest' pursued by Taliesin and the narrator, the same poetical Quest outlined in Powys's autobiographical works, pushes beyond Merlin and into the alluring chamber of Caridwen and Rhadamanthus.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Powys animates Classical and Renaissance figures such as Rhadamanthus, Socrates, and Rabelais, he is hesitant in allowing Merlin an equal measure of articulation. This is because, in *Morwyn*, Powys is still coming to terms with the aspect and meaning of a Welsh mythology that will provide the all important backdrop for Merlin when he is

finally given a voice in *Porius*. There is another reason why Merlin is not concretely drawn amongst the spectres of *Morwyn*; he does not belong solely to the realm of the fantastic. Why Merlin is finally cast in the fusion of mythic fantasy and realism that characterise *Porius* is best explained in an extract taken from Powys's diary for 1935. Although he is referring to the progress of *Maiden Castle*, the statement sheds considerable light as to why a roundly believable Merlin would have to appear in a detailed Historical Romance: "Aye! how I do want to make it convincing as I go on. I begin with fantastic situations and weird persons out of the ordinary but *later on* I do feel the necessity of thickening it all out with as many touches of reality and of versimilitude as I can gather in. I want to have it 'Perfectly Realised'."<sup>11</sup>

There was obviously no easy way for Powys to accept Merlin if he had to be convincingly drawn into the epic realm of *Porius*. Though when he was finally introduced into his fiction Powys displayed evident satisfaction with his achievement: "This Romance is ... the best piece of work I've ever done. It introduces both King Arthur and Merlin, treated in a different manner, at once more realistically and more sensationally than they've ever been treated".<sup>12</sup> The confidence with which he believed in his ability to successfully render the image in his work is expressed in his "Preface" to *Porius*:

As to Merlin ... this undying discovery, this imperishable creation of our Welsh ancestors, I have as much right to introduce here 'Like a god from the machine' as the author of Job had to introduce the Voice of Jehovah or Goethe's Faust first to capture and then to exorcise that 'queer son of chaos' Mephistopheles!<sup>13</sup>

Clearly the potency of the author's mythopoeic vision must be equal to the stature of the creation he is recasting. Powys's Merlin, following in the tradition of Goethe's Mephistopheles, must bear the stamp of the author's personality whilst affirming traditional aspects of characterisation that have been obscured and undermined. In *Porius* Powys consummately expresses aspects of his long cultivated philosophy, advocating an affirmative, sensual reappraisal of the individual's relationship with the animate and inanimate components of the natural world. The prime mouthpiece for Powys's "philosophy of elementalism" is Myrddin Wyllt, whose name is borrowed from

one of the earliest manifestations of the Merlin figure in ancient Welsh poetry. Powys's creation is at once inspiring and repellent. It is his triumph as an author that he can present us with a figure whose tactile grossness and supra-sensual presence stimulates unease and forces a reconsideration of aesthetic and spiritual values. Exuding a "strange fungus smell", redolent of organic decay, Powys's Merlin presents himself thus:

The man who in that mist looked like a herdsman from the south spoke in a low, hoarse, guttural whisper, like someone who had given up for long years the use of human speech ... The man's head was bare of everything but a crop of coal-black hair, and his ears were the largest appendages of that kind that Porius had ever seen.<sup>14</sup>

To those solely familiar with the Merlin depicted during the great Arthurian revival of the nineteenth century, whether it be Tennyson's magical architect and prophet, or the sallow and saturnine victim portrayed by Burne-Jones, Powys's Myrddin would appear both puzzling



Merlin and Nimue from Aubrey Beardsley's illustration to *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1893) a parody of Burne-Jones's Merlin

and shocking. Arguably all the Arthurian characters of *Porius* are inflected in such a way so as to undermine the conventionalised notions of an Arthurian ideal, such as had been heralded by the poets and artists of the Victorian era. Myrddin Wyllt's centrality, however, compared with the peripheral presences of Arthur, Medrawd, Galehaut, and Peredur, ensures a sustained confutation of standardised aesthetic values. Yet, for all his strangeness, Powys's Merlin does not embody a complete departure from tradition; he is not at variance with certain archaic representations of the Merlin figure. Like Owen Evans who sought to compile a new and authentic "Life of Merlin", Powys gathered his knowledge of the legendary figure from varied literary regions. From his fiction, philosophical writings, letters and diaries we learn that Powys had recourse to Welsh lore and Latin romance, old and modern Arthurian poetry and prose, pseudo-history and chronicle, contemporary criticism and folkloric research, all of which were selectively considered before the mage could be satisfactorily drawn into Powys's life and fiction.

John Cowper Powys was familiar with the works of Sir Thomas Malory at least as early as 1898, when he stood before the Oxford University Extension committee to lecture on the Arthurian legend. In the *Autobiography* he refers to this period and recalls, "I think we possessed in our own shelves, or at least our relations did in theirs, the green covered 'Globe Edition' of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*".<sup>15</sup> He lectured on the Arthurian legend again in 1901, at the summer meeting of the Oxford University Extension delegacy, the first lecture on the syllabus being devoted to "Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*".<sup>16</sup> References to Malory's Arthurian epic occur at key stages in Powys's writing career. An extract relating the arrangements for the climatic battle between "King Arthur and Sir Modred" is inserted into a letter to his brother Llewelyn, dated 16 August 1912.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Nicholas Ross, dated 15 May 1942, he refers to a copy of the *Morte D'Arthur* in his possession: "My Malory, this two volume book, bought in 1928 in Kansas City".<sup>18</sup> Of the diverse Arthurian sources alluded to in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Malory's name recurs the most frequently.<sup>19</sup> Owen Evans turns to the *Morte D'Arthur*, "For exactly the twenty-fifth time (176) where the passage describing Merlin's concealment temporarily alleviates his tortured and divided soul: "He was

careful to open the book this time not at the end but at the beginning; and he turned over the pages until he came to a particular passage about Merlin which always stirred him profoundly" (178). Malory's work is undoubtedly one of the most accessible and enduring versions of the Arthurian legend, and the Merlin he describes, despite the brevity of his appearance, is one of the best known of all his literary representations. Having returned again and again to this fifteenth century text Powys could not help but be influenced by the figure Malory describes. Merlin's entry into the *Morte D'Arthur* is sudden, and Malory presupposes the reader's foreknowledge of the magician's history. He is introduced as a renowned sorcerer and royal councillor, responsible for founding the Order of the Round Table and forecasting the Quest of the Holy Grail. Certain characteristics correspond with the outcast prophet of *Porius*. In the *Morte D'Arthur* Merlin is cast as an advisor to Uther Pendragon and Arthur. His soothsaying abilities are essential in the organization of battle campaigns and in predicting the tragic inevitability of King Arthur's life. He is feared by many and denigrated as a "Dream reader".<sup>20</sup> In one instance he has to be saved by Arthur from savage public persecution.<sup>21</sup> The character's delight in disguise, trickery and roguery, would have inevitably endeared him to Powys who understood these characteristics as prerequisite to the play of deception and elusiveness essential to the creation of literature. These abilities were for Powys the source of the "magic" whereby he could transform himself into the roles of "a pluralist, a totemist, a fetishist, a mythologist, a polytheist, and even a 'chaoticist' and place his shifting notions of 'truth' amongst "all the 'truths' of which the universe is crowded".<sup>22</sup> When Malory's Merlin perplexes and angers King Arthur, seeking favours whilst disguised as a "churl", or offering unwanted wisdom as a "Child of fourteen years of age", one is compelled to consider Powys's delight in acting the role of "cultural gadfly", goading and vexing figures of authority, described in the *Autobiography*, where he defines "charlatanism" and the "comic-actor element" as the "essence of all psychic truth".<sup>23</sup> In *Porius* Myrddin's shape changing abilities are subject to Porius's sceptical enquiry: "He had heard from his earliest childhood at Mynydd-Y-Gaer about this weird person's shape shifting disguises, but he realised now that there was much less in them than the legend proclaimed" (89). Myrddin can never

effect a true disguise; nothing can fully conceal the exaggerated "enormity of his cavernous eyes", "primeval forehead" and "subhuman" skull. For Powys it is important that the aspect of a charade is maintained during Myrddin's sartorial transformations. His essential appearance remains the same, as a reminder of his distinct, almost foolish, otherness.

Malory's deftly written and moving account of Merlin's disappearance not only acts as a comforter to Owen Evans in *A Glastonbury Romance* but also provides a pattern for the climactic events that close *Porius*. Not only is Merlin aware of his inevitable imprisonment in the *Morte D'Arthur*, he is also mysteriously compliant with his fate. It is his persistent and amorous pursuit of Nimue that will inevitably bind him. The pursuit of desire is presented in such a way that Malory avoids the misogynistic morality that would later temper Tennyson's treatment of the incident. Merlin is his own victim, a fact that Powys skilfully employs when he describes Myrddin's interment in *Porius*. The full tragedy of Merlin's submission is succinctly written into Malory's account. "So by her subtle working she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there; but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin."<sup>24</sup>

Sir Thomas Malory's work proved to be a vital inspirational source for the Arthurian revival of the nineteenth century. His chivalrous tale of mankind's failure to achieve an ideal worked its way into the art and poetry of an era where the pursuit of new social and personal virtues was an enduring and major concern. As these themes form the backdrop against which Powys's developing artistry was set, the Arthurian conceptions born from nineteenth century need deserve to be carefully considered in relation to his work. There are, of course, areas of Victorian Arthuriana about which Powys professedly knew little. For instance, in a letter to Nicholas Ross, he states that he is unfamiliar with the poetry of Robert Stephen Hawker ("Till you began to tell me of him I had never so much as heard his name")<sup>25</sup> whose poem entitled *The Quest of the Sangraal*, published in 1863, included a Merlin who cast obscure prophesies regarding Britain's future. Although Hawker's verse enjoyed a measure of popularity, he was never at the vanguard of the movement forsworn to establish the integrity of a largely ignored body of British legend. In the same letter to Ross, Powys



Merlin casts a spell on Gyneth, Henry Selous's illustration to Scott's "The Bridal of Triermain", *Poems and Pictures* (1846)

declares his admiration for the poet who more than anyone secured a new respectability for the 'Matter of Britain', Tennyson. At the same time as he had been delivering lectures on Malory, Powys had also lectured on 'the philosophy of Tennyson', 'the art of Tennyson', and 'the Idylls of the King' as part of his Extension lecture syllabi.<sup>26</sup>

The infrequent references to Tennyson in Powys's writing allude mainly to the formative value of his verse; he assumes the status of a benevolent, inspirational sire to Powys's early poetic excursions.<sup>27</sup> Whilst in an early poem Powys exalts the poet laureate as the "Great bard of England ... Mighty magician!"<sup>28</sup> Powys's mature philosophy implements a deliberate withdrawal from the ethics propounded in Tennyson's *Idylls*. One finds, for example, within *In Defence of Sensuality* a disavowal of "the pompous evolutionary chatter about 'letting the ape and tiger die' from amid our human instincts",<sup>29</sup> thereby challenging the conception of a hierarchic world view, proclaiming man's unquestionable dominion at the apex of a stratified 'natural' order, which underpins Tennyson's Arthurian scheme. Tennyson was greatly indebted to the *Morte D'Arthur* for supplying many of the characters, incidents, and themes used in the *Idylls*, although there are many conscious departures from tradition, the implications of which affect Powys's Myrddin Wyllt. Tennyson divests Merlin of his reputed diabolic parentage and invests his character with a grandeur and dignity befitting the instructor of Arthur the divine agent. Gone also are the lusty and mischievous credentials bestowed by Malory. Whilst Powys rebels against the morally staid aspects of the new Merlin, rejecting the moral refinement that determined the construction of Tennyson's Arthurian characters, he cannot help but endorse Tennyson's conception of Merlin's centrality within the Arthurian legend. It suited Tennyson's purpose to grant Merlin a longevity denied by Malory so that he could fulfil his purpose in the scheme of the *Idylls*. Merlin's entombment occurs at a comparatively early stage in the *Mort D'Arthur*. The incident as described in Tennyson's *Merlin and Vivian* occupies a central position within the finally ordered pattern of the *Idylls*, stressing the importance of his disappearance and its repercussions, as it hastens the decline of Arthur's realm.

Tennyson's preoccupation with the Arthurian legend spanned the greater part of his poetical



Tennyson's Merlin and Vivien, an engraving (by W. Ridgway) after Gustav Doré

career, and given Powys's knowledge of the poet-laureate's verse one can suspect that he must have been familiar with one of Tennyson's last and most personal poems *Merlin and the Gleam*. Here Merlin's magic is unequivocally linked with the art of the poet. The "Grey Magician" is the prophetic patron of the lone poet and wayfarer. In this poem Tennyson compounds many of the ideas about Merlin formulated within the *Idylls*. As a catalyst he exists to awaken and invoke the highest ideals in others. Analogies between the lot of the mistrusted, outcast wizard and the paradoxically powerful yet peripheral social position of the poet-prophet are apparent within both Tennyson's and Powys's works. Both Merlin and Myrddin draw their wisdom from a remote, disengaged, past, promoting an awareness of a golden age that once existed and may one day exist again. Yet both are fully aware of their own tragic destiny and understand that their message is to be understood by few.

Whereas Tennyson at his most extreme represented a celebration of order that goaded Powys into a forceful critical response, the

poetry of Matthew Arnold is often cited as an antidote to the "Sunday school lesson" venter of the poet-laureate's work. The perception of nature and personal liberty in Arnold's poetry, that so captivated Powys, are encapsulated in his narrative poem *Tristram and Iseult*. The story of Merlin's fateful encounter with Vivian is added as a coda to Arnold's modern rendition of the traditional tale. Its tragic declarations of love, passion, melancholy, and loss stirred Powys, who saw within Arnold's poem instances of "startling and penetrating beauty; such as ... bring all the tears of half-forgotten romance back again to us and restore to us the despair that is dearer than hope".<sup>30</sup> By inverting popular poetic methods that advocated the construction of giant poetic schemes, in order to delineate the efficacy of new ethical systems and moral concerns, Arnold's verse works from the ground up. Rather than map the terrain of immediate social issues, Arnold emphasises the personal, emotional motivations that define the human condition. With *Tristram and Iseult* Arnold proffers a timely rejoinder against Tennyson's "artistic dignity". Indeed Powys sees in the poem's art-

lessness a true response to modern need: "How superior to all the laboured and artistic attempts of Tennyson and Swinburne and of so many others down to this present hour!—to catch what is really the most evasive secret in the whole over-world of inspiration in this casual, easy, careless unfinished fragment!"<sup>31</sup>

Praising the "romantic and yet realistic naivete" of the poem, Powys contrasts its anti-aestheticism with "pure medieval romance".<sup>32</sup> More specifically *Tristram and Iseult* is compared with a passage taken from the Old Welsh tale *Kilhwch and Olwen*, featured in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion*. Believing that Arnold's verse possessed an affinity with this tale that "Tennyson ... could never capture" Powys emphasised the stylistic similarities that reinforced Arnold's position as an inheritor of obscured perceptions. The abundance of incidental description, including the "brush-wood", "stems", "blossom", "horns", and "brawling brook" that frame Merlin's fated journey to the sylvan "daisied circle", predominates over action and dialogue at the poem's close. This emphasis on the detail of mundane objects, motions, and colours, invites comparison with the *Mabinogion* where supernatural incident is described in conjunction with similar illuminative and descriptive passages. Such instances where supernatural improbability and vivid foreground realism meet, constituted the definitive synthesis of what Arnold called "celtic genius". The convergence of naturalistic and supernatural expression makes for celtic magic: "Magic is the word to insist upon a magically vivid and new interpretation of nature".<sup>33</sup>

Myrddin Wyllt's portrayal is rooted in a similar vein of romantic expression; gross realism complements his uncanny communicative and prophetic powers. He belongs more to the tradition of Arnold's Merlin, a being who willingly subsides into the natural world, than to Tennyson's dignified architect and builder. The latter's creations are doomed to crumble whilst the perennial message of Arnold is one of subterranean survival and endurance. Moreover his message is not one to be filtered down through society by a semi-divine agent such as King Arthur, it works from below, through Merlin the agent of "Nature that great non-human power".<sup>34</sup> All of these sentiments are gathered in Myrddin Wyllt's memorable speech denouncing the imposition of power, dominion, and material conceit:

Nobody in the world, nobody beyond the world, can be trusted with power ... The Golden age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and devils learn to unmake themselves ... as I did, and leave men and women to themselves ... That's the hope of the world. The world lasts and man lasts, and the animals and birds and fishes last, but gods and governments perish! (276)

When Merlin entered into the poetry and prose of the opening decades of the twentieth century he appeared as one displaced from the pedestal of Victorian idealism. Edward Arlington Robinson's *Merlin* (1917) updated the magician in a poem that attempts to encapsulate Robinson's belief in the "romance of the common-place". The supernatural elements and the emphasis on details of battle, conquest and massed action, integral parts of the old stories, are dropped in favour of a sceptical and intense psychological study of power and dissolution. Traditional moral dichotomies are broken down into more complicated and subtle patterns of conscience. Robinson, as he describes Vivian's insidiously sophisticated beauty, ensures that she represents more than an embodiment of untruth and destruction. Merlin is also given new and fuller dimensions as the poem probes the dilemma that shadows his decision to forsake his voluntary exile with Vivian and aid the beleaguered realm of King Arthur. Powys was a great friend and admirer of Robinson<sup>35</sup> "whose personality", he states in the *Autobiography*, "has always attracted me as much as his singular genius".<sup>36</sup> It is tempting to trace the colloquial and realistic inflexions of Robinson's verse, with its emphasis on personal survival in spite of intrusive social change, into the development of magic realism in Powys's fiction. However, whilst it seemed that Merlin still had an important poetic function, Powys turned away from his recent poetical representations, towards critical and evaluative studies of the Arthurian legend, in order to nurture his Myrddin. His early interest in archaic Welsh literature was given a coherent direction through contact with two books, Arnold's *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867)<sup>37</sup> and Sir John Rhys's *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (1891).<sup>38</sup> The former testifies to the culturally revivifying poetical values inherent to archaic Welsh literature, whilst the latter perpetuates Arnold's crusade to champion a neglected, native, Celtic heritage, in

a pioneering study of the Arthurian legend's development from ancient Welsh sources. Powys looked towards Wales and things Welsh to provide a focal point for his philosophical and poetical speculation. He looked to Wales to find "a link between the spring time of Christendom and our Modern age".<sup>39</sup> Merlin became linked with Powys's quest for a restive religious sense that would replace static Christian dogma. His speculative vision was fired by the fact that the earliest manifestations of the Merlin figure lay in the distant, obscure, and until recently uncovered regions of archaic Welsh tale and verse. Doubtless he would have agreed with David Jones's conception of the Arthurian literature of old Wales being linked with a disquieting, primal instinct.

The Celtic cycle that lies, like a subterranean influence as a deep water troubling, under everything in this island, like Merlin complaining under his big rock.<sup>40</sup>

In fact the early representations of Merlin not only provided Powys with elements of physical description, absent in Malory, that determined the physiognomy of Myrddin Wyllt, they also established Merlin as both madman and prophet, an outcast with a strong affinity towards the natural world, a figure whose powers lay dormant in the landscape within which he is restrained.

Although Rhys neglects to trace Merlin's Welsh provenance amongst the many lists of Arthurian characters whose Celtic lineage is defined in the *Arthurian Legend*, he does locate the region of the magician's final disappearance into a "Glass House" on the "Isle of Bardsey, off the western most point of North Wales".<sup>41</sup> More importantly Rhys alights upon a passage from Plutarch, describing the travels of Demitrius, relating the imprisonment of "Cronus" in an island close to Britain. A parallel is drawn between the "slumbering Cronus" and "Merlin with his bardic satellities entering the Glass House in Bardsey, never more to appear among men".<sup>42</sup> This particular notion excited Powys's imagination to the extent that the usurped Titan became synonymous with the Arthurian Mage. Myrddin Wyllt becomes: "The supreme Deity of Britain ... whom ... I prefer to 'equate' with Cronus or Saturn, the Father".<sup>43</sup>

Although Merlin is not mentioned by name in the collection of early Welsh tales that make up the *Mabinogion*, the presence of two sinister key figures prefigures the development of Powys's

advisor and "herdsman from the South". In *Kilwch and Olwen*, Kilwch and Arthur's retinue encounter a stranger whose advice is instrumental in their quest for the giant's daughter. They encounter a "vast" and "boundless" flock of sheep, presided over by a rustic yet supernatural guardian: "And upon the top of the mound there was a herdsman, keeping the sheep. And a rug made of stars was upon him".<sup>43</sup> A similar figure is encouraged by Owain in his quest for the Countess of the Fountain, in *The Lady of the Fountain*. The advice he needs to complete his sojourn comes from an initially repulsive source. Kynon tells Owain to journey to a certain wood:

'And thou wilt see a black man of great stature on top of the mound. He is not smaller in size than two of the men of this world. He has but one foot; and one eye in the middle of his forehead. And he is not a comely man, but on the contrary he is exceedingly ill-favoured; and he is the woodward of that wood. And thou wilt see a thousand wild animals grazing around him.'



When the extent of the nameless woodward's power over the woodland is questioned, the figure responds:

'I will show thee, little man' said he. And he took his club in his hand, and with it he struck a stag a great blow so that he brayed vehemently, and at his braying the other animals came together, as numerous as the stars in the sky ... And he looked at them, and bade them to go and feed; and they bowed their heads, and did him homage as vassals to their lord.

Then the black man said to me, 'Seest thou now, little man, what power I hold over these animals'.<sup>45</sup>

The correspondences between the "ill-favoured", one-eyed stranger and Powys's deceptively cyclopean prophet are obvious. The connections are confirmed by a passage in *Porius* where the scene from the *Mabinogion* is significantly inverted. Myrddin Wyllt's actions are more tenderly ministrative than imperiously brutal as he baffles Porius's questions regarding his indentity:

The figure in sheepskins shrugged his shoulders and made an indescribable gesture with his free hand, while with his club he patted softly the palpitating sides of the young deer.

'I am what you see,' he said in the same harsh, husky, muttering tone. 'The creatures you see are *my* creatures. They know me and I know them.'<sup>(56)</sup>

In his later years John Cowper Powys urged G. R. Wilson Knight to "get hold of Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion*' which was published in the 'Everyman Series!' None of these modern translations *touch* Lady Charlotte Guest and her *notes* are full of that rich dark suggestiveness that a real scholar like you can appreciate best".<sup>46</sup> One finds in the notes appended to *The Lady of the Fountain* a recountal of the Breton based Merlin and Vivian tale that inspired Arnold's coda for *Tristram and Iseult*. Whilst this would have established the importance of the fated tryst in Powys's mind, it is the otherworldly figures of the *Mabinogion* stories that lent themselves to the creation of a disturbing, but not barbaric, prophet embodying attributes of the "profane and impious" and the "comical and grotesque" necessary for one who would "give vent to strictures upon the Status Quo".<sup>47</sup>

Merlin's stature as an advisor and prophet, closer to the world of flora and fauna than to the society of men, is highlighted in Roger Sherman Loomis's *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, published in 1927. In this book Loomis explores Merlin's literary and mythic

ancestry, analysing, along the way, the magician's "Peculiar Fondness for the role of the Giant Herdsman of Churl".<sup>48</sup> John Cowper Powys read Loomis's work as part of a preparatory study of the Grail legends, before embarking upon *A Glastonbury Romance*. In a diary entry dated 30 January 1931, he briefly states: "Read the Green Book of Loomis about the mythology of love and sank into it".<sup>49</sup> Loomis's preoccupation is with the earliest extant references to Merlin, and he evinces a "Welsh tradition" that predates the appearance of Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century *History of Kings of Britain*. Although many of the Welsh poems are obscure and elusive it appeared to Loomis that the Myrddin they describe bears the traits of "a degraded god whose special domain was poetry and prophecy".<sup>50</sup> His existence as a primal deity affixed to a particular portion of the British Isles can be extrapolated from a Welsh triad wherein Britain is referred to as "Merlin Close".<sup>51</sup> Powys refers to this ancient association in *Obstinate Cymric*, where he cites a translation of the relevant triad, which also happens to assert an early claim to Welsh dominion:

Three names were given to the Isle of Britain in the beginning: Its first inhabitants called it *Merlin's Close*; and then its inhabitants called it *The Honey Isle*; and then when it was ruled by Prydain ab Ae'dd Mawr they called it The Isle of Britain. No one has any right to it except the Welsh people for they conquered it first.<sup>52</sup>

Loomis traces Merlin's 'wild' disposition to the Myrddin Wyllt of ancient Welsh poetry. The emergence of a later tradition, depicting a Merlin more regal than elementally prophetic, is ascribed to a bifurcation of detail in two early chronicles that describe the early history and deeds of the prophet, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth's text and Nennius's ninth century *Historia Brittonum*. The figure identifiable with Merlin in the anterior text calls himself Ambrosius, and is identified by Nennius as a ruling figure: "Embreis the Chief Emperor". The title Ambrosius also translates as 'Immortal', and this appellation is appended to the name of Merlin in Geoffrey's text. This early amalgamation of themes led to a double identity that accompanied the figure of Merlin thereafter. The earlier traditions are comparatively less confused and more or less unanimous regarding Merlin's grotesque and solitary wood-

land existence. Such literary representations are extensively cited by Loomis, who also claims that tradition declares the existence of two Merlins: "Merlin Ambrosius and Merlin Sylvester (of the wood)". He cites a resounding description of Merlin's transmogrification into the form of a wild man, taken from the *Livre d'Artus*, which is noteworthy for its proximity to Powys's portrayal of Myrddin Wyllt:

He became a great herdsman, a great club in his hand, clad in a great hide ... He was transformed so that his ears hung down to his waist, wide as a winnowing fan. He had eyes in his head as large and as black as a-, and a head as big as a buffalo's, and hair so long that it brushed his girdle, all bristly, stiff and black as ink.

'I am as you see, for I am never anything else, and I watch over the beasts of these woods and the forest, of which I am wholly lord.'<sup>53</sup>

Whilst intrigued by this curiously composite character, Powys, because of its elemental and isolatory connotations, chose the name of 'Myrddin Wyllt otherwise 'Myrddin Wild' whom I have chosen as my Merlin in this tale in preference to Merlin Ambrosius or 'Merlin the Immortal' and to Merlin Emrys whom we associate with royal authority".<sup>54</sup> Loomis interprets "Emrys" as a corruption of "Embreis", though Powys may have come across the appellation in Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion*. Her notes incorporate a translation of a Welsh triad linking "Merddin Emrys" with the figure of Taliesin; both are titled as "Baptismal bards of Britain".<sup>56</sup> In Loomis's work Powys found material to bolster his conception of a Welsh prophet, part wild man and part fallen god, a consummation of the "sub-human" and "super-human" elements of the psyche that, within *In Defence of Sensuality*, he declared modern humanity had "crowded out of existence". The cumulative evidence expressing Merlin's immortality led Loomis to declare him to be "without exception the most deathless figure in Arthurian romance", a pronouncement with which Powys would have certainly agreed.

Myrddin Wyllt's existence presents a passively threatening obstacle to the exponents of Christian dogma, in *Porius*. He is denounced as an "arch devil", a "hellish magician", and an "antiChrist of Magic" by his Christian persecutor. Powys would have found the most

succinct and poetical renditions of Merlin's parentage in two twelfth century Arthurian chronicles, Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Layamon's *Brut*.<sup>57</sup> Biblical comparisons are immediately conspicuous in both chronicles as they describe Merlin's supernatural conception, his being sought after by an elder, and his role as prophet, all of which parallel the early life of Christ. For Powys an apocalyptic figure, conceived by a nun and sired by a devil, presented itself, and would be incorporated into his enemy of systematised religious structures. Powys, however, distrusted dogmatically declared demonic knowledge as much as he distrusted Christianity. "Beware of the Occult!" he declares to G. R. Wilson Knight, "Its effect on us is a weakening one, a blurring one and not an enlightening one".<sup>58</sup> An equally formidable opponent of free and articulate thought presented itself to Powys in the form of the Christian Apologist fiction that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s. He singled out the writings of C. S. Lewis as being more insidiously threatening than anything "the Master" Aleister Crowley could concoct:

How far more terrifying ... than any of the late Master's antics are the imaginative horrors of some of those believers in the blessed trinity like C. S. Lewis ... this lordly "loving laughing" Christianity is the limit.<sup>59</sup>

During the month of November 1945, whilst completing the chapter of *Porius* to be called "Myrddin Wyllt", Powys wrote in his diary that at the same time as he was "writing about Merlin" he was also "reading about him".<sup>60</sup> His reading matter was, in fact, C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength* (1945), a book that compelled Powys with varying degrees of disgust and fascination. In a diary entry dated 29 October 1945, he refers to his and Phyllis Playter's perusal of the book that day:

We are *both shocked* and horrified and disgusted by the mind revealed by Clive Staples Lewis's book called this '*Hideous Strength*' ... I do not like his idea of what goodness is and his chat about erotic 'obedience' makes me sick!<sup>61</sup>

Set in modern England the novel's plot centres upon the efforts made by Dr Ransom, "The Pendragon of Britain", the spiritual head of a latter day Arthurian 'Company', to combat the growth of the totalitarian organization NICE. During the course of events Merlin's burial place

is discovered, and a race against time ensues as both parties strive to resurrect the prophet and enlist him to their cause. Merlin Ambrosius sides with Ransom and the Company, although his allegiance is less than inevitable, as Powys states: "We have now reached an exciting point in *This Hideous Strength* ... as to which side (whether *God's* or the *Devil's* side) Merlin will take as he wakes up!!"<sup>62</sup> Both Lewis's Merlin Ambrosius and Powys's Myrddin Wyllt are sought after as repositories of an age old wisdom, a wisdom that can subvert oppressive rule. The learned Dr Dimble, in *That Hideous Strength*, discloses the magician's ancient origins:

'Has it ever struck you what an odd creation Merlin is? He's not evil: yet he's a magician ... I often wonder ... whether Merlin doesn't represent the last traces of something the later tradition has quite forgotten about—something that became impossible when the only people in touch with the supernatural were either white or black, either priests or sorcerers.'<sup>63</sup>

Despite his triumph in securing Ransom's success, Lewis is sceptical of Merlin's dual divine-diabolic origin and his place in the modern world. Ransom, the figurehead of Christian order, declares, "I'm afraid there is no niche in the world for people that won't be either Pagan or Christian".<sup>64</sup> Merlin's powers are brought under Ransom's subjection, and at the novel's close Christian order is established once again, with the submission and obedience to patriarchal rule that Lewis's Christian scheme demands. It is significant that, given Powys's distaste for Lewis's brand of 'obedience', the chapter "Myrddin Wyllt" contains Myrddin's strongest denunciation of the new Christian message with its claims of duty and obeisance:

'Listen, child. Do you think obedience is a good thing?'

'Am I to say the truth?'

And Neb the son of Digon coldly shook his impish head.

'No, Master, I don't. It's what cruel people do to children and animals.'

The resurrected one from yr Wyddfa positively clapped his hands at this reply.

'Well, then, the Devil is every God who exacts obedience.'

'What turns a God into a devil, Master?'

'Power, my son. Nobody in the world, nobody beyond the world, can be trusted with power ...' (276)

Myrddin Wyllt's message is one of forbearance from dogmatism and dominative control. He is a catalyst, not an imposer of change, and therefore stands against the Christian strength advocated in Lewis's book.

A further collaboration with traditional Welsh sources would have resulted from Powys's acquaintance with a text purchased in 1939. In a letter to C. Benson Roberts, he writes, "And do you know what I've bought? I saw it in a secondhand catalogue. Nothing less than the *Myvrian Archaiology of Wales* printed and published in 1870 by Thomas Gee originally published in London in 1801. To *this* book every single scholar who ever writes refers! It is like that book of *Michael Scott the Wizard* in Sir Walter's 'Lay.'<sup>65</sup>

*The Myvrian Archaiology of Wales*, represents a huge undertaking to collect and collate specimens of "ancient manuscripts in the Welsh tongue". It incorporates anonymous and named bardic verse, and cites examples of archaic Welsh poetry, historical documents, and prose. The text's introduction, written in 1801, would alone have excited Powys's speculations about a pacific, homespun wisdom: "The books are venerable monuments of enlightened periods of literature amongst the Briton, while scenes of barbarity were acted over Europe, and darkened the light of our Island: a literature whose origin was not borrowed but matured at home, under the extraordinary system, the Bardic institution".<sup>66</sup>

A section of the *Archaiology* is devoted to a group of poems credited to Myrddin. The "Myrddin Poems" are narrated by, or refer to the conversation of, the outcast prophet Myrddin Wyllt. They reveal a figure persecuted as often as he is called upon to counsel, and as frail in his isolation as he is strong in his prophetic powers. Not only would these poems have impressed the characteristics that constituted Powys's isolatory prophet, but they would also have helped to establish the formal relationships between Myrddin Wyllt and the accompanying 'Arthurian' characters of *Porius*.<sup>67</sup>

Whilst Powys persistently asserts the primacy of neglected poetic vision over and above predominant scientific perspectives, he tacitly shares Matthew Arnold's belief that the 'disinterested' disciplines of philology and anthropology offered a way of looking beyond the petrified standards of modern thought. To this end he sought out the works of Rhys and Loomis, and then turned to legend and lore, to nourish his artistic and phil-

osophic vision, and create a new Merlin. Unlike his contemporaries, who either dealt with Christian tempered chivalric prose or handled pagan legend too elegantly, Powys used 'inartistic' materials to reject certain long-standing aesthetic codes that propagated moral prohibitions. If a single character could be extracted from the many sources from which John Cowper Powys drew his inspiration, whose bearing corresponds with the complexities of his own prophetic creation, then perhaps one should look to Gwydion, the enchanter whose powerful magic sets him apart to preside over the magically endowed characters in the *Mabinogion*.<sup>68</sup> The characteristics that Powys believed both artist and magician share reside within this archaic

figure. Gwydion is presented as a master of illusion and self-transformation, whose wonder-working powers are born from a reciprocal manipulation of natural phenomena, and an affinitive kinship with the natural world. Using his magical wand he bestows a semblance of life upon inert matter, turns man into beast, and vegetation into beautiful womanhood. Most importantly it is stated that his magic is worked through the power of the word; through incantation he creates life and illusion.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately Gwydion testifies to the magic Powys invested within Myrddin Wyllt, a character born from the mythic articulations of an archaic Welsh tradition, a tradition that intimates the power in the repressed realms of sensuality and nature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Diary entry, 23 April 1945. All extracts from John Cowper Powys's diaries are, unless otherwise stated, taken from the original manuscript copies housed in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography* (1934), London: Pan, 1982, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938), London: The Village Press, 1975, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Wolf Solent* London: Cape, 1929, p. 248; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, (1964), p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933), London: Pan, 1975, p. 571. Following page number in my text refer to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> *Morwyn* (1937), London: Village Press, 1987, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>11</sup> Diary entry, 14 March 1935.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Miss Muller, 16 February 1949. *The Powys Newsletter 1974-5*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> John Cowper Powys, "Preface or anything you like to *Porius*". *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Porius*, London: Macdonald, 1951; Village Press, 1974, pp. 54-55. Page numbers in my text refer to this edition.

<sup>15</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Langridge, *John Cowper Powys—a record of achievement*, London: The Library Association, 1966, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Letter, 16 August 1912, *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn 1902-1925*, London: Village Press, 1975, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, 5 May 1942, *Letters to Nicholas Ross* London: Macmillan & Co., 1900, Bk 1, ch. 9.

<sup>19</sup> *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 178, p. 179, p. 1023, p. 1055.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), London: Macmillan & Co., 1990, Bk 1, ch. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 1, ch. 23.

<sup>22</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 465.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>24</sup> *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Bk 4, ch. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Letter, 9 October 1954, *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> *John Cowper Powys—a record of achievement*, pp. 44-52.

<sup>27</sup> *Lucifer* (1956), London: Village Press, 1974, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> "To The Poet Laureate" (1892), *John Cowper Powys—a record of achievement*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> *In Defence of Sensuality* (1930), London: Village Press, 1974, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> *Visions and Revisions* (1915), London: Village Press, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> *The Pleasures of Literature* (1948), London: Village Press, 1975, p. 418.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), London: Dent, 1976, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> *The Pleasures of Literature*, p. 439.

<sup>35</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 451.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.

<sup>37</sup> *The Pleasures of Literature*, p. 435.

<sup>38</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 284.

<sup>39</sup> *Obstinate Cymric* (1947), London: Village Press, 1973, p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> David Jones, "Does the Subject Matter?", autobiographical commentary accompanying the Arts Council's David Jones Exhibition, 1989.

<sup>41</sup>Sir John Rhys, *Studies on the Arthurian Legend*; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891, p. 312.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>43</sup>John Cowper Powys, "The Characters of the Book" *The Powys Newsletter 1974-5*, p.17. Powys forecasts the conclusion of *Porius*, describing Myrddin Wyllt's confinement within a Welsh mountain top, in an essay entitled "My Philosophy up to date", where he describes a precipitous Welsh landmark, the "Highest Peak" of Eryri that may well have been a grave of crooked counselling Cronos the father of the father of gods and men". *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 144. The connection between the Cymric prophet Myrddin Wyllt and the Hesiodic Titan, as well as Cronus the Mithraic deity, is asserted in the chapter of *Porius* entitled "Myrddin Wyllt".

<sup>44</sup>Lady Charlotte Guest tr. and ed., *The Mabinogion* (1849), London: Dent, 1906, p. 108.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13-154.

<sup>46</sup>Letter, 23 May 1957, *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to G.R. Wilson Knight*, London: Cecil Woolf, 1983, p. 74.

<sup>47</sup>*In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 201.

<sup>48</sup>Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (1927), New York: Haskell House, 1967, p. 131.

<sup>49</sup>*The Diary of John Cowper Powys, 1930*, London: Greymitre Books, 1987, p. 37.

<sup>50</sup>*Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 125.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>52</sup>*Obstinate Cymric*, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup>*Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup>"The Characters of the Book", p. 17. Elsewhere Powys states that in *Porius* he hoped to compose "nothing less than the whole legend of the three Merlins, Merlin Ambrosius, Merlin Emrys, and Merlin the Savage or Wyllt", " 'Preface' or anything you like to *Porius*". p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>*The Mabinogion*, p. 427.

<sup>56</sup>Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys—Novelist*, Oxford: Clarendon, p. 186.

<sup>57</sup>Mr. E.E. Bissell informed me, in a letter 19 December 1987, that in his collection of Powys material he possesses John's copy of the "*Arthurian Chronicles*, Wace and Layamon, published in Everyman's Library in 1937".

<sup>58</sup>Letter, 25 April 1955. *Letters to G. R. Wilson Knight*, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup>Letter, 8 April 1948. *Letters to Louis Wilkinson 1935-1956*, London: Village Press, 1974, p. 245.

<sup>60</sup>Diary entry, 2 November 1945.

<sup>61</sup>Diary entry, 29 October 1945.

<sup>62</sup>C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), London: The Bodley head, 1976, p. 33.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>64</sup>Letter, 8 May 1939. *Letters to C. Benson Roberts*, London: Village Press, 1974, p. 27. Iorwerth C. Peate states that Powys "came to read Welsh well, but would not attempt to write it." *John Cowper Powys' Letters 1937-1954*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup>Owen Jones, Edward Williams, William Pughe, eds., *The Myvrian Archaeology of Wales*, Denbigh: Thomas Gee, 1870, p. v.

<sup>66</sup>Myrddin is described as Gwenddydd's sister in *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer*. We are also told that "he is accustomed to make disclosures when a maid goes to him". Myrddin and Taliesin conduct a dialogue in *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Taliesin*. A translation of the latter verse appears in Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion*, p. 317.

<sup>67</sup>The story of Gwydion's creation of Blodeuwedd, the "Flower Maiden", in *Math the Son of Mathonwy*, corresponds, of course, to Myrddin Wyllt's conjuration of Blodeuwedd in *Porius*.

<sup>68</sup>"Gwydion was an enchanter ... As such he is repeatedly alluded to in the poems of the Welsh, especially in those of Taliesin. The remarkable instances of his powers of incantation ... are thus related in the composition ascribed to that bard *Kadeir Kerridwen*". *The Mabinogion*, p. 300.

## Powys News From Germany

J.C. Powys, *The Meaning of Culture* has been published as *Kultur Als Lebenskunst*, Hamburg, Junius, 1989 (Introduction by Elmar Schenkel).

The excellent *Inklings—Jahrbuch*, devoted mainly to the works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and George MacDonald, in its latest number (7-1989) carries an article by Elmar Schenkel, "John Cowper

Powys und die Ursprünge der Phantase", an analysis of Powys's debt to 'the romantic concept of the imagination'. Powys's mostly negative comments on the Inklings are examined but also his shared concerns, such as the use of Arthurian myth and the importance of the creative imagination.

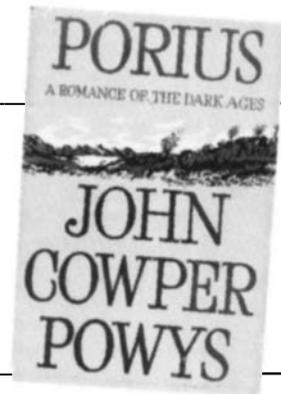
Ed.

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Peter Christensen

The Marriage of Myth and History in  
John Cowper Powys's *Porius*

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This essay will review past reception of *Porius*, analyse its reflection on history,<sup>1</sup> and examine its claims to be an epic as well as a historical novel. By thinking of *Porius* as a response to World War II, we shall see that it is probably more successful as epic than as historical novel.

One line of thematic criticism of *Porius* stresses its views on human freedom. Denis Lane writes, “the [central] message, which may be described as a form of voluntarism, concerns the creative power of the imagination and human will in determining the course of our evolution in the face of political and religious tyrannies.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Glen Cavaliero states, “[T]he central issue is the autonomy of individual human choice and vision over every creed and pressure from without, and ‘the holiness of the heart’s affections.’”<sup>3</sup> Finally, John Brebner, comparing *Porius* to Powys’s Wessex novels, believes that here the concept of “personal salvation” has been broadened, since [i]maginative creation involves society as well as the individual.” For Powys, “men living in time can shape the direction of events by dissolving the contrarities of life into the harmony of imaginative acceptance.”<sup>4</sup>

All of these approaches, dealing with a person’s ability to control destiny and overcome the environment, it would seem, require a certain belief in *Porius* as a work that gives us a realistic view of human life with its historical contingencies. Otherwise, claims that this fiction can give an accurate picture of humankind’s control over the forces around it will not hold up. This suspicion, I believe, is recognized by Denis Lane when he used the word “voluntarism”, which can connote an unrealistic, aggrandized sense of personal control over

life. If this line of critical thinking is relevant to *Porius*, we need to establish the degree of fullness of the social context presented in the novel.

In his preface to *Porius*, Powys writes:

Now I very quickly had the wit to discover what *suited* me particularly well in the heart of this shifty tumultuous chaos of an age; namely the fact that in one specially privileged portion of it there were surviving, and, as we say “*extant*” no *historical documents at all!* In the middle of the fifth century there is a work in latin of Saint Patrick and in the middle of the sixth century there is a work in latin of Gildas. But the last two decades, let’s say, of the fifth century and the first two decades of the sixth century, that is between Patrick and Gildas, there is for my private enjoyment as a story-teller nothing but a beautiful, a heavenly *blank!*<sup>5</sup>

Thus Powys establishes himself as a historical novelist outside of the mainstream tradition established by Sir Walter Scott and analysed in detail by Georg Lukács. This line of descent was a continuation of eighteenth century realism in a new context. When Powys suggests that his chosen period is blank, it is not the same thing as making the claim that no documents survive from it, as there are other forms of archaeological evidence that can be called on to give a certain “thickness” to the social formations of the period. Powys could have availed himself of much material in, say, R.G. Collingwood’s 1923 book on Roman Britain to describe the world of economics, agriculture, trade, and village organization and to clarify the social givens weighing upon characters such as Porius, Rhun, and the Aunties. Instead, he gives much emphasis to religious conflict, the intellectual beliefs of eccentric characters, and racial difference. The last factor

is of especial interest, since Powys's claim for Iberian settlement in Wales is disputed. Furthermore, Powys continually has characters refer to chance and fate, yet these forces are seen so abstractly and so divorced from the usual contingencies of social life that they seem to fail to adequately relate to Powys's claims that human beings can maintain themselves as subjects carving out their own destinies.

Given these difficulties in upholding the social reality of *Porius*, other critics have struck out in other directions. Morine Kristdottir abandons social formations altogether to read the book as an allegory of the alchemical quest and as a hero myth.<sup>6</sup> She makes a convincing case for Powys's intention of writing such a novel. However, her approach also indicates that the quest is not appended to a historical context. Jeremy Hooker also points out the mythopoeic quality of *Porius*. Whereas he strongly objects to Powys's "rewriting of Welsh history" in *Owen Glendower*, he praises Powys for going beyond the materials made available to him by Sir John Rhys and others in order to "create his own mythology on the basis of the common elements of Celtic myth."<sup>7</sup> For him, *Porius* is a novel about our present power to create or destroy the future.

If *Porius* is better seen as a mythic-historical fiction, we need to remember the context in which it was begun in 1942, the battle for civilization in World War II. This included the opposition of the British Empire to the German nation, which fed its people on heroic myths of Aryan racial purity in a distinctly patriarchal context. In the new Pantheon Hitler could be associated with the old sky gods, as Leni Riefensthal treats him in the famous opening sequence of *Triumph of the Will*. The invasion of German tribes in the text of *Porius* itself can only further the contention that in its mythology *Porius*, despite its belated publication in 1951, is really a response to the World War II crisis. We need to ask both what is the nature of the myth, in some ways a racial myth of the Celtic past, which Powys prop-

oses, and what is the value, if any, of creating a myth of a national past during wartime. Is this effort propagandistic? Would democracy be better served by a strictly historical account of a national past? Powys does not seem to think so.

With this set of questions, a comment in the mythologically oriented interpretation of G. Wilson Knight becomes particularly valuable. He finds the hero's mating with the female Giant a crucial passage. According to him, finding a tyrant mate, the Powys-hero becomes both "normal and heroic". *Porius* recognizes the "primal mystery of the different consciousness of male and female".<sup>8</sup> Bisexuality, which had been valued in *Owen Glendower*, is now suspect. If we ask what it means for Welsh heroes to mate with giants, I think we come up with political mystification as much as myth—if for no other reason than the fact that Western civilization has separated history and myth since the Enlightenment, and even in the classical Greek period.

In thinking of the historical claims implicit in *Porius*, C.A. Coates writes that the characters are too intellectual for us to believe in them. She also states briefly that the surviving writings of the British heretic Pelagius do not support the conception of him as "a teacher of the creative powers of the imagination". However, Coates generously puts these objections aside to maintain that Powys is proposing an end to a dualist view of God and devil figures. In thus treating *Porius* as a symbolic narrative with this message, she finds one legitimate way of defending the book, although it leaves the ideological implications of the treatment of myth and history unaccounted for. For Coates, the union of *Porius* with the Gawres is an aboriginal experience. Personality is no longer foregrounded, and the lovers are described by Powys as "primeval forms of matter".<sup>9</sup> Not only is such an episode obviously not credible historically, but it works against what is carefully laid out as historical in the book, creating an unresolved artistic tension.

The most detailed defence of *Porius* as a

type of successful historical novel comes from Michael Ballin, who in his article, "John Cowper Powys and the Dialectic of History" shows Powys's indebtedness to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man* for his conception of the relation of time and history. He points out that for Powys fable and myth support history. I believe, however, that although they did for Powys, they do not necessarily do so in our analyses of the book. This issue is raised in *Porius* itself through the character of the Henog. Ballin suggests that in the book "the form of the historical novel is recreated since the reader is confronted with an altogether new amalgam of history, romance, fantasy, and psychological recreation of character".<sup>10</sup> This is a valid argument, but I think that the reverse perspective is also fruitful: Powys simply rejects the realistically grounded historical novel to write his own myth-oriented epic of Welsh history, the epic of the formation of the Welsh people and the development of a Welsh consciousness against the Anglo-Saxon invader as Roman rule falls away.

The relation of myth and history is raised in *Porius* by the Henog in Chapter 19, "Taliessin Pen Beirdd". The Henog is conversing with Dion Diomedes.

'I want you,' the former was soon protesting, 'I want you to realize, Master Dion, exactly what I mean when I say "as a historian." You may think I mean a careful sifting of fact from fable. I mean *nothing of the kind!* A true historian records fact and fable with philosophic indiscrimination. Who is he to decide between them? He leaves posterity to do that. Besides he knows well that there are plenty of fables that in reality are far more ... revealing of Nature's secrets than many verified facts and unquestionable events.'

'I understand you completely, lord Henog. Your method was the rule with Herodotus and in a large measure with Thucydides and Plutarch ...'<sup>11</sup>

Powys does not openly side with the Henog, but he fails to have anyone give the obvious objection that those in power will simply combine myth and history for their

own ends. The question arises as to whether the Henog's principle in writing his history of Arthur's time is to be applied to Powys's writing his history of that era as well.

It is in Chapter 6, "The Prophet" that the issue of history is first taken up. Myrddin denounces the Henog's view of history, and the Henog attacks Myrddin's idea of prophecy. Then follows a major prophecy by Myrddin, succeeded by some reflections on the argument by Porius.

I will begin with the prophecy, which reads as follows in its entirety:

'This simple Arthur whose grandmother came from Africa and his grandfather from Rome will clear the land of the fair heads for a generation. Colgrim and Baldulf and Chel-dric—all shall perish!

'This simple Arthur shall slaughter them all; and the black earth, nourished by their blood, shall grow thirty good harvests, rich and sweet and safely stored, before their tribes from Germania come back again. But back they must come and possess all our land, they and the Black Pagans who will come after them.

'But our speech and our mountains and our mountain-farms we shall keep; and the Saeson themselves will be conquered by others, crueller, craftier, and far cleverer than they are! One of our own they will take to rule over them; and he in return will try to destroy our speech, but to no avail. Driven from the plain and the sea-coast our speech will refuge itself in the mountains and from thence till the Day of Judgment it shall be heard!

'But when our Lord the Sun with his attendant planets has passed from the power of Pisces into the power of Aquarius, the white dragon from Germania will cross the sea to trouble us again. This time it will not swim with its feet and with its tail through the water, breathing smoke and fire. It will—it will—that white dragon from Germania will—that white dragon will—' (100)

I have quoted the prophecy in full to show that its process of selection puts it squarely in the framework of monumental history, as expressed by Nietzsche in his essay, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" (1874).<sup>12</sup> This approach to the past stresses the major achievements of the past and the

great persons who were responsible for them. Myrddin's prophecy is given in terms of invasions and resistance. This resistance is the cornerstone of the monumental past. He completely bypasses the political interpretation of events and the path toward representative government. The main points of this history are the German invasion of c.550, the Viking (Black Pagan) incursions, the Norman Conquest, the accession of Henry V, and the Battle of Britain. It is the story of the survival of the Welsh people, here presented as descendants of people of Africa and Rome, in a manner which somewhat suggests the *Aeneid*. The use of monumental history here is to remind Welshmen of our day that they have been great warriors and survivors in the past, and that they can be so again in the days of the white Nazi dragon.

Myrddin's prophecy is a bravura piece produced during his debate with the agitated Henog. When the Henog asks whether the Emperor will be happy if he (the Henog) confines himself to the truth in the "Historia Veridica" about Myrddin, the latter responds with a peculiar tirade that truth is elusive and can't be possessed. Furthermore, no one in the future will apparently care what may have happened in the past. Myrddin says:

'... neither you nor I nor any other who ever lived, no, nor any who *will* ever live, can call the truth our own. The emperor would know it as the truth and so would every creature alive, did you place it in our hands, Henog. But you cannot place the truth in our hands. It flows like water. It melts like air. It burns itself out like fire. It covers itself *with itself* like the mud with the mud, the moss with the moss, the grass with the grass, the lichen with the lichen.' (94-95)

The claim that truth cannot be placed in anyone's hands and that it varies with the ages sounds at first to be a version of Nietzschean perspectivism, or perhaps a Foucauldian statement on the change in epistemes. On the other hand it may be a nihilistic outbreak on Myrddin's part in which truth is ultimately believed to be of no consequence. He goes on to say:

'... but when the age of Pisces is over and the age of Aquarius begins, do you fancy that men *then*, men who can kill with balls of fire, men who can sail in ships of iron, men who can ride on horses of smoke, will give a denarius for a *Vita* of you or me, or an obol of brass to know what the lady Gwendydd did, or the lady Nineue said, though all the forest *was* in arms around their tent?' (95)

These latter sentences seem to evoke another Nietzschean belief—that it can be in the best interest of our time to forget the past, which puts a paralysing grip on the future.

Since both history and truth have been impugned, the Henog rises to the challenge:

'God has not given you, my lord, his miraculous gift of seeing the future so that you should insult the past. And let me tell you this, Myrddin ap Morfryn: all that you see of the future are clouds and mists and vapours! All of it is dark and obscure ... All that you announce of the events of the future is doubtful and uncertain. Many are the interpretations of what you announce; and bitter to the end of time will be the disputes between the interpreters; for the future does not yet exist. A dark gulf in Time and Space alone exists ...' (97)

Although the Henog is literally saying that the future cannot be predicted, he is also implying that it cannot be thought. "The clouds and mists and vapours" show that we cannot imagine what will be. Here we should add that, in the light of Foucault's archaeologies and geneologies, the issue of how we can think the other (the future) except under the concept of the same seems particularly relevant.

The Henog defends his respect for the past and insists on the value of distinguishing truth from falsehood (an idea we would not anticipate from his conversation with Dion Diomedes). Here truth does not seem to be connected to perspectivism but to exist as the correspondence of thought with situations in the world. The Henog cries:

And mark this, O illustrious counsellor: these struggles of mine, and of others wiser than I am, to sift and winnow the truth from the falsehood in the great gold-mine of the god-like past are themselves parts and portions of

that mysterious power that out of the past—*not*, mark you, O master! out of anything already existent in that dark obscure gulf—creates the as-yet-uncreated future! (97)

The Henog claims that the past creates the future, and it does create it by offering us the idea of the same by which we grasp what extends before us.

As in many debates in Powys's work, there can be no resolution to the argument. There is no real point in choosing between the two. As Myrddin suggests, history can be abused by making us forget the future we must attain to. The Henog counters by saying that the future cannot be thought except through the sameness of the past.

Porius has a response that shows that he cannot really master the debate. He wonders if the "time-breath of Cronos" could be "caught as it blows backward from the remote future" (101). He puzzles some more over the issue:

But if the Henog were right and the future completely indetermined, why then there was no such thing as Fate, and no such thing as a man's or a nation's or a world's destiny. All was chance; all was chaos; all was anarchy. 'Nor am I quite certain,' he said to himself, 'that I wouldn't prefer it be so.' (102)

The argument on a literal level seems to offer two false extremes, and Porius never looks for a middle ground. It makes better sense symbolically: the future can be seen not only as undestined but also unthinkable. This is the chaos and anarchy that we encounter in trying to think the future as 'other'. Ultimately, Porius can only resolve himself to accepting the "mingling of Nature's purposes with accident and chance" (106).

Perhaps this debate would seem irritating were it not for Myrddin's prophecy itself, which not only foresees the future for the characters in 499 A.D., but also represents the monumental past for the readers of the "romance of the Dark Ages". Powys reminds us that what is significant in the past is only seen as such from the standpoint of the present. This significance is here con-

ceived of as nationalistic history in the time of the threat of invasion.

To think of *Porius* through its reflection on history does not prevent us from thinking it through other genres as well. Since Powys called his book a "romance", it would be worthwhile to follow up this idea. However, in the wake of Northrop Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism*, a romance has come to mean a quest narrative. Krissdottir reads *Porius* as a quest, but not the personal quest of the hero. On the literal level, there is so much more action beyond what the hero does, that I find *Porius* has the larger scope of an epic.

There are at least four reasons why we can think of *Porius* as an epic. First of all, it is filled with references to Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil, which indicate the tradition by which it wishes to be judged. Perhaps one of the most obvious tip-offs is the following line:

Porius, was therefore, considerably startled, and indeed compelled to feel like the blustering hero of some artificial pseudo-heroic Roman epic admonishing some ghostly survivor from the Siege of Troy, when, instead of hurrying off in the direction indicated, Medrawd received his sword with a nod and a smile, and proceeded with the utmost coolness and deliberation to retreat into the interior of the building. (572)

Many other references lend support to the idea of the giantlike Porius as a type of epic hero.

Second, in his essay on Homer in *The Enjoyment of Literature* Powys invokes a consonance of Homer and Nietzsche, which suggests he saw no difficulty in fitting the German philosopher's thought into his own hybrid epic form. He states:

And what is this Homeric attitude that takes its place alongside of all the other abiding philosophies which our race has found for the endurance of life under the sun? It certainly comes nearer to Nietzschean attitude than to any other. Can you catch the a-moral aestheticism of Nietzsche's tone in this characteristic Homeric remark, 'The gods spin the

skein of ruin for men, that there might be a song for those yet to be born'?

But it is more massive, more earthy, and in a sense more tender and magnanimous than the desperate *sanctity reversed* of that misunderstood prophet of the spirit. And it is more pessimistic; for Nietzsche regarded death after the manner of all the great individual pagans from Catullus to Hardy ...<sup>13</sup>

Although one could argue that Homer does not share Nietzsche's amoral aestheticism (citing Simone Weil's famous essay on *The Iliad*), we should note that Nikos Kazantzakis also created an inspired epic by blending Homer with Nietzsche.

Third, *Porius* has some major themes in common with *The Aeneid*. These include the formation of the new nation, concern with heredity, the importance of prophecy, the choice of the right marriage partner, the nature of piety, the interference of the gods, and the heroic battle. Although Powys's affection for Homer is very well known, we should not forget his respect for Virgil.

Finally, and most importantly, the essays "Welsh Aborigines" and "Pair Dadeni" in the collection *Obstinate Cymric* indicate that Powys saw the Welsh as Non-Aryans standing up to Hitler's vision of Aryan supremacy. He declares:

... our original Welshmen, whose souls 'touched wood' to escape from Homeric swords, were *not* as both Goidels and Brythons certainly were, of Aryan blood. It seems indeed that those among us for whom the Goidels and Brythons were only the first, or more probably if we include the Picts in our black list, only the second in a bloody series, would be regarded not only by the barbarous Hitler, but by such a proud tradition-bearer of Greek and Roman culture as Nietzsche himself, as, along with Jews, Arabs, Africans, and Egyptians, outside the pale of 'Good Europeans'. Well! we must accept this grave indictment and solemn verdict and boldly 'glory' as that most introverted of all Non-Aryans, St. Paul would say, 'in our shame'. And yet—not exactly 'glory': for we non-Aryan Aborigines have long ago learned 'a better way'.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly of interest here is Powys's identification with a bygone Wales of non-

Aryan racial purity. The impetus most likely is the desire to find an appropriate response to Nazi doctrine of racial supremacy and the policies it fostered. In *Porius* itself, as contrasted with the essay, Powys's stress is on the mixture of the races, not on identification with the pre-Aryan element in Wales.

In "Pair Dadeni" Powys associates the Dark Ages with his own time as a new Dark Age, a connection which is not as apparent in *Porius*, where the return of the Germans is not connected with the Nazi horror but with a history of resistance to invasion. In the essay Powys writes:

Never since the Dark Ages, never since at the battle of Badon the historic Arthur turned—as far as Britain was concerned—the Muse of Tragedy into the Muse of Romance has the human race been plunged into such a gulf of misery and horror as the one it sees around it today. It looks like some monstrously grotesque 'Triumph of Death' or like some incredible 'dance of Shiva'.<sup>15</sup>

Given Powys's recognition of the Nazi menace and his work on *Porius* as a response to that menace, several of the attitudes in the book are puzzling: the caricaturing of Christianity, the anarchic strain, and the abnegation of judgment promoted by the sympathetic characters, such as Myrddin, Taliessin, and the monk John.

Although as Cronos one can hardly expect Myrddin to relate well to Christianity, it is disconcerting to hear the following conversation between him and his disciple Neb go by without counterargument:

'Tell me, little one, what is it that makes you serve me as you do?'

Never had Neb's face looked so grave.

'Because you were God before the Three-in-One conquered heaven; and you made people happy before cruelty and love and lies ruled the earth.' (275)

The failure of Christianity in Nazi Germany did not bring about a Golden Age. Rather, as Novalis said, where the gods depart, there shall the demons be. If Powys is suggesting that we should go back to the Golden Age through the classical/pagan

religions, the example of his own time should have told him that this was no easy proposition. By having Myrddin refuse to look at the good things in Christianity, Powys fails to carry through on a more sophisticated argument about new religious ideals.

Passages such as this seem ominous when we read them in conjunction with other statements in the novel. For example, Tal-essin presents a philosophy, which calls for:

*The ending forever of the Guilt-sense and  
God-sense,  
The ending forever of the Sin-sense and  
Shame-sense,  
The ending forever of the Love-sense and  
Loss-sense,  
The beginning forever of the Peace paradisi-  
(417)*

This prescription seems to be an idle fantasy, given the political realities of the time. One could easily argue that Germany had done better than Great Britain to get rid of the notions of guilt, God, sin, and shame (although the Nazis were not interested in the 'Peace paradisi'). So Powys seems to offer us nothing concrete toward an improved society. He wants to offer a utopian vision of the world, but he does not consider that the end of sin and shame may herald a dystopia instead.

Another passage, from the lips of the dying Pelagian hermit John, offers us forgiveness without judgment:

'I'd like to sleep for a long time; to sleep, you understand, Porius filius, just simply to sleep. But the things those children are telling you, Porius, my son, are enough to keep us awake till doomsday. You've brought me a good doctor, Porius, a very good doctor. But death's a better one. But I want to tell you something, and I've no time to explain what I want to tell you. I can only tell you and you must take my word for it, Porius filius, that if I *had* time I could explain. No one is to be blamed for all this horror except everybody and everything. That's what I want to say. Nobody is to blame more than we all are; and nobody is to be punished more than we all are!' (548-49)

For a last minute revelation about the nature of human existence this speech is

inadequate. As Hannah Arendt notes in her lectures of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, for humans to bypass judgment means to forgo moral responsibility. Rather, as she indicates, some judgments will be succeeded by forgiveness because of any number of reasons and circumstances. Arendt, as is well known, writes in response to World War II, as does Powys. Although all critics have remarked on the liberal nature of Powys's moral views in *Porius*, it must be noted that they are inadequate for our age's problems.

Since I don't want to champion *Porius* as a meditation on history or for its political ideas, I want to suggest that it succeeds on several accounts as an epic nonetheless. Not only does it have the great natural descriptions, psychological development of characters, and representation of sense impressions that characterize many great epics, *Porius* deserves praise for its treatment of the enemy, racial mixing, and the matriarchy.

The Saxons in *Porius* have received little attention. John Hodgson, however, shows that Powys does not condemn them.<sup>16</sup> Here we may be reminded of Homer's sympathetic treatment of the Trojans.

Not only is Powys to be complimented for taking a fair picture of the enemy, he shows the inhabitants of Northern Wales to be a multi-racial society trying to cope with very different claims, all of which seem to be legitimate. Powys is very sympathetic to the feelings of the early inhabitants of the land, those who have been displaced and injured by waves of invasion. For example, near the end of the novel Morfydd hears the elemental death-in-life cry of the forest people (490). Furthermore, the need for fraternalization in times of crisis is stressed in the scene in which Arthur's men make friends with the Druid archers under the new name of 'Cymry' (489-90).

In addition to showing graciousness towards the enemy and the aboriginal tribes, Powys tries to give the matriarchy a sympathetic role it does not usually have in the Western epic. Although it may be argued

that the Aunties are ultimately seen in a bad light because of their treacherous actions with Medrawd, Powys tries to show how they have been wronged by the new patriarchal order. Glen Cavaliero writes that in the typescript of the novel, they are even more sympathetically treated than in the published version.<sup>17</sup>

When we juxtapose Powys's treatment of the Welsh enemy, multi-racial society, and the matriarchy with Nazi myths, we can better appreciate it as a human response to the violence, racism, and sexism of the Third

Reich. Thus, *Porius* seems to be of much higher value as an epic than as a historical novel in which history cannot be totally accounted for, partially because of the choice of a relatively unknown time and place. In conclusion, I have not intended to be unduly critical of *Porius* but to show its problematic nature in a clearer light. By considering it as a historical novel and an epic written in response to the Nazi threat we have a chance to place it in the mainstream of significant twentieth-century literature where it deserves to be.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 126, refers Powys's novels to the publishing context of their time.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Lane, "Elementalism in John Cowper Powys's *Porius*", *PLL: Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1981): 381-404.

<sup>3</sup> Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> John Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels*, London: Macdonald, 1973, p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> John Cowper Powys, "'Preface' or Anything You Like to *Porius*", *The Powys Newsletter*, No. 4 (1974-1975): 7-13.

<sup>6</sup> Morine Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, London: Macdonald, 1980, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys*, Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1972, pp. 77-79.

<sup>8</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest: A Chart of the Prose Works of John Cowper Powys*, London: Methuen, 1964, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> C. A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 137-55. See p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Ballin, "John Cowper Powys's *Porius* and the Dialectic of History", *The Powys Review*, No. 19 (1986): 20-35. See p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Porius*, London: Macdonald, 1951, pp. 423-24. All future references to the novel will be to this edition.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, tr. Peter Preuss, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> John Cowper Powys, *The Enjoyment of Literature*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-47*, Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1947, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> John Hodgson, "On Reading *Porius*", *The Powys Review*, No. 8 (1980-1981): 28-38.

<sup>17</sup> Cavaliero, p. 186.

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# Danielle Price

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## Repetitions: Weston and Pickwick

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T.F. Powys and Charles Dickens created fictional worlds that bear a strange resemblance. *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (1927) and *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) are dominated by men who preside over their respective worlds, and who become more alike with each examination. To what extent, however, is this literary repetition significant? Is it merely by chance that Mr. Weston has some of Samuel Pickwick's qualities? Before comparing the two figures, these questions should be addressed.

This paper examines the case for literary repetition. Although no external evidence linking *Pickwick Papers* with *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* was found, internal evidence abounds. Martin Steinmann's essay, "T.F. Powys and Tradition",<sup>1</sup> supplied the base for a discussion of influence and tradition.

The artists themselves provide the starting point. At first glance, Dickens, the urban Victorian, and Powys, the Dorset man born five years after Dickens's death, have little in common. They shared, however, an unorthodox Christianity, and it pervades their writings. Powys, we are told by his son, was "deeply religious in his unorthodox way". He would not attend church on the traditional Christian holy day, but "went on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday".<sup>2</sup> A close friend of the Powyses, Louis Wilkinson, says that Powys searched for God all his life.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens had a very private view of religion. He was a Christian—Dostoevsky referred to him as "that great Christian"—but an anti-dogmatic one.<sup>4</sup> Jane Vogel calls Dickens an "anti-formalist" Christian, and states that it is wrong to cast him as a disbeliever because he was not a steady churchgoer.<sup>5</sup> Dickens's own words are proof: "I have always striven in my writings to express

repetition for the life and lessons of Our Saviour ... But I have never made proclamation of this from the housetops".<sup>5</sup>

Keeping this context in mind, one can turn to the distinction between similarity and influence. Steinmann clearly shows the differences in his essay entitled "T.F. Powys and Tradition". As he succinctly states:

To show that Powys is similar to Jane Austen, for example, is not, of course, to show that he was influenced by her. Perhaps both were influenced by a third writer—Richardson, say, or Dr Johnson. Or perhaps both, like Darwin and Wallace, independently hit upon the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

Often all that can be shown is that a writer is part of a tradition, "a network of influences so elaborate and often so venerable that particular links are usually impossible to trace".<sup>6</sup>

Dickens and Powys do belong to the same tradition, as their readings indicate. Both men read widely: Powys read many novelists, dramatists, essayists, and poets. Dickens himself says that he spent much time acquiring a knowledge of the literature found in the library of the British Museum.<sup>7</sup> Worth mentioning, especially for the purposes of this essay, are Bunyan and the Bible. Dickens had read *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the characters' names and situations flow easily from his pen.<sup>8</sup> Steven Marcus believes, in fact, that *Oliver Twist* is written in the tradition of Bunyan.<sup>9</sup> Familiarity with the Bible is evident in, among other things, the account of the New Testament that Dickens wrote for his children—*The Life of Our Lord*—his "amazingly informal way of citing Scripture", and the sentiments revealed in his letters to his children:

I strongly and affectionately impress upon you [Henry Fielding Dickens] the priceless value of the New Testament, and the study of that book as the one unfailing guide in life.<sup>10</sup>

T.F. Powys always declared that “his close study and reading of the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Paradise Lost* ... shaped his own prose”.<sup>11</sup> The book that Powys most enjoyed allegorizing is the Bible, and he has been called “a true descendant of Bunyan”, one with “no direct successors in England”.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, his interest reveals itself in nonfiction interpretations of the book of Genesis and Job, as well as an essay on Bunyan.

Bunyan and the Bible, therefore, are part of the “network of influences” that Powys and Dickens share. Evidence of the direct influence of Dickens on Powys, however, must be shown in a different way. Steinmann believes that finding “striking similarities between two works” is evidence of influence, “especially if the writer of one is known to have read the other”.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the second matter will be addressed first. Did T.F. Powys read Dickens? According to Kenneth Hopkins, the three most famous Powys brothers all read Dickens.<sup>14</sup> John Cowper Powys, whose own works are said to have influenced his younger brother,<sup>15</sup> lectured on Dickens, and called Dickens his favourite novelist after Scott and Hardy.<sup>16</sup> Although no direct references to *The Pickwick Papers* were found, the similarities between Mr. Weston and Mr. Pickwick speak for themselves.

An examination of Mr. Weston can begin where the novel does, with a physical description. The stout and red-nosed gentleman in question is distinguished by a face which is “good-natured and loving, though a trifle rugged and worn”.<sup>17</sup> The eyes also merit attention, being on the whole, thoughtful, but at times twinkling with merriment. (2) Mr. Pickwick has many of the same characteristics: he is plump and short, and his beaming eyes twinkle beneath his glasses.<sup>18</sup> From the very beginning of their respective novels, the main characters are endowed with caring and congeniality.

The names of characters are, in a sense, descriptions that remain throughout the text. Dickens may be *the* master of names in the English language, and Powys displays his own talent in *Mr. Weston’s Good Wine*. Because both authors carefully chose names, the names of Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Weston merit attention. Mr. Pickwick’s first name is Samuel, a name which appears several times in the work. Samuel, the Hebrew judge and prophet, listened to the call of the Lord. Whether or not Dickens wanted the reader to draw any more from the name than a feeling of spirituality is uncertain. “Pickwick” is an appropriate name for several reasons. The comedic effect created by the rhyming syllables is in tune with the general tone of the work; to “pick” something or someone is to choose, and Mr. Pickwick is very much a chosen or blessed person; and “wick” conveys a multitude of meanings, including an instrument by which light shines, several dwelling places and topographical details, and as a form of the word “quick”, characterized by life, or simply “alive”.

Mr. Weston’s name is also rich with allusions. The west, home to the setting sun, is associated with death. Mr. Weston, who is most prominent in Folly Down during the evening, cannot be separated from ideas of death even while he brings renewal. The name reaches beyond the bounds of this novel to Jane Austen’s *Emma*, where young Mr. Elton, enamoured by Emma, reveals his heart after having too much to drink: “She [Emma] believed he had been drinking too much of Mr Weston’s good wine, and felt sure that he would want to be talking nonsense”. Mr. Elton does start “talking nonsense”, at least from Emma’s point-of-view. He declares his love for her, “hoping—fearing—adoring—ready to die if she refused him”.<sup>19</sup>

In *Mr. Weston’s Good Wine*, it is the title character who radiates love. Love is the ruling principle of his world, as well as that of Mr. Pickwick’s. Powys’s novel takes place because Mr. Weston visits the world, and his trip to Folly Down is a manifestation

of his love. Mr. Weston takes note of the symbolic sparrow that chances to fall (23). He wipes his eyes over Mr. Grobe; he wipes his eyes over the dead body of Ada Kiddle. Though he wants to give his light wine, the wine of love, to everybody, not everyone will accept it. Mrs. Vosper is cut off from Mr. Weston not because he decrees it so, but because she sets herself up as an authority, perverts the ruling force of the universe from love to lust, and refuses to accept the love that is always being offered by Mr. Weston. Even Mr. Weston's dark wine, the wine of death, is offered out of love. "I only give this wine to those I love," he says to the Reverend Grobe, "but when you drink this wine you will sorrow no more" (216).

Mr. Pickwick has been described as "a kind of universal godfather"<sup>20</sup> and most of his virtues are associated with love and benevolence. Pickwick's attitude and actions towards Alfred Jingle illustrate his magnanimity. Jingle pesters him, tricks him, and causes him to expend a great deal of time trying to uncover his latest escapades; but when Pickwick meets him in prison, barely alive, he is overcome with grief: "'Come here, Sir,' said Mr Pickwick, trying to look stern, with four large tears running down his waistcoat. 'Take that, Sir.'" (659) "That," of course, is money, and Pickwick will feed, room, and free Jingle from prison. He is *caritas* in action.

Love, with Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Weston, is a creative force. In *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*, the references to the creative act are frequent. The act of creation reveals itself in both of the books of God—the universe and the Bible. Mr. Weston, we are told, "looked into the valley. Had he created Folly Down and all the people who dwelt there, he could not have looked at the village in a more interested manner" (18). The Bible, Mr. Weston's prose poem, may have been the instrument that brought the universe into being—world forming from the Word. The loving aspect of Christ is emphasized in Mr. Grobe's thoughts; he believes that Jesus had "an imagination that could create an entirely new world, and with

so forceful a love that all men could, if they wished, live in this one Man's love and pity—and die in it too" (45).

With Mr. Pickwick, the situation is not as clear. He has not created the other characters in the novel, but he begins the adventures of the Pickwick Club, of which he is the founding member. Through his love he has a direct influence on people's lives. Jingle is, in a sense, recreated through Mr. Pickwick's efforts, for he is given the opportunity for a new life in a different country. As well, a harmonious community forms around Samuel Pickwick, a community generated by his influence and interest.

Mr. Weston presides over and Mr. Pickwick resides in a comic world. In comedy, which is concerned with the community, the legitimacy of society is reaffirmed. The traditional way to indicate this renewal is through marriage, and the two novels end with several marriages. In *The Pickwick Papers*, Sam and Mary, Arabella and Mr. Winkle, and Emily and Mr. Snodgrass will be or have just married; in *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*, the Kiddle sisters are joined with the Mumbys, Jenny and Luke marry, the divine marriage of Tamar and Michael occurs, and the marriage of Nancy Gipps and the mayor is in the future.

The comedy in the works, however, does not hide the ugliness and evil that confront Mr. Weston and Mr. Pickwick. Both men are aware of evil. Mr. Weston, who knows that there are other communities where his wine has not been purchased for some time, meets evil in the rotting body of Ada Kiddle, the presence of Mrs. Vosper, and the uncaring nature of the residents of Folly Down. In *The Pickwick Papers* there are signs of Dickens as the social critic that would be further developed in his later novels. Samuel Pickwick experiences the corruption of the judicial system and the horrors of debtor's prison; he is initiated into full knowledge of the evil man can do to man. Despite the tragedies in the novels, however, a sense of hope prevails. Mr. Weston, after all, does visit his flock, and many of the sheep are redeemable; the

actions of Mr. Pickwick and his friends lessen the darkness.

Accompanying the two men through the complexities of the world are their trusty companions, Sam Weller and Michael. These characters fulfil several purposes, aside from the structural one of providing someone for the main character to talk to. First, their loyalty and reverence to their masters increases the respect accorded to the main characters. Michael, we are told, “behaved to Mr Weston with a respect that did honour to them both, for it was the loving respect that is never given unless the object is entirely deserving of it” (11). Sam Weller, whose first name is the same as Mr. Pickwick’s and a sign of the wisdom shared by both, also shows unconditional love for his master. He incurs a debt so that he can join Pickwick in prison, and postpones his marriage to work under him. Sam’s attitude clearly shows in these words to his master:

‘[V]lages or no vages, notice or no notice, board or no board, lodgin’ or no lodgin’, Sam Veller, as you took from the old inn in the borough, sticks by you, come what come may; and let ev’rythin’ and ev’rybody do their very fiercest, nothin’ shall ever perwent it!’ (865)

Sam and Michael also act as foils to the main character. Messrs Pickwick and Weston are portrayed as idealists who need someone more practical to help them in dealing with the world. It is Michael, for example, who like any good manager, provides his boss with details about the customers. Sam Weller feels he has to protect Mr. Pickwick from the harsh realities of life; he joins Mr. Pickwick in prison partially because he doubts his ability to survive in such surroundings.

Sam and Michael accompany men who are larger than life, who are, in fact, allegorical figures. Allegory is interesting in this context because it not only links Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Weston, and reminds us of the debt the authors owe to Bunyan, but because allegory itself is a type of repetition, presenting once again the eternal human dramas. Steinmann comments, in words



Mr Pickwick and Mr Weller: illustration to Ch XX by Phiz (Hablot Brown)

which are also applicable to Dickens, on Powys’s use of allegory or symbolism:

Powys is in the native tradition of allegory, fable, humours, ‘characters’, and caricature that runs from Langland, Chaucer, and *Everyman* through the seventeenth-century Theophrastrians, Bunyan, most eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English novelists, most English dramatists of every century but ours, and many eighteenth and nineteenth century essayists.<sup>21</sup>

Who is Samuel Pickwick, or rather, what does he symbolize? “From the very beginning of *Pickwick Papers*”, Marcus writes, “Dickens projected Mr Pickwick in quasi-mythical terms, as if he were a kind of demi-god come to visit the earth”.<sup>22</sup> The character does achieve transcendence—Sam can call him a “reg’lar thoroughbred angel” (704)—but reaches an ideal state, not a divine one. Mr. Pickwick is the ideal man, the embodiment of Christian virtue, and through him can be seen the possibilities of human relationships. Mortal he remains, however; the last words of the novel mention death and remind us that Mr. Pickwick is human.

*Mr. Weston's Good Wine* is an "old-fashioned" allegory. To Folly Down, which may represent the world after the fall or merely a place where foolishness and wickedness are rampant, comes God "in the shape of a travelling tradesman, cosy, tweedy, humorous, and also a little vain and at moments a little regretful".<sup>23</sup> Mr. Weston is a complex figure. Because he is God incarnate—whether Christ, the Father or the Trinity is, in this context, irrelevant—there is a necessary tension in his portrayal: God who is perfect in an imperfect form. Mr. Weston's imperfections may be the result of his acquisition of human form, or the result of a fallible creator, the artist. Perhaps Powys is commenting on our perception of God, or our desire for a deity

that has the power to forgive but is comfortably flawed. These issues make Mr. Weston the more thought-provoking character.

The similarities that can be found between Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Weston spring from a tradition of literature common to Dickens and Powys, and from the influence of the former on the latter. Their main characters repeat the actions of the artist by infusing life into others. Mr. Weston is a more sublime creator and above Mr. Pickwick in the hierarchy. Mr. Pickwick, who frequents inns and public places, who enjoys feasting and merriment, who feels anger and fear but sets love over them, may very well be the kind of person Mr. Weston would like to see populating his world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Powys Review*, 13 (1983-84), pp. 5-15.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Powys, "Mr Weston's Good World" *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, ed. B. Humfrey, London: Peter Owen, 1980, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> "Some Memories of T.F. Powys", *Recollections*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Doomsday*, London: Chatto, 1965, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Vogel, *Allegory in Dickens*, Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1977, p. 21; p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Duane De Vries, *Dickens's Apprentice Years: The Making of a Novelist*, Hassocks: Harvester; New York: Barnes, 1976, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Allegory in Dickens*, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>10</sup> *Allegory in Dickens*, p. 26; p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Muntz, "T.F. Powys: A Few Recorded Memories", *Recollections*, p. 142.

<sup>12</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, Cambridge: CUP, 1965, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> *The Powys Review*, No. 13, (1983-84), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Hopkins, *The Powys Brothers*, London: Phoenix, 1967, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> *The Powys Review*, No. 13, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography* (1934), London: Macdonald, 1967, p. 345.

<sup>17</sup> T.F. Powys, *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (1927), London: Heinemann, 1967, p. 2. Later page references in my text are to this edition.

<sup>18</sup> *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), ed. James Kingsley, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986, p. 2. Later page references in my text are to this edition.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick*, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> *The Powys Review*, No. 13, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Varieties of Parable*, p. 115; p. 116.



The Sailor's Return, East Chaldon, today, neatly thatched and recently extended. If T.F. Powys described East Chaldon village under the name of Folly Down in *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*, this was the inn.

Photograph and note by Jean E. Bellamy

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Gloria G. Fromm

## Epistolary Counterpoint: The Letters of Dorothy Richardson and John Cowper Powys

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Dorothy Richardson is one of those novelists so resistant to labels that after a brief vogue as “originals”—often during their own lifetimes—they become the property of literary historians and slip out of range of the non-plussed critics. The literary historians have credited Dorothy Richardson with being the first practitioner in English, perhaps even the originator, of the stream-of-consciousness novel, a genre-description which she herself rejected as imprecise and which, when applied to her own major work, *Pilgrimage*, had the effect of reducing it to a pale version of the more flamboyantly brilliant experimental fiction of her Irish contemporary James Joyce. The other writers with whom she was linked—Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust—shared, with Richardson and Joyce, certain literary aims. They, too, not only looked for ways to render in fiction the very texture of consciousness but were also engaged in revolutionizing the subject matter of the novel, which in their hands was turning into consciousness itself—both as psychological process and content.

These four writers are acknowledged as the important experimentalists in early modernist prose fiction, but their critical reputations, for historically and culturally significant reasons, differ markedly. While the prestige accorded to Proust and Joyce has remained relatively stable, Virginia Woolf's place in the literary pantheon has shifted radically since her death in 1941. Considered during the 1950s and 1960s as a gifted but precious and mannered minor writer, not until the 1970s did she achieve major status. Dorothy Richardson's position has remained consistently ambiguous.

Although regarded as a major innovator who had indeed invented a form, she was said to lack the rich literary language and the complexity that characterized the prose of her contemporaries. It is now possible to see that she actually presents to readers and critics profounder difficulties than any of the others, with the nature of these difficulties gradually coming to light through the action of the very same cultural forces involved in the reevaluation of Virginia Woolf.

Woolf's gain in stature coincided with the fresh interest in women writers during the 1960s and 1970s, but it was not the result of any revision of aesthetic criteria. Quite the contrary. Woolf was admitted into the company of the master prose stylists of the late nineteenth century—Henry James, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson—but with her highly developed political sense of herself as a disadvantaged woman in a family with strong literary and intellectual traditions, she has also become a potent feminist icon. Dorothy Richardson has not, in turn, been taken up by any special group, nor have the thirteen novels that constitute *Pilgrimage* been subjected, like Virginia Woolf's, to exhaustive literary analysis, in large measure because unlike Woolf's or Proust's novels, Dorothy Richardson's are *sui generis* in their materials as well as their form. Despite the fact that she has always had her share of distinguished admirers, even they have been hard pressed to find the language that would convey in general terms their particular, highly individualized, often personal response to her novelistic tones. John Cowper Powys, for example, writing

\*A version of a paper read at the Powys Conference, University of Sussex, 1989.

about her in 1931, and trying to describe the special quality of the narrative presence she projected in *Pilgrimage*, ten volumes of which had by then appeared, insisted she was a “Pythian soothsayer”. Indeed, in his view, reiterated in the letters he wrote to Dorothy Richardson from 1929 on, the creator of this large work taking shape over the years would deserve a place among the great writers of the Western world. While such praise may have seemed extravagant even then, when Dorothy Richardson was widely known, it testifies nonetheless to a significant cultural phenomenon too often overlooked by students of literature—that the ears of a few readers are attuned to a different music not heard by the rest of their generation.

Moreover, it did not become evident until *Pilgrimage* was well advanced that Dorothy Richardson had set out to give her life an aesthetic shape and character, to mythologize it. In effect, she had found a way to be both herself and someone else at the same time, yet by her own wish—because consciousness mattered more than identity—very little was known about Dorothy Richardson as historical person until after her death in 1957 at the age of 84, when she had already witnessed the failure of several generations of readers to extract from *Pilgrimage* what she had spent a lifetime putting into it.

Forty years old when she began to write *Pilgrimage*, she spent the rest of her life at work on it, a series of books about herself as Miriam Henderson from seventeen to forty. Every year—or two, or three—as another chapter-volume appeared, the distance in time grew between the writing self and the fictional self, between the events as they had actually occurred and her memory of them. Over the years, then, nearly forty, to be exact, *Pilgrimage* developed into a complex, many-layered autobiographical fiction; but the majority of its readers—unaware of its basis in fact—responded to Miriam Henderson as a character in a serial novel, more interesting initially for the method by which she was presented than in herself. While

Dorothy Richardson wanted *Pilgrimage* to be read as a novel, she was also convinced of the importance and value of her experience as a woman; it was *this* story she had committed herself to telling, in detail and with extraordinary faithfulness to states of mind and feeling. And it was precisely this story—so different in its “feminine” materials from those of Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus or Proust’s Marcel—that met with the most resistance. The novel-reading world was ready (more or less) to grapple with the scrambled consciousness of Stephen Daedalus or Leopold Bloom but not with Miriam Henderson’s—not prepared, in other words, to feel enclosed (“trapped” was the word many readers used) in the mind and emotional experience of a very young, very naive English girl. She would grow up, in the course of *Pilgrimage*, to become its author but her future, in the early chapter-volumes, was painfully unclear. Yet one of Richardson’s principal aims in writing *Pilgrimage* was to chart—with the utmost fidelity—the education of her heroine’s sensibility in the late-Victorian and Edwardian world of her own youth. She meant Miriam Henderson, however, to represent much more than herself, to represent a generation and a class of women. Thus, the autobiographical basis of *Pilgrimage* did not need to be known, for Richardson rightly felt that it had both integrity and coherence as fiction.

It had uniqueness as well. There was nothing like *Pilgrimage* in English literature, and as Dorothy Richardson’s anomalous work grew larger all the time, it kept being accounted for in a slightly different way. If it were not exactly Proustian or Joycean, then perhaps it was Balzacian or Goethean. Virginia Woolf even suggested that Richardson had invented a new kind of prose sentence, with a feminine gender. No one has yet associated *Pilgrimage* with Tanizaki’s great novel of the forties, *The Makioka Sisters*, which celebrates ordinariness and the intimate minute details of daily life, but the Japanese themselves discovered Dorothy Richardson in 1934, with a trans-

lation of the first chapter-volume, *Pointed Roofs*.

*Pointed Roofs* had first appeared in 1915, followed by *Backwater* in 1916 and *Honeycomb* in 1917, three novels that formed a thematic as well as chronological unit, in which Dorothy Richardson's fictionalized self crossed the shadow line (in Joseph Conrad's term) between youth and adulthood. Indeed, each novel described a different stage in this transition, with the tone and imagery delicately modulated to convey those differences. Thus, the setting of each novel is counterpointed with the mental and emotional state of the central character, producing a distinctively characterized atmosphere of the mind. Among the early reviewers of *Pilgrimage*, it was often students of the Imagist Movement or poets who heard these subtle changes in register. Randolph Bourne, for example, reviewing *Honeycomb* in the American magazine the *Dial*, described it as an "imagist novel", marveled at its "precision", and felt that it contained "the essence of quivering youth". Not long after, the young poet Babette Deutsch commented on the qualities of Dorothy Richardson's prose that appealed to her and how certain passages reminded her of T.S. Eliot in the "sensitive-ness of their rhythms". For her the method of *Pilgrimage* was that of the poet—realizing an emotion not by analysis but rather, as she put it, by "inducing its systole and diastole".

For John Cowper Powys, too, *Pilgrimage* made poetry out of daily life, giving it the sacramental Wordsworthian character that he cherished, but it was also—as he told her—just the kind of book he preferred, one that seemed not like a work of art at all but rather "disguised autobiography like *Wilhelm Meister* and Proust". In truth, both *Pilgrimage* and Dorothy Richardson had a multi-sided appeal for Powys. If Richardson was engaged in mythologizing herself, Powys, in turn, took to mythologizing the author of *Pilgrimage*, the creator of Miriam Henderson, who seemed to feel the same magical intensity that he did in the

things of everyday life. She was, he liked to claim, not only a "Pythian soothsayer" but also a "Priestess", a "Delphic Oracle", a "Norse Valkyrie", even "our 4th Fate". Their correspondence—consisting of 180 letters in all, written between 1929 and 1952, when Richardson ceased communicating with anyone—provides us with context and tone, enabling us to sort out the disparate elements in a relationship between two people and two writers who seem on the surface as unlike each other as it is possible to be. Furthermore, with both sides of the correspondence available, which all too rarely happens, we can venture a reading of these letters as a collaborative literary text, driven by the verbal interaction of two distinctive and highly self-conscious personalities. So that while they furnish the usual biographical data one would expect from letters, they are also—in this case at least—extensions of their writers' creative lives.

To begin with some of the information not available elsewhere: Powys's letters show that his active interest in Dorothy Richardson dates from the twenties and his developing relationship with Phyllis Playter. It may even have been Phyllis Playter who introduced him to *Pilgrimage* in the first place, which he said she discovered in a shop on Main Street, in Joplin, Missouri, and read first, on her own, though there is also evidence that the editor of an American newspaper had already called Richardson's work to his attention. But it was surely Phyllis Playter who urged him to write to Dorothy Richardson in 1929, so that he might meet her during his visit to England that summer and report back to Phyllis in New York. Going still further, it is quite possible that to please Phyllis as much as for any other reason he agreed to Richardson's suggestion the following year that he write about her, a suggestion that evolved from a London bookseller's plan to publicize *Pilgrimage*. Not only did Powys consent at once to supply an essay for William Jackson that could be published as a pamphlet—and offer to do it for nothing—but he also set aside temporarily his own work-in-progress



Dorothy Richardson [and Alan Odle] by Adrian Allison, 1936

(*A Glastonbury Romance*). And he sent Richardson the manuscript of his essay with explicit instructions to make any changes in it she wished. In other words, he was at her service, as well as Phyllis Playter's.

Powys's meeting with Dorothy Richardson on a Sunday in mid-August of 1929 yielded far more than either he or Phyllis Playter could have anticipated. His running account of the meeting—jotted down, it would seem, very soon after—indicates that Richardson herself did not surprise him but that Richardson's artist-husband *did*. In their exchange of notes beforehand, which make it quite clear that she was not especially eager to receive him, Richardson had said, rather ruefully and resignedly, "I think on the whole I agree with those who feel it is a mistake to meet writers whose work one likes. There is so rarely any apparent correspondence. The enquirer risks losing 'illusions'—the writer a reader. Truth is served however and that, no doubt, if one can face it, is great compensation." With his characteristic blend of gallantry and purposiveness, Powys had followed up their meeting in London with a letter from his son's Folkestone address. He was about to sail for the States and wanted to make certain that Rich-

ardson would keep her promise to correspond with him. He said,

I must just send you a line, ... 'tho' so well as I trained in Miriam's insight that I know it's totally unnecessary ... to assure you the truth & illusion like 'mercy & righteousness in the Psalmist positively 'kissed each other & lacked a hair's breadth between them during my thrice-happy hours with you. The Boswellian tendencies in me were satisfied to the full—but far beyond all that I got such a lot to think about in what you said ... You really were lovely to me, Miss Miriam & I've got lodged in my brain one at least of Mr Odle's extraordinary evocations, the one with the monster's tongue (or trunk) curving up with the flexible upward slide of a flame in the wind or a hart's tongue fern!

There is little doubt that, in the run-down rooms on Queen's Terrace in St John's Wood, which reminded him, he said, of New York City's Patchin Place and where Richardson and her husband, Alan Odle could afford to spend only summers (the rest of the year they lived in Cornwall), Powys found a most intriguing pair: Richardson, in his own words, "square and solid", "no handsome", and probably his own age Alan Odle "a charming wraith—hardly a

human being”, “fragile, delicate to the last degree”, and a “very fine fantastical illustrator of Rabelais and *Candide*” as well. In his way, Odle was as striking a figure as Powys—extremely tall, shockingly thin, cadaverously pale, and exceedingly courteous. His black velvet coat looked ancient and his finger-nails were long and none too clean but his brown eyes glowed with intelligence and he talked about art and literature with great authority and intense conviction. Powys was positively “enchanted”, perhaps as much by the odd-looking couple as by anything else. Though he said nothing about it, he would surely have taken in the disparity in age between Richardson and her husband. Like Phyllis Playter, Alan Odle was considerably younger than his partner—by fifteen years, to be exact. They had met in 1915, in the Queen’s Terrace house, where Odle had been living for several years and drinking away both his health and his father’s allowance at the famous Café Royal on Regent Street. Otherwise he lived only to draw, but by the time Dorothy Richardson met him he had little in print to show for a decade of work: the illustrations to an edition of Oscar Wilde’s *The Sphinx*, and all the decorative art—plus full-page drawings—for the two published issues of *The Gypsy*, a magazine that did not survive the war. But it was the war that forced the Café Royal into earlier nightly closings, thereby shortening Alan Odle’s bohemian evenings out and bringing him down to breakfast in the basement dining room of 32 Queen’s Terrace; where he discovered the author of a book he had heard talked about—*Pointed Roofs*—and learned that the second chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage* was already in progress. She learned very quickly that his knowledge of literature was much broader than hers—he seemed to have read everything—and his drawings like nothing she had ever seen before—so wild and macabre and powerful that you could almost hear them. This was what she said, later on, about his large-scale, crowded, explosive scenes showing humankind at its greediest and ugliest—that from across the room,

where he would be working, the drawings *resounded*. But she took them in stride almost at once, claimed she could read them for his psychic state, and even so, decided he was safe to marry.

Powys, about whom one suspects the young Phyllis Playter reached a similar conclusion, found the drawings exciting and disturbing—*eruptions*, full of grinning devils and lecherous imps, decadence, depravity, and the uncontrollable energy of evil. A taste for Odle “grotesquerie” was rare and specialized indeed. By the time Powys met him he had illustrated a few more books (among them *Candide* and Mark Twain’s scurrilous *1601*) and contributed sparsely to assorted magazines: the *Golden Hind*, an art quarterly that flourished in the 20s, Condé Nast’s *Vanity Fair*, and the prestigious *Studio*. But as Odle himself put it to his novelist-friend Claude Houghton, who asked him in the mid-forties for a bibliography of his published work, “it’s not much of a show”, and he went on to say, characteristically, that it was a “wonder” anything of his had been published at all. And not surprisingly few people had been moved to buy his drawings when he exhibited them in the teens and mid-twenties; yet Powys thought they might, in time, become “collector’s items”. Meanwhile *he* saw in them nothing less than “the beauty of the scandalous and the mysticism of the obscene”.

The affinities between Mr Odle and Mr Powys were obvious to start with, and they would soon multiply. When Powys first called at Queen’s Terrace in 1929, neither Dorothy Richardson nor Alan Odle knew much about him beyond the name, and he said little about himself during the visit, preferring to spend his time drawing her out on a variety of subjects, from her own books and how they had come into being to her pet ideas about men and women and the differences between them, though he could not resist introducing some of his own pet ideas. He got her to agree that if a sadist married a masochist all was well and that worse than sadism was “brutality of an unconscious

kind". She did not mind "such a turn of the conversation", he was pleased to see, and to his delight she would talk as readily and knowledgeably about the graves in St John's Wood church-yard as about Maeterlinck and Proust and the French language itself.

Powys wanted this "continuous talk"—as he put it—to go on, and Richardson's first letter to him—in September 1929—was as warm and voluble as he could wish. It was noteworthy for a few additional reasons. Between their meeting in August and this letter, Richardson had learned from the September issue of *The London Mercury* and its review of *Wolf Solent* what Powys had refrained from telling her himself—that he was already the author of a number of books. Chagrined and eager to make amends for her "abyss of ignorance", she found just the opportunity she was looking for in an unexpected meeting with brother Llewelyn at H.D.'s flat in Sloane Street. Were all six brothers "thatched similar", she wanted to know; did they all have "terrific eyebrows"; and were they "all rays from a centre"? She had no means of imagining the sisters, she went on to say, "nor"—oddly enough—"any curiosity for them". Llewelyn, she noted with interest, seemed "free of astonishment" as John was not, which made John, she ventured to think, "more feminine". Like her, she said, he found "it astonishing each day to open a window", and he, too, *saw* "soap dishes ... & cups, & linoleum".

All of this, as she knew it would, struck responsive chords in Powys, including her parting remark that "Alan's and [her] own bookmarkers [were] chas[ing each other] and collid[ing] through *Wolf Solent*". As it happened, *Wolf Solent* was one of a handful of Powys's books that Richardson would comment on in her own right. Usually she reported Alan's total immersion in a Powys novel, how for the time being he was "immobile, dumb, blind [and] deaf to everything else". In fact, to Powys's intense gratification, Odle turned out to be his Ideal Reader, "horoscopically akin", as he once put it. Moreover, his discovery of Powys's

novels made him the counterpart of Phyllis Playter in an extended exchange of letters that had several unusual features. Not the least of these is what I would call its polyphonic character. I mean by this that four distinctive voices can be heard in the correspondence, two male and two female, arranged in something like a sexual counterpoint. Richardson and Powys spoke *for* Phyllis and Alan to each other, literally as well as dialogically. Phyllis and Alan were *invoked* and *evoked*—as audience *and* participants—for a multitude of purposes. They were reference-points, authorities to cite, substitutes to fall back on, *shields*. Powys, of course, as is well known, could scarcely write to *anyone* without weaving Phyllis into the letter, and Alan, as it turned out, was especially useful to Richardson in the letters to Powys that required responses to his latest novel. Only twice perhaps did Alan write directly to Powys, comparing the characters in *Owen Glendower*, for example, to the "fateful figures in a frieze by William Blake", and going on to declare, "May my right hand lose its cunning if I ever forget Rhisiart and the Lollard, Tegolin, [and] Owen himself, on the immortal horse—Griffin".

Early in the correspondence, then, certain patterns were established and themes began to emerge, ways of talking about themselves as well as each other. Powys liked to harp on the popular character of his novels, on their theatrical and melodramatic qualities (rather than moral or aesthetic) that explained, he said, why *his* works sold better than hers. This was one of his obsessive themes, that a principal difference between him and Richardson was his "Low-Browism". But *Pilgrimage* did not fall neatly into the category of High-Browism, certainly not the sort that Phyllis labeled the "heavy weather" kind. Powys insisted that when he thought of Richardson's books, and Richardson's characters, it was always "of particular pages episodes situations meditations" more than anything else, while "the art of Flaubert" and the "cleverness" of Virginia Woolf made him "infinitely weary". Rich-

ardson, he claimed, as much as Wordsworth and Pater among the English writers, had contributed to his own “cult of pure sensation”. When he talked about style, however, he was not all that clear. In his opinion, he *had* no style, none, at any rate, that could be recognized by a sentence, as she had and as both his brothers, Llewelyn and Theodore, had. Whether one agrees with him or not, it is quite apparent that this non-style of his that he liked to deprecate meant a great deal to him. It was one thing to assure Richardson, when he was writing an essay about *her*, that she had “carte blanche” with the manuscript, that she could feel free to make any changes she wished, but it was quite another for Richardson to make editorial suggestions on something like the manuscript of *Morwyn*, which he had sent with a standing invitation to them both to supply him with commentary. *Morwyn* happened to be another of the books Richardson handled on her own instead of merely echoing Alan Odle’s praise (perhaps because the landscape of *Morwyn* bore a striking resemblance to an Odle drawing!), and Powys reacted with a good measure of discomfort. He thanked her profusely for the list of recommended changes and then proceeded to offer elaborate explanations for not accepting most of them—from what he called “complicated defences full of wondrously roundabout considerations” to “pure private manias such as my familiar Demons compel” and “the perfectly fantastic ground of a fear of worrying the mind of the Printer with too *many* changes”. He summed things up (in June 1937) in his characteristically provocative manner: “I’ll write you a long Sermon my dear friend one day on the Immortality of Works of Slipshod Art & of the thrilling happiness of the Second (Aesthetic) Best. Top-notch High-Brows like Proust and yourself are ‘difficult’ in the deep Spinozoistic sense—see the last words of the Ethics [“But all noble things are as difficult as they are rare.”]—of all good & great things (except Charles Dickens & Sir Walter Scott). The truth is, my Sybilline Mistress dear, the words of the

Lord about childishness & Heaven are true in the World of Letters—A certain kind of grown-up sophistication without exuberance & relish & ecstasy tends to *perish*”.

Dorothy Richardson played along with a figurative shrug, allowing for Powys’s extravagant humility as well as his familiar mania for self-analysis. From the beginning of their correspondence, he tried to coax diagnoses out of Richardson herself with teasing analyses of his own character and conduct. When, for example, *Morwyn* elicited criticism—after it was published—that Powys regarded as “no less than a slap in the face” and he told Richardson (in late December) that what he had done was to “*literally* turn the other cheek”, he threw out a challenge that was meant at the same time to conciliate: “Now, as our Cornish Sybil, can you chemically analyze the various ingredients of this ‘turning of the other cheek’ which is my habitual instinctive automatic and intuitive habit?” He went on to analyze the elements himself—the first four of them—as Fear: of reprisals; of scenes and shocks; of being disliked; of losing his prestige for tender and sweet behaviour. The last three were a “perfectly maniacal and far-fetched ... consideration for my enemies’ feelings; a desire to slip away with the least possible vibration (of *any* sort) from *all* human contact; and a shrinking from *unpleasant sensations* of anger hatred indignation revenge in myself”.

Addressing him in kind as “you old Pagan”, Richardson said she thought he was right in his “seven-branched diagnosis”, though it also seemed to her that “big-branch seven”—a shrinking from unpleasant sensations, etc.—was “surely the one from which all the others depend[ed]”. And she made mild fun of his desire to slip away from *all* human contact. It struck her as yet another of his gross exaggerations. But he had a point. To tamper with a line from Virginia Woolf, it was really knowledge not intimacy that Powys wanted. Though the knowledge was often highly personal, the aim was mental rather than physical contact. From the start, what he wished to

hear and what he asked for from Dorothy Richardson were private thoughts—hers *and* Alan's. The letters he enjoyed the most, he said, were those that gave a picture of their daily lives, down to what they thought about lying alongside each other in bed at night. "If I could only describe the routine of my days and Phyllis's," he wrote her from upstate New York in 1932, "I could I know make you and Mr. A. like that kind of letter from Phudd's too much the best! But it takes more effort to write intelligently & vividly of the sort of daily existence you lead so as to give another person a real bird's-eye view of it than to launch out at any Arbitrary side-issue on books and sensations and ideas. The old-fashioned letters that I've read," he went on, "of my parents' generation ... are always full of a patient meticulous effort to give details of the writer's day—morn, noon, & night—whereas modern letters, as far as that sort of thing goes, might as well be propaganda dropped from an airplane." What he found of consuming interest, what he wanted to *learn* about, was "the regular ploughed field of [a person's] life."

And of course much of the appeal of *Pilgrimage* for both Powys and Phyllis Playter lay in its spiritual transformation of ordinary experience—of *human* experience, whether a man's or a woman's. Reading *Dawn's Left Hand*, the tenth volume of *Pilgrimage*, he was "most thrilled", he said, "by those *sounds of the doors* of Tansley Street ... & street-sounds & the ... crackling open of large front doors at the newspaper-boy's voice ... The sort of feeling it called out", he claimed, "was one of the nicest there is—& one we don't half cultivate enough". He meant by this "*sharing* a little physical symbolical ritual-routine of normal *secure* lives ... sharing imaginatively ... but with a real thrill, the leaving of the milk at the door & the purchasing of wood for the fire & of potatoes—of in fact anything that you can get by a human FEUDAL medium, & not in mere shops".

He wanted their letters to convey such experiences—and they often *do*—but one

can also see that it was an exchange between two sensibilities unrivalled, perhaps, for ideational expressiveness. Whatever the confidences on Richardson's part and the confessions on Powys's, their relationship had a cerebral quality. There was frankness; there was warmth and affection; there was even dependence. But the closeness was not "intimacy", no matter how many of his physical disorders Powys catalogued in detail, no matter now openly he spoke of Phyllis's problems in the mid-30s adjusting to their new life in England and Wales. They were subjects by no means unique to these letters, but they elicited gratifying responses from Richardson. She could offer, at a moment's notice, any one of a number of remedies—not only for nerves but also for constipation, for ulcers, for eye-trouble—the ailments which plagued Powys for years. This did not mean that he followed her suggestions. Most of the time he didn't, as he hadn't taken most of her corrections of *Morwyn*, but he liked the attention—had liked it from the start, when he described to Phyllis how on the evening of their first meeting, Dorothy Richardson had guided him across the road from the café (where they had gone for a meal) just as Llewelyn's Alyse would do. The "protective instinct", he had divined, was very strong in her, and clearly he took pleasure in stimulating it, perhaps even as a way of feeling himself inside Alan Odle's skin and benefiting from the maternal care Richardson gave to *him*, maternal care of the *impersonal* sort that Powys seemed to prefer and that Phyllis Playter also seemed to provide. Impersonality, and distance that did not mean remoteness, were as necessary to Richardson as to Powys. And not surprisingly, Phyllis Playter and Alan Odle had certain traits in common. They were both undemanding yet strong-willed, and they led active and fiercely independent interior lives. Alan's savagery found complete expression in his drawings; in his domestic life he could not bear the slightest divergence from the established routine, regarding it as sacred and inviolable. Powys's daily rituals, though more

fetishistic, were comparable, and they had, I would think, a similar stabilizing effect on Phyllis Playter. She may have had her own thoughts but, as Powys put it, she was also “riding on the Centaur’s back”.

The two principals, then, talked to each other (they actually met only three times in all), but the two ‘seconds’ made up an integral part of the dialogue, their voices blending in. And there was more than a four-way conversation going on. Sex-roles as well as thoughts and feelings were exchanged. Alan Odle’s asexual presence, as I see it, was liberating for Powys, Phyllis Playter’s androgyny no less than her seriousness humanizing for Richardson. Moreover, while Richardson found it easier to deal with Powys’s lavish and bold novels through Alan, Powys preferred to deal with *Miriam* rather than with Dorothy, who became for him primarily Miriam’s creator—the Priestess, the Sybil, the Delphic Oracle, the Pythian Soothsayer: in other words, the feminine safely mythologized. The end result of all this manoeuvring is a correspondence that reveals as much in its written discourse.

But the discourse has its own expressive side for the wide range of subject matter and intonation—from Henry Miller, introduced by Powys, and Richardson’s surprising disclosure that she had already read and liked him to the Russian Berdyaev whom Richardson admired and Powys (at least at first) found intolerable: he was, he claimed, too mystical for his taste. Their most prolonged disagreement, oddly enough, stemmed from the book by Powys that Richardson praised more than any other. This was *The Pleasures of Literature*, which almost made her suggest to Powys, she said, that he stop writing novels. Nevertheless, his essay on St Paul shocked her with its approval of him at the expense of St John, and she argued for the simple loving John—despite his intellectual limitations—against the brilliant Paul, who had more knowledge but less experience in living. The argument was a draw, mainly because Powys would neither retreat nor continue the dispute on behalf of

his favourite apostle, the “mad perverted persecuting sadistic misogynistic Saint Paul”, as he gleefully described him. But the essay had also elicited from Richardson a lecture on the differences between men and women, and here Powys had no trouble agreeing with her—that in general men were “less whole, more divided, more specialist than women”, and that most of them were what she called the “Disbelievers”, who could not imagine death as anything but the end of an individual. Artists, on the other hand, who were “three parts woman, and women whose minds had not been monkey-eyed with, dominatingly, by men, were better qualified”, she declared, “than most men, to pronounce on the subject of immortality”. “Elementals” such as Catherine and Heathcliff, knew what only exceptional people discovered, she said, that “*Time* [was] not long enough, or wide, or deep enough for *love*”, a word she apologized to Powys for using, aware that he insisted on “charity”, as in the New Testament’s Authorized Version.

The letters set off by *The Pleasures of Literature* were written in the early months of 1939. By September the war had begun, rousing Powys to anger, resentment, and cynicism (it was a war between capitalists for the upper hand and little more, in his jaundiced view). Richardson countered with a passionate defence of the struggle against coercion and dictators (masculine *or* feminine). Hitler had been produced by “all of us”, she said, and people were having a hard time facing up to it. Powys himself would decide (by 1942) that Stalin was even worse than Hitler, and as the war took its inexorable course he embarked, almost defiantly, on one astonishing book after another—from *Glendower* to *Porius* and *Dostoevsky* and *Rabelais*. Richardson, in Cornwall, confined herself to short fiction, to letters, and to wartime life in a small village. She put *Pilgrimage* aside for the most part, with grave misgivings about its future. It had appeared in 1938, in a much-heralded and misrepresented ‘omnibus’ edition, advertised as the complete work in twelve chapter-

volumes, even though she had already begun work on a thirteenth part. The incentive to finish it was weak, her creative drive—unlike Powys's—derailed. But she wrote long letters to several correspondents, including Powys, about the world scene as well as about contemporary literature and philosophy. And they continued—even after Alan Odle's sudden death in 1948—until her removal from Cornwall to a nursing home, in 1952. When she died in 1957, Phyllis Playter wrote to Richardson's sister-in-law, speaking at the last in her own subtle and cryptic voice that, like the others, needed its contextual chamber to be fully heard. She wanted to convey the impression Richardson had made on her at their first meeting in 1934, an impression linked up with the point she remembered Richardson had made to Powys about the danger of meeting writers one admired. Five years later, at their second and last meeting, as Phyllis Playter recalled it, Richardson had expressed the fear a little differently: those who came to

admire, she suggested, “might go away feeling *less well about themselves*”, presumably because they had learned that their admiration was misplaced. But on the contrary, Phyllis Playter felt that in her case something like a spiritual transference had taken place, that she had been filled with Richardson's personality and the “wisdom and richness” of her nature. In other words, she remembered that they had ‘fused’ perfectly, and having gone to admire Richardson, she felt herself admired in turn, for the same qualities.

It seems appropriate that Phyllis Playter's letter should bring to a close the correspondence Powys had initiated—at her urging—nearly thirty years earlier and carried on in both their voices. But Dorothy Richardson had met him halfway, countering with Alan Odle as her own second or back-up voice and facilitating an exchange of letters that contribute a curious little operatic quartet to modernist literary history.

## THE POWYS SOCIETY

President: Glen Cavaliero

The Powys Society exists to promote public recognition of the writings, thought, and contribution to the arts of the Powys family, particularly of John Cowper, Theodore and Llewelyn, but also including other members of the family and their close associates. The Society holds an annual weekend conference as well as informal local meetings. Members receive a regular *Newsletter* and *The Powys Review*. The Society publishes other Powysiana from time to time.

The annual membership subscription is £10.00 (U.K.) and £12.00 (abroad).

Further details may be obtained from:

Griffin Beale,  
39 Church Street,  
Bridgwater,  
Somerset, TA6 5AT

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# “Ever your Faithful Friend”:

## Letters from John Cowper Powys to James Hanley edited by David Gerard

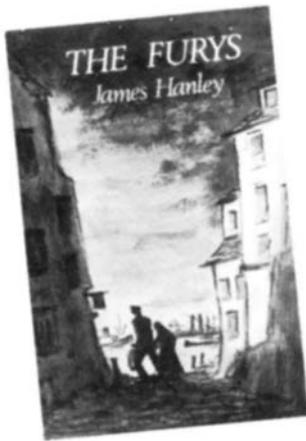
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The present selection is drawn from the 71 letters preserved in Liverpool Public Libraries together with three letters now in the National Library of Wales. The period covered is 1929-1938, the decade when Hanley's reputation was firmly established, when he lacked no advocacy from among the *litterati* of the period, whose private letters and public statements confirm their high estimate of his work: E.M. Forster, Storm Jameson, Richard Aldington, T.E. Lawrence, Henry Green and William Faulkner all testified to his qualities; but his most consistent and enthusiastic supporter was John Cowper Powys.

The friendship between Hanley and Powys, begun through correspondence in 1929, blossomed into a warm personal relationship when Powys returned from America to settle in Wales, firstly at Corwen not far from where Hanley was living, and latterly in Blaenau Ffestiniog where Powys died. The letters were completely characteristic of Powys in their emotional immediacy, exuberance, generous recognition and encouragement, the absence of that peculiar gloss of sophistication and restraint which was so often a hallmark of the metropolitan literary culture. Though we haven't Hanley's replies it is clear that he responded with equal candour to Powys's fervour and both communicants became deep and permanent lovers of Wales, Hanley declaring himself “Welsh by adoption”.

Publication of the letters comes at a timely moment, as if Powys's support for the young writer from Liverpool is to be vindicated: the publisher Andre Deutsch is reissuing *Boy*, Hanley's early novel banned by police action in 1934, and two other titles, *An End And A Beginning* and *No Directions*.

Thanks are due to Liverpool City Council, Libraries and Arts Department and the Librarian, National Library of Wales, for permission to publish the letters that follow.



4 Patchin Place  
New York City  
New York

3 Oct. [1929]

Dear Mr Hanley

If the six copies<sup>1</sup> on *that* that side of the Atlantic and the six copies on *this* side of the Atlantic hadn't melted like snow among my endless relatives I surely w<sup>d</sup> have sent you one 'for love' as they say but alas!

they've all been given away and the American edition w<sup>h</sup> is in two vols is better than the English one as you can easier carry it in your pocket & if I *do* get over my natural miserliness (w<sup>h</sup> almost equals Mr Earlforward's in “Riceyman's [sic] Steps” (if you know that book of Bennett's)) I w<sup>d</sup> really rather like to think of you carrying my work (which took four years, my dear sir, to write) in your side pocket when you go on one of those tram-cars that in my time I used to know so well in the environs of Liverpool.

I am not sure that I know exactly where you live but I used often to stay with a friend, a very good friend called Tom Jones<sup>2</sup> in Weld & Co's Cotton Business but *that* firm is bankrupt now & my friend ruined & penniless is woefully dead of a broken heart. But his memory makes Liverpool still dear to me tho' a bit sad as you can believe.

Do send me a line to jolt my selfishness ere long & if you've got hold of my book from a Library let me know how you liked it—but more useful than that to me (thinking of my *next* book) where you *didn't* like it. Any way write—& till I hear I remain yours

very truly,

John Cowper Powys

<sup>1</sup>Of *Wolf Solent* published London and New York, 1929.

<sup>2</sup>For a full account of his exultant relationship with Tom Jones see *Autobiography*, 1934, pp. 363-370.

4 Patchin Place  
New York City

Dinkler Hotel,  
Birmingham, Alabama

24 Nov 1929

My dear Mr Hanley,

I beg you to pardon my long delay in replying to your most interesting letter of Oct 13th.

The only thing that puzzled me in it was your reference to my novel “Ducdame” in connection with the war; for that book was not published until 1925, seven years after the war ended.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of your excellent letter I found of great interest & I was arrested again & again by turns of thought and expressions of feeling that aroused my vivid sympathy. And now, my dear sir, I really am in the next two or three days going to despatch *Wolf Solent* to you in its American two volumes. It is really—only keep this a great secret—more agreeable to me in its American “format”, as they call it in the office, than in the English one, although I chose the colour etc etc of that myself! This one or these two vols, I am now sending you were designed by a young artist from Vienna & I think you’ll agree that he did a good job in book-making. Don’t bother to reply to this *until you have safely got the package*—

Yrs sincerely,  
John Cowper Powys

<sup>1</sup>The setting is Dorset.

3 Feb. [1930]

Dear Mr Hanley

My permanent address in this country is always the same 4 Patchin Place New York City but I am now in the midst of an exhausting lecture-tour. I do from my heart congratulate you, sir, on that good news that you have had a novel accepted & soon to appear.<sup>1</sup> What splendid news—I shall be able to read it and then I shall come to know your mind & the way it works and all your feelings, ideas, and sensations much better. I will enquire when I get back whether my book was sent to you & if not I will have it sent as soon as I return to New York. Your letter was full of interest for me. What a life you have had! I think you must be now displaying that ancient piety of the Romans & the Chinese—somewhat neglected often among us!—of supporting your parents. Well—you are lucky any way not to have sons to educate! Though I can’t complain for my only child is now very nearly self-supporting.<sup>2</sup>

Think of your having left home for all those remote places by ship when you were so young. Aye! but you must indeed sometimes find yourself recalling strange memories as you take those Liverpool trams to wherever your work is! My own early hardships were at



James Hanley

Photograph: Welsh Arts Council

school. Its a terrible Spartan custom that—in our Middle Classes—of snatching little kids from their parents at 9 & 10 plunging them into a struggle for existence such as in after life nothing they meet can compare with for bitter loneliness & fighting for their own hand.

I often say to myself when these long lecture tours grow heavy & forlorn that I shall at least never have to go to School again—and I still dream of it sometimes<sup>3</sup>—like Dickens used to dream of that blacking-bottle factory where they sent him.

Aye! I *shall* be thankful when I get back to New York. I’ve been thro’ Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Kansas and now I’m in Alabama and soon off for Georgia and then Louisiana—and back to New York via Virginia. Its not all honey, my dear sir, I can assure you, the life of a lecturer—I often envy those who can live by their pen alone—but for me to do that now with my various obligations would mean I fear great financial worry. And its better to suffer from physical discomfort and have peace of mind than to live in a quiet spot & be perpetually worried by money troubles. But this lecture-business, I can assure you, is not all beer & skittles.

With every good wish for the success of your book.  
I am yrs most cordially  
John Cowper Powys

<sup>1</sup> *Drift*, published 23 January 1930 by Eric Partridge.

<sup>2</sup> Littleton Alfred Powys, began his career as an Anglican clergyman, later a Roman Catholic priest.

<sup>3</sup> Sherborne School which JCP entered at 10.

Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

18 Dec. 1930

Dear Mr Hanley

I’ve been *very* impressed by those tales of yours<sup>1</sup> and I enclose a Preface w<sup>h</sup> I hope won’t be an anticlimax at the wrong end!

I have only one criticism to offer & that is that I feel the discourse of that one of the second pair of warders (its the one called “Hope” isn’t it?) who finally yields to the man’s passion is a lot *too long* & this length spoils the poignancy of the tale.

I feel that his discourse could be very considerably condensed to the great benefit of the formidable & mysterious hit you are making.

Personally I relucted a bit at that *keyhole* in the door, coming in like that; but that may have been a vague outrageous recollection of gross vulgar & comic jests of old Preparatory School days; and I don’t lay the same stress, or anything like on *that* reluctance as on my hesitation over the *length* of the particular warder’s speech. Its hard for me to visualise however any publisher daring to risk the censor over that

passage but more power to his elbow if [he] does dare & to the writer’s too, par le splendeur de Dieu!

Well, all good luck to you, Mr Hanley, in what you set your hand to next.

You certainly are no shirker  
Yrs V. sincerely

John Cowper Powys

The MSS came in *very* bad condition—the envelopes badly torn—no sign of any story called *John Muck* but there was one called *Last Voyage*.

<sup>1</sup> *Men In Darkness*, published 18 September 1931 by John Lane.

Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

5 Aug. 1931

Dear Mr Hanley

I am so very glad to hear of your marriage<sup>1</sup> (I heard a rumour first of it from our mutual publishers in Fleet St). And now these little pictures arrive w<sup>h</sup> give me a much more clearly defined notion of you; & a most happy one of your bride. I like well to think of you on a Welsh hill side such as I can see in this picture—alas! it has a tendency to make me quite home-sick for the old country—although my own Hillside though it is in “Columbia County” and not in the Principality has its merits for anyone desirous of solitude as I am.

Yes you use the right word (& I know it) when you use the word “cheat” for what of all things you especially hate. Without question these people for whom you have resolved to wage relentless war with your formidable pen are *cheated*; & not only cheated by kindly meaning people too, who in a most fatal sense “know not what they do”.

This tedious duodenal ulcer of mine *is* a lot better at the present moment of writing & I trust it’ll stay so.

By the way I have just read (translated into American under-world slang) a book called “*Alexanderplatz*” by Dr Alfred Döblin<sup>2</sup> in 2 vols—a big long book—copying Joyce a little but not obscure at all—w<sup>h</sup> (if by any chance you come across it) w<sup>d</sup>, I feel sure, hit your taste to a nicety. I think its the best continental European book for many a year. Its about Berlin... & I’ve never read any fiction before with Berlin as background.

Well, I shall look out with great interest for your next work; & indeed shall follow every step of your history, w<sup>h</sup> I pray may be a long one and undefeated & unthwarted along the lines you have set out to follow.

Please convey my most respectful salutations to your lady

Yrs very sincerely  
John Cowper Powys

<sup>1</sup> To ‘Timothy’. Her maiden name was Dorothy Enid Heathcote. Novelist and painter.

<sup>2</sup> *Alexanderplatz*; translated by Eugene Jolas (Martin Secker, 1931).

Route 2,  
Hillsdale,  
New York

15 Oct. [1931]

My dear Mr Hanley,

I read with what Walter Pater (humorously enough if you consider what this world is, as you obviously frequently do!) calls "appropriate emotions" that sardonic and quite rightly cruel little black war-tract.

I keep pondering as I read your work on its superiority to the work of Thomas Burke<sup>1</sup> who "goes in" so much for cruel horrors. With you it's a legitimate & angrily righteous hitting back at the First Cause of sentient suffering nerves with Its own weapons & is entirely free from the voluptuousness of Sadism.

I fancy that books wh. have a Sadistic gusto in them must set going in the world or *keep* going there many very dangerous vibrations such as do not tend to diminish (in a revolt or indignation as *your* writings do) the cruelty & stupidity of the arena of life but rather in a subtle aesthetic way condone such things. I have been meditating on this very much of late in connection with Dostoievsky (who if anyone ever did) knows the psychology of that sort of thing—& he, I note, with his Stavrogins, Svidrigaliovs,<sup>2</sup> etc etc never touches that particular nerve till he has sublimated it in a dusky flame of spiritual remorse wherein it appears, as in no other writer who ever touches it, in its true colours.

You really do (as some of your reviewers evidently feel) share something of that "saeva indignatio" of Swift and Joyce which is so powerful an urge—one of the most powerful I think for sincere writing—and which rallies to you so many "indignant souls" as Dante calls them.

I am sure I wish you every sort of good luck, my dear sir, & I am glad you've found so sturdy & spirited a supporter as your friend Mr L.<sup>3</sup> I am ever grateful to him for standing by you.

I've writ to New York for my 2 vols edition of Wolf Solent & will forward it to the address you are now using. Pardon delay in this but now you yourself are launched so illustriously by such good Heraldic Supporters as one might call 'em (whose names are writ in heaven) my delay in this respect is more pardonable. Unpardonable to Mr Hanley of Liverpool—but pardonable to Mr Hanley of London! ... but it shall come all the same with real apologies anyway.

With every good wish,  
Yours most sincerely  
John Cowper Powys

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Burke (1886-1945) a now neglected novelist, once considered the best interpreter of London's East End: *The Real East End* (1933), *The Streets Of London* (1940).

<sup>2</sup>Stavrogin, a character in Dostoievsky's *The Possessed*, is the monstrous misfit in society with a ruthless will and indifference to people's opinion. Svirgidalov,

a character in *Crime And Punishment* inspires terror by his amoral, unscrupulous acts, the extrovert without any ideals.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Lahr, who was responsible for the printing of *The German Prisoner*, issued privately by James Hanley in 1930 when other publishers refused it.

"Phudd Bottom"  
Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

7 Nov. 1931

Dear Mr Hanley,

I have read "Sheila Moynihan"<sup>1</sup> with extraordinary interest and arrest ... Of course in all books that touch the erotic nerve a person finds it impossible to be as "objective" in criticism (or appreciation) as in other cases, because one's individual reactions to the whole stream of things is so dependent on the peculiarities of that particular nerve, so strangely different in every one and when you come down to it so evasive of all the pigeon-holes of the psychologists!

I don't call the book morbid or neurotic or "pathological". I call it tragically & pitifully natural and normal. It is, however, alas! *normal* too for most people, when they see *in print* what they do & feel in life, to cry "morbidity", "exhibitionism" etc etc etc. I am such a story-lover and such a slave to the direct narrative about my hero or heroine that I did find it hard to compel my mind to leave Sheila and go back each time to her parents in Ireland! That's the worst of having two separate locales in a book especially when divided by the salt estranging sea.<sup>2</sup> You offer a reader of my type—and there must be many of them—who gets this old-world thrill from direct narrative about a heroine's adventures—terrible temptations *to skip*. "Oh drop that" I would have said if I'd been blind, to my reader—"Never mind *those* people! get back to Sheila—I can't wait!"

But God! it's an exhilarating book, Hanley, & full of a formidable imagination.

For my own part (but as I said just now one *can't* be objective in these things!) I felt all along that it would have been quite possible to get the full effect without all the material details. I speak of all these fellows' "penises", their state, shape, that and the heroine coming up against them so very tangibly. Now I suppose I am wrong when I say I felt you could get the *full* effect without these passages—for wh. is of course part [of] that *full* effect? why do I talk of them at all if they hadn't an *effect* on me. But what I meant really was that such being the power of normal imagination on the reader, the details which *are* given, *sans* the tangible "penises", are enough to convey the main idea of the book, *wh* is, I take it, the tragically close association between the ritual of suppression with the † as its symbol & this organ of Dionysus in *wh* tragedy Priest and Innocent are both involved.

It is a curious coincidence & one *wh* shows I am a dedicated reader of yours, Hanley, that on All Souls Day before I began to read your book I had sent off my complete ‘Glastonbury’ to the publishers—in *wh* I have a *scene on a Cross*! Mine differs (as you will see when you get the book; I hope before the end of January) from yours in that there is no embrace or anything approaching it and *my* figure on the Cross is a sort of “Oberammergau Pageant” or Mystery-Play actor but I do make the actress who plays Our Lady and who does embrace the cross conscious of morbid emotions as she plays her role as chief mourner at the Passion—though her feelings, by reason of the non-conductive nature of the oaken wood to *wh* she clings, are *not* communicated to the figure playing the Christ.

I allude to this to show you how alike our minds are in these directions & incidentally to assure you that I didn’t steal the idea from the story of Sheila! In protesting against the tangible “penises” I feel, I confess, a little like the discreet Mr Emerson on Boston Common imploring Walt Whitman to censor the phallic passages in “Leaves of Grass”!<sup>3</sup> But probably like W.W. & like Luther at Worms, & like Pilate with his famous inscription, you will reply “What I have written I have written. Here stand I. I can no other.” *But* maybe not ---

The *net* at the end with Sheila’s body in it is indeed a touch! *There*, of course you tend to desert natural verisimilitude & bleak realism for a symbol & mythic dimension only *remotely* possible; but at the same time extraordinarily telling & rounding off the whole tale so very well! ... Here again our minds must have worked along rather similar lines for in my Glastonbury book (as of course in the old legends on *wh* it’s based) there is a lot about *Fish* ... “Ichthus” the word fish being an old symbol of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

I rather feel—here I am, I think, being objective—that the assault upon Sheila by that man at the end of the lane is not as inevitable as the rest & piles it up a bit *too* thick & of course it comes in again when Mr Grogan interrupts them.

Old Grogan I don’t feel *quite* convinced by. Somehow I cannot *quite* see him going as far as he does in obeying the Priest in his strange designs—this is the sort of situation in which my brother Theodore would follow your character’s feelings and behaviour, rather better than I am able to!

But even in this strange book of yours, Hanley, I am glad to say I detect not the faintest flicker of sadism ... I think it is true that many writers—who claim with a lot of self-righteousness “to be following the brute facts of life” are in reality indulging themselves in cerebral orgies of wicked joy. But the admirable way in *wh* you make Sheila get an ecstasy from these things (quite apart from the initial *shock* on her innocent mind *wh* is the real cause of her death) is the crucial point in your way of handling these matters which entirely and totally separate you from the wilfully sadistic writers that I hold are a dangerous influence; because only one inclined that way must be encouraged by such writings—& besides I am enough of a

mystic to dream that such writing spread an “aura” of an evil nature—

But your book is in a totally different class from what I am animadverting upon now ... & in these things, I tell ‘ee, Hanley, I am a devil of a subtle psychic Mole! Have I not learnt my lesson from Dostoevsky who was far too conscious, quite as you yourself are, of the cruelty of life to its innocents & objects to do anything to increase the wheels of suffering in the world.

The man of the Lavatory on ship-board comes in *very well*, I’ve no quarrel with him at all. I can even swallow *his* open “fly” buttons!

The end of your book is really a piece of tremendously touching writing & the way it links on with the Masses for the Fish at the start is wonderfully done.

Of course temperamentally I am an “introvert”, as their current expression runs, and an incorrigible romanticist—and full of nervous shyings-off from the physical aspects of things. And it’s a good proof I think of how powerful your imaginative tendency is that a person as morbidly fastidious as I am should be able to stomach your realism at all. I notice that some reader of yours keeps putting a ? opposite your use, quite peculiar to yourself, of the word *cataract*. This word I am prepared to defend. For it’s the best word I’ve yet stumbled on to express what it does express.

But to return to what [I] will now discreetly—as they all do these days—call the phallic passages. It is these really & these alone that wd. necessitate a private printing of the book—and I must say I think that wd. be a pity. With a little cunning *expurgation* I wd. have thought you could so deal with it as to pass muster in these days. It seems a shame the book shouldn’t be published officially. It is so unfair I feel that whereas these books that are really wickedly sadistic “get away with it” because of people’s stupidity, a book like yours which is a legitimate and imaginative handling of a tragic subject should have no chance of appearing.

Am I to return it to Knopf—37 Bedford Sq, or direct to yourself? I expect to Knopf,<sup>5</sup> eh? Well, pardon such a rigmarole but I was as you can see very interested.

With best wishes to your lady I am as heretofore  
Yours most sincerely,  
John C. Powys

<sup>1</sup> Never published. The character of Sheila appears in *The Furies* (1935).

<sup>2</sup> ‘The unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea’ (Matthew Arnold, “To Marguerite—Concluded”).

<sup>3</sup> See *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. R.L. Rusk, Columbia UP, 1939, vol. 4, p. 520.

<sup>4</sup> The initial letters of the Christian salutation in Greek: ‘Iesous Christos Theou (H)uios Soter’ formed the Greek word *ichthus*, a fish.

<sup>5</sup> James Hanley’s American publisher. JCP had contributed a preface to Hanley’s collection of short stories, *Men In Darkness*, published by Knopf in 1931.

Phudd Bottom  
Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

30 Nov. 1932

My dear James Hanley

I was so glad to see your hand again & also to see these admirable photos. I do particularly like that one of yourself alone, like Mephistopheles, proceeding blamelessly on his way to some private—back of the Moon—interview with the All-Highest. And I like that one of your lady in the full torrent of the river enjoying herself—tho' it makes me shiver in this Zero weather here—in that spacious stream, like an elemental of the water—a water-sprite.

I like to see this announcement of a long book of yours soon to appear—the reviews of "Boy" over here were the kind that an author of the sort you & I would be likes well to get—a bit awed & puzzled but aware of some pride going on its way to some extreme limit.

I was Sixty my last birthday in Oct—think of that! & who knows but that after another decade out here, or thereabouts, I may suddenly make my way to Wales so as to spend my declining years & lay my old bones in the land of my remote ancestors.

It is *Charles Boni* who is now in possession of my rights in my "Samphire".<sup>1</sup> I wrote to a friend who went to see him or them about letting your young publishers have it but he spoke of such a percentage of royalty that he would want that I went no further thinking that your men w<sup>d</sup> not want it so restricted by having to pay royalties from so slight & small book to an American firm. But if they care to carry the matter further I expect they'd better write to Charles Boni—Publishers—New York City. I have not the address to hand. Yes I heard from Schuster<sup>2</sup> when he was in London that he was persuading John Lane to sign up for Glastonbury—but I've had so many slips (after apparently all was safe contracted) that I shall not let myself be too elated by this, till I hear much more definite news. Anyway it is only for the pleasure of getting the reaction of my native land that I'm keen on it for according to my contract my monetary advantage in any foreign sale conducted by my publishers—& England counts as foreign—is negligible. But I would all the same be very pleased to see it out in England & get some kind of exciting repercussions! I will certainly tell Simon & Schuster that if the Bodley Head falls thro' they'd better try opening negotiations with these people of yours.

Do give my love to your lady, James Hanley, though I fear she'll be cross with me for not being able to think of your name in that Irish form she so likes! But as with names Thomas Hardy and Jonathan Swift and William Blake there's something solidly and lacoonically predestined to me about "James Hanley".

Oh yes short of unforeseen shocks, catastrophes, startling changes, disasters, lones,<sup>3</sup> destitutions etc etc

(the list, under our fitful stars, is always so long!) I expect to remain here in these hills for several years yet & trust to be able to fulfil all my obligations without being driven back to the Platform.

This teasing (tho' not serious) duodenal ulcer refuses to quite heal up but in its average condition it causes me very little discomfort—for I've had this sort of trouble so long—in fact for about 45 years!—that I am "native & endued" to it now. But it gives me an excuse (posing as an invalid) to refuse steadily all lecture offers & to struggle on to earn my living by my pen.

I haven't got *one* of those big photos to send you or I surely would do so. Here is some sort of a snap-shot—

With all affectionate thoughts my dear Hanley to both you and your wife & so much gratitude to you for writing—

always your friend *John C. Powys*

<sup>1</sup>The firm was then Albert & Charles Boni. *Samphire* was originally published by Thomas Seltzer (1922).

<sup>2</sup>Of Simon & Schuster, the New York publishers.

<sup>3</sup>An archaism of the kind beloved by JCP. A Middle English word meaning 'concealments', 'unforseen eventualities' (cf. Malory, *Morte D'Arthur*).

Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

29 Jan. 1933

Dear James Hanley,

How *particularly* good of you to send me this wonderful book about Musicians. I find it simply full of interest—every page—from start to finish. It fascinates me. Few people w<sup>d</sup> have taken down from their favourite shelf such a favourite book & despatched it off as a present to another.

*You are generous.* I'm by nature, as all the sons of my father are, *terribly* dull to music. The old man never could tell one tune from another. Sub-normal was he in that; & tho' I'm not quite as bad as that I find any music without a tune I can catch very hard to concentrate on. One modern musician alone I have acquired a taste for with the help of records on a gramophone & that is *Sibelius*—this music does for some reason beyond my understanding have an appeal for me—but tho' your wonderful book gets as far as Stravinsky who's the last mentioned it says nought of Sibelius!

And I've now read your Ebb Flood too. Never have I read such a perfect description of boys—their ways & feelings & the end of it when Burns hangs himself & the scene at the trial when the hero says "because he was a boy" affected me deeply ... as indeed it must have done many, many by *this* time ... I do so like the way it ends with the mother & son going off.

How good a figure too is that priest! You’re really top-notch, my friend, on priests; you seem to know them thro’ & thro’ & have a real appreciation of them ... & a respect.

Think of your having found a copy of that old book of youthful verses of mine<sup>1</sup> & treating it quite seriously too! *That* did give my pride of the past such a curious thrill!

I *also* have some little (American) tits!—they resemble our English marsh-tits I think—whose enjoyment of the garbage I convey up Phudd Hill to them is always being interrupted by two great thievish black crows who sit watching for my appearance to get the first go. Aye! but I do enjoy this wild remote empty landscape so! Even in bed I like listening to the harsh sounds of the crows—not exactly like our rooks—a bit *harsher*—the most characteristic of all country sounds in America!

Well—I’ve just had (for me) a good piece of news, for S[imon] & S[chuster] write that John Lane really *has* at last finally signed & sealed up to take Glastonbury for England—whether he’ll do it with those teasing expurgations & changes that I so laboriously—counting every *letter* for the benefit of the printing—made for Gollancz I cannot tell. S & S speak no word on that point.

I’ve had a worrying attack of acid dyspepsia that started up my old ulcer again but I’ve now gone to bed for a week & a little over & am *absolutely* fit again, only I’m going to stay in bed for a *while* longer to make sure, ere I start my normal existence again. I am always much more hypochondriacal when I feel free from discomfort than when I feel bad; *then* I tend to get fierce & reckless.

Convey please my most sincerely felt appreciation of their intentions on my behalf to those young publishing friends of yours.<sup>2</sup> *What* a good picture, in so difficult foreshortening, Alan Odle did for your cover! I met him with D.M.R. (my favourite modern writer of *quiet* life!) and liked him so *very* particularly, just as I did her.<sup>3</sup>

My little philosophy-book is due to come out on Feb 9th.<sup>4</sup> They’ve got it in a very nice binding & I am pleased with *its* look as I trust you & your dear lady may eventually be with its contents when you see it. Do give her my best love, will you? I *did* so like her letters. And tell her too that<sup>5</sup>

Well I must stop  
Good luck be with you, Hanley!  
ever your faithful friend

J.C.Powys

<sup>1</sup>This might have been *Odes* (1896) or *Poems*.

<sup>2</sup>Boriswood Press.

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy Miller Richardson (1873-1957), novelist. Alan Odle, the artist, was her husband. His ‘cover’ was probably for *Ebb & Flood* (1932).

<sup>4</sup>*A Philosophy Of Solitude* (Simon & Schuster (USA); Cape (UK) 1933).

<sup>5</sup>The sentence ends ambiguously. He presumably means “Tell her I like her letters”.

Route 2  
Hillsdale  
New York

6 Jan. 1934

Dear Hanley,

I *was* so glad to hear from you—& such a splendid letter—O I do hope you’ll get out of those people’s hands<sup>1</sup> & get a good reliable publisher—& one on this side as well—these things are so worrying & such a burden. But I have a presentment that the stars in your horoscope will be more—are more—propitious for 1934! I am *most* interested in that long book you are now writing—the history of that family.<sup>2</sup> I seem to divine that you are satisfied with it yourself and I fancy you really always know in these things; tho’ by God! we won’t always confess what we know if ‘tis on the wrong side! But after all if a writer is deeply satisfied himself—*that’s* the great sign! And I seem really to detect that you are.

Every new writer—as Coleridge said “has to *create* the taste by which he is appreciated!”<sup>3</sup> Isn’t that a fine saying?

I’ve been suffering a bit from my old duodenal trouble ... had to go to bed for a week ... But it’s better now—tho’ it comes on regularly just about tea-time—my final & second meal—at 5 or 6—& makes it hard to enjoy my tea & bread-&-butter! But I have had this complaint since I was at school & thro’ all my lecture-travels; so now it’s as easy as pat to cope with it. Think—I have not had a natural action of the bowels for 2 years! And of course this dependence on “enemas” makes me very reluctant to move from my present refuge—where I am so luckily placed with the nicest neighbours I could *possibly* have—& these wonderful hills—with no trespassing, for I can go where I like if I can climb over, or under, the barbed wire.

My relatives tend to hold me for a fool not to make my independent deals with the English publishers—but aye! as long as I make ends meet & as long as they’ll advance me royalties I tend to stick to S & S and let them deal with England for I do know they lost heavily on Glastonbury w<sup>h</sup> was a failure over here & they did save me from my lectures by doing so well with Wolf Solent. I am, just like you, inclined to shirk a business-fight as long as I am not *driven* to it by absolute necessity, as you have been by those young buggers who fooled you so!<sup>4</sup>

Well, good luck to ye both, to ye all three! I fancy my *Weymouth Sands*<sup>5</sup> will be out on one side of the sea or the other now—or may be simultaneously—before very long. But I am always too timid to ask them the direct question “When?” You and I are a *fair* pair in these matters, Hanley!

I am now at work on my Autobiography—and I write so quickly that I have to revise each chapter afterwards very slowly & carefully ...

Yrs, as ever, *John C. Powys*

<sup>1</sup>Uncertain which publisher is meant: possibly Boriswood.

<sup>2</sup>*The Furys*. The Furys Chronicle consisted of four volumes eventually: *The Furys* (1935); *The Secret Journey* (1936); *Our Time Is Gone* (1940); *Winter Song* (1950).

<sup>3</sup>From the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: “Every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is relished.”

<sup>4</sup>This seems to refer to Boriswood.

<sup>5</sup>Published in the USA by Simon & Schuster, and in the UK by John Lane with title *Jobber Skald*, in 1934.

[No address]

22 May 1934

Dear Hanley & Timothy

In *terrific* haste & terrible rush to get off & get my Book—my long Autobiography<sup>1</sup> done—ere I start. For I am leaving this country & hope to lay my bones ... not *finally just* yet please the fates! ... in my native land!

Yes I am now sailing on the “*Westernland*” from New York touching at Halifax to *Southampton* due to arrive there about June 10th sailing on June 1st.

I shall go straight to my brother Llewelyn & take a cottage near him for a while—a cottage w<sup>h</sup> my brother Will from Africa rented when he was there for £5 a year! It is called *Rats’ Barn*.

So after about June 12th my address will be  
c/o Llewelyn Powys

“Chydyok”

East Chaldon

Dorchester, Dorset

Better write there when you or Timothy write for I don’t yet know whether the East Chaldon postman comes to *Rats’ Barn*!

I was *thrilled* by that picture of your little boy my spiritual God-son.<sup>2</sup> The minute I arrive I have to face a Writ for Libel ... for the owner of Wookey Hole declares I libelled him in the person of Philip Crow whom he resembles!<sup>3</sup>

Damn! What a worry—and what a *comical* worry!

Well I must stop

I *am* so thankful that your Book is finished & that you are safe out of Lawyers hands—just when I have to face them!

Well, well!  
Yr aff<sup>te</sup> & faithful  
J.C.P.

<sup>1</sup>Published by John Lane (1934).

<sup>2</sup>Liam Hanley.

<sup>3</sup>This was settled out of court. In the 2nd edition (1955) is an Author’s Note: “The character in this book Philip Crow is an entirely imaginary figure. The author first wrote the book many years ago and was wholly unacquainted with any persons who controlled Wookey Hole Caves. Philip Crow does not represent in any way any person now or at any time connected with the management or ownership of the Caves.”

38 High East St,  
Dorchester  
Dorset

3 Nov. 1934

Dear Hanley,

Bravo! You’ve done it—and as I prayed and hoped you would—Yes I’ve read every word of the “*Furys*”<sup>1</sup> with growing absorption & unflagging & unabated interest. It’s great! Oh I do congratulate you from my heart, & Timothy; & little Liam too, on his Dad’s genius!

I really think it is different—in quality, texture, atmosphere, viewpoint, art, & purpose,—from any other book I know. It’s a wonderful thing to have done and I can tell you you’ve put into it with more balanced completeness more sides of your nature than in anything else you’ve done before. The character of the mother is a masterpiece & so—only second to her—is Mr Fury. I never recall reading of the mysterious & involved link between married people so profoundly & touchingly portrayed as in the case of these two.

The greatest of all dramatic mysteries, the relations between a man and a woman who have lived long in contact, is indicated with mastery, in the bed-rock affection mixed, no! *over-laid*, with misunderstanding, of Mr & Mrs Fury for each other—

Of course his having been so long at sea & in America altered their relations a bit but that sea-absence of his is never forgotten all the way through and is one of the main elements of the book as his feeling for her struggles against his distaste for the narrowing worries of land-life. Her *secrecy*, a queer mania of her deepest nature, is beautifully delineated with all its tragical effects & it is a touch of real genius the way you make her loathing of *questions & questioning* come in so often. Mr Fury’s pride in her & his natural wish to be a bit more “in the know” is a most excellent thread all through and his relations with Peter & his breaking down in that Park with Maureen are top-notch I think. And how *perfect* Aunt Brigid is! That scene when she makes him go to the tavern with her & leave Mr Postlewaite waiting outside & makes him drunk is *very* good and it’s an unspeakable satisfaction to the reader (one of those scenes of righteous revenge that thrill the reader like Becky’s Rawdon<sup>2</sup> hitting her Lord; & like the unmasking and demolition of Dickens’ rascally hypocrites that a reader *deserves* now and again & seldom gets) when sucking Mrs

Pettigrew's *Jujubes* (that's great! like the Jujube in the mouth of the royal personage in James Joyce's "Ulysses").<sup>3</sup>

Like Joyce's, your imagination has caught the unholy grotesquerie of certain person's *sucked sweets*—a sort of monstrous boyishness of terror—old waggipolen,<sup>4</sup> old damned ones, Sucking Lollipops in Hell!—I think the description of Mrs Rayner & her room is superb—very *Balzacian*, and better still those amazing pages of Mrs Fury scrubbing her house. Never has the act of a woman's scrubbing been made into so Homeric a scene—and it is quite right that someone should have done this. To be the only writer who has really done justice to a Woman Scrubbing Floors is a real triumph. I kept wondering how Peter got down from that wall and who Wooden Face was and what made the wall slimy. I was proud of myself for liking Mr Joseph K. at once—I sympathised with his love of reading the paper in peace—I detected that he was a good man. The book is totally unlike all other books. Its peculiar kind of realism is different from any I know. It slowly—as with all works of genius—as Coleridge says—*creates the taste by which it is appreciated.*<sup>5</sup>

I was so sad when it came to an end & I am glad a sequel is to follow. The end is however, magnificent; entirely satisfying. The restrained indignation over the attitude of the "Company" & "Mr Lake" is more effective than any savage direct protest. I rather feared that there was going to be a murder of Peter by Desmond & I became so involved as to find myself turning each page with intense suspense to know if Peter did get off with Mulcare on that ship. I confess I always felt a certain drop in the interest when the people went away from those three houses, the Fury's, Maureen's, & Desmond's—most of all I felt this in the ride of those men in the Motor to the Conference, after the meeting of Desmond with the Priest. Things had got so tense at home that I found it hard not to hurry on faster than a reader should just there.

That green dress of Brigid—in fact all the Brigid scenes—struck me as very good art. I think it was a magnificent stroke to bring in someone like the Professor—but I confess I am not quite content with the name *Titmouse*. This name spoils it a bit for me and I wish deeply that he had had another name. Like *the man in the Mackintosh*<sup>6</sup> in the funeral scene in *Ulysses*. That Professor is a very imaginative touch—you were well inspired to bring someone of that kind in—but I do not feel *quite* as if this particular figure in all details were totally satisfactory. I got a jerk, a[n] uncomfortable aesthetic jerk, of some sort over him, as if the tone, the key, the peculiar tempo of the book had suddenly suffered an upset. But I do not feel this to be the result of the introduction of *some* symbolic figure at that moment for I feel that to have been a true inspiration and one that you knew was *required* the moment it came, but I felt it due largely to the mere word "Titmarsh" [sic] which evoked for me a sort of Aldous Huxley airiness of wilfulness, breaking the kind of Ibsen-like or at least Strindberg-like or

*Andreyev-like*<sup>7</sup> inevitable poetry of this singular personage.

This name I fancy was introduced by you to avoid any melodramatic hint of the supernatural but somehow to me the supernatural as such is less of a jerk than the sort of humour in that particular word—I didn't feel perfectly happy about the colloquy on *the back of the lion*—you were skating then on thin ice, and, though you *did* get over; the ice, for me at least, cracked audibly now & then!

Sheila was *very very* good—a wonderful character—though here again there seemed to me a danger of a romance coming in—I mean a *Celtic* romantic atmosphere coming in when it might almost seem to the reader that the author was allowing himself, or I would say the poet in him, to strain the premeditated texture of his story to satisfy a subjective emotion of his own—but *I may* be wrong in this! I *felt* it however, for a moment, when George & Mrs George saw her alone on the shore.

The scene however where Peter *goes upstairs* led by the voice of the Professor struck me as simply magnificent & in the really great vein & all that love-making scene was without flaw to my mind.

The "rubber-boy" too was I felt just the right touch where it came bringing that curious sense of the sordid in those things—the monstrously grotesque sordid—that such provocations under those conditions might and do have and that was got better by the "rubber-boy" containing the missive from the old procuress than any vivid description of the place where she took him.

I did several times if you'll let me say so get a *James Joyce feeling*; as for instance in that coffee shop when the good-natured waiting-wench awaits that man behind the screen under the Amazon's patronages. But the general tone of your style of realism is totally unlike Joyce &, as I say, unlike any writer I know. But Mr & Mrs Fury are to me the masterpieces of the book. Not a word could be altered where they are concerned together. I was myself I confess very strongly moved by the passages in italics describing the thoughts of the old Mr Mangan and his memories. I think your style is wonderful there—that dignified simple poetic style almost like some of Wordsworth's Blank verse ... in fact I was reminded of his poem "Michael" about the sheep fold, in wh. the line comes

"And never lifted up a single stone".

My only quarrel with those passages from the thoughts of the poor old "Slobberer" was the use of the word "one"—"one thinks", "one does", so & so—"one is so & so"—

But this my American lady<sup>8</sup> tells me is a prejudice of my own & I suppose it is—but I remember as a boy when I used to hear people say "*One* does so and so" instead of "you" or "we" or "anyone" or "a person" it always struck me as precious & even affected. But I expect I'm wrong there ... but somehow I didn't like that "one does" or "one thinks" or "one feels" to come into so grandly a

simple & tragic a memory of that poor old man! But this is a small point anyway!

Well I do congratulate you, Hanley, on this book. It's a great book; the realism convincing, the characters convincing, the subject tragic in the noblest sense and the vein of poetic—supernatural symbolism frighteningly effective; save for the name "Titmouse"!

I hope you won't hesitate to quote from this letter any particular passage that your publishers might find of use; for I do feel that so remarkable and powerful a book by the author of one of the greatest short stories ever written—I refer to "The Last Voyage"—ought to be launched with a good send-off—the best they can manage!

Please thank the lady "Tim" ever so much for her gracious and charming letter and I needn't tell you how your own word about "Glastonbury" thrilled its author, who needs such a word of praise, after some of the reviews of his last book!

With affectionate greetings from us both & many many thanks for that lovely invitation—But I must not take any exciting trip, like that to Wales, till I have done a little solid work here. I am terribly behind with my work,

Yrs most sincerely,  
John Cowper Powys

P.S. I was not altogether certain whether I felt quite happy over the part about George & Nabob—though George's attitude to the strike *was* a necessary note.

<sup>1</sup>See letter of 6 January 1934, note 2.

<sup>2</sup>*Vanity Fair*, chapter 53. Becky had feigned illness but spent the evening with Lord Steyne. They were surprised by Rawdon Crawley's sudden entrance and all Becky Sharp's stratagems were exposed.

<sup>3</sup>In the 'Circe' chapter. King Edward VII makes a brief appearance "in an archway ... He sucks a red jujube ..." The scene is set in Bella Cohen's brothel.

<sup>4</sup>Presumably a JCP coinage. ("The satisfaction I got came ... from arbitrarily inventing words". *Autobiography*, p. 65).

<sup>5</sup>See letter of 6 January 1934, note 3.

<sup>6</sup>An elusive, mysterious figure who appears and reappears throughout the text of *Ulysses*. This reference is to the 'Hades' chapter, Paddy Dignam's funeral: "Now who is that lankylooking galoot over there in the macintosh?"

<sup>7</sup>Leonid Nikolaievitch Andreyev (1871-1919), Russian writer of short stories and plays, dealt largely with the despised and the outcasts of society, his treatment of sexuality criticised in his day as morbid and obscene. *The Abyss* and *In The Fog* are probably his best known works.

<sup>8</sup>Phyllis Playter.

<sup>9</sup>Published by William Jackson in a limited edition of 550 copies in 1931.

38 High East St,  
Dorchester

16 March 1935

My dear Hanley,

I am simply thrilled to have again safe & sound & to hand all your books—I do thank you for them & the inscriptions. I read last night with absorbed interest this fine & terrifying story you especially devoted to me "At Bay" & I like it uncommon well & Phyllis will take it to Llewelyn, who is at *Weymouth* for a few days or a few weeks now—I hope the sea-air won't hurt him—He isn't *quite* so well ... but he did so crave for a change.

Phyllis is disgusted with all these young Public School & University men (& women too of the same kind!) who write "fiction" in this our England—she says it is "not a patch" on what's being written in America and I entirely agree.

We turn to your books I can tell you with untold relief. These books are neither passionate nor *real*, neither imaginative *nor* convincing—They are wilful weak and silly "haverings"—Aye! but I pray you will live to write a great shelf-ful—*several* shelves-full—of formidable novels—with life & strength & passion & imagination putting all these people to shame and I *think* you will—

There is assuredly no writer like you—you see how it is!—you impress & enchant a rhapsodical dithyrambic Welshman like me *and also* these dare-devil men of action like Lawrence of Arabia. I am proud to have been present to watch the start of your career ... may it be *long in the land!* Both our loves to you & "Lady Tim", & my god-son Liam

Bless you ever,  
afftely,  
J.C.Powys

Corwen  
Merioneth.

1 June 1937

My dear James,

I've been thinking of you three & wondering how you are—Tis hard in the daily toil & rush of one little thing after another to break my routine & take the bus to see 'ee but 'tisin't lack of caring for 'ee or of thinking of you three that prevents. Just one thing after another thing!

How you must have liked this weather for I never can recall a pleasanter May in this old island as far as *weather* goes ... tho' now our farmers and gardeners are crying for rain & on the mountains all waterfalls & streams are dry.

Well, my dear James, you'll be interested to hear that I've had all my teeth out every Jack one of them & do not intend to replace them by *any* others ... One young Corwen woman laughed in my face when she

Ist saw me but most are more polite than that & the great thing is I'm free from discomfort in my head—

And I seem to be able to recite poetry & talk all right ... I even believe that I *could* give a lecture! I think I'll ere long get as skilful with my tongue & gums as with the former & teeth! And what a comfort not to have to bother with a tooth-brush.

I have actually & seriously begun my interminable historical romance on *Owen Glyndwr*. I wrote the first sentence in the Chapter-House of Valle Crucis Ruins<sup>1</sup> but God knows whether I'll survive to write the last sentence of it or where!

I do hope, James, my friend, that you are in fairly good heart, & Tim & my old fellow curly pate the same. My brother Littleton & his wife are coming to visit us for a couple of weeks on the 15th.

Tell Tim that I saw on the mountain a specimen of that rare & lovely butterfly the *Green Hairstreak* green as a leaf when his wings are closed.

So we're not going to let our own royal runaway<sup>2</sup> have any grandees to his wedding!—but he'll manage to carry it through in the civilised language of Voltaire, & according to the Code Napoleon; & to Hell with us!

Love to Tim & kiss the Curly Head yr “lean & slippered” but *afft* Pantaloon<sup>3</sup> John. P. sends her love & the Ladies<sup>4</sup> their respect.

<sup>1</sup> Valle Crucis Abbey on the Berwyn hills overlooking Llangollen was founded c. 1200 AD by Madoc ap Gruffydd Maelor, Prince of Powys.

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the wedding of ex-King Edward VIII and Mrs Wallis Simpson.

<sup>3</sup> *As You Like It*, II, vii, 158.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Playter's mother and sister who accompanied JCP to Wales.

8 Dec. 1938

7 Cae Coed  
Corwen

[No salutation]

So sorry about this Flue, [sic] James. I pray you two will not suffer too much or too long or have too deep gloom in the recovery. I had a most exciting time at Bridgend—the most stirring & moving thing to me about it all was my encounter with an astonishing poet called *Huw Menai*<sup>1</sup> an ex-miner from the Rhondda who is a great devotee of yours & *corresponded* with you once—*before* you went down there—when you had to do with those Boriswood gentry I *think* it was.

This man will be up here for the Denbigh Eisteddfod if not before & has begged me to introduce him to you w<sup>h</sup> I shall surely do—He simply hypnotised me & fascinated me. And under his reckless encouragement



C. Benson Roberts, John Cowper Powys, Huw Menai at Bridgend, 1938

I gave the longest lecture I’ve ever given in my life—over two hours!

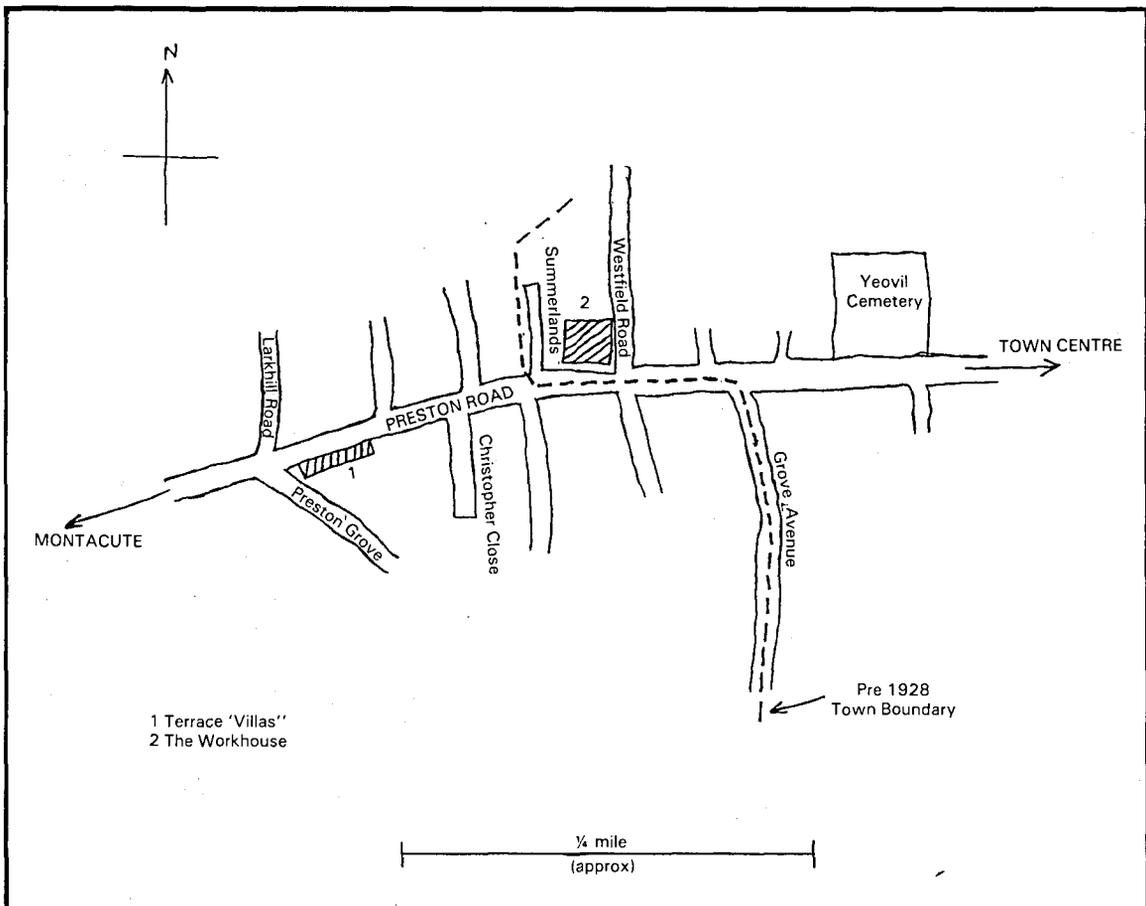
How good of you, James, to think of this chance of a biography for me James! I must think about it a little. I doubt if it would be wise to turn aside from Owen Glendower till I’ve done it by the summer to be published in the Fall. But as soon as I’ve done it (about July say) I might possibly do this. Of course I’d have to ask my Agent & Cassells first. I wonder if Owen Glendower himself would do for the Biography? But I think I must concentrate on my Hist. Novel (don’t you, James?) *till its done* for it’s only *half way through* so far.

But ’twas a passing thought of yours my friend. I must ponder a bit on it.

Love to T.L. & G.<sup>2</sup>  
& your old self of course from  
us both—J

<sup>1</sup>Huw Menai Williams, a miner from Gilfach Bach, Glamorgan, whose fourth and last collection of poems, *The Simple Vision* (1945), was introduced by JCP.

<sup>2</sup>Timothy, Liam and Gerald [Hanley] James’s brother, also a novelist.



Tony Hallett’s sketch map, locating the home of Wolf and Gerda in Yeovil (Blacksod)

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# Tony Hallett

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## *Ramsgard to Blacksod continued*

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Since I wrote "Ramsgard to Blacksod" which appeared in the pages of *The Powys Review*, 24, a surprising number of books have been published, reprinted or brought to my attention which have enabled me to add further to my understanding of the Blacksod landscape of *Wolf Solent*. In addition I am most profoundly indebted to Eve Batten who revealed the whereabouts of Torp's yard.

Blacksod Grammar School is what was Yeovil County School; formerly situated in a building to the left of the Employment Exchange (Y.M. D2).<sup>1</sup>

The cottages where Wolf Solent observes the elderly woman reading by candlelight were on the Sherborne side of the road-bridge at Pen Mill Railway Station (Y.M. F3) on the site of what is now the Pittard factory as a very fine drawing by local artist and historian Leslie Brooke reveals.<sup>2</sup>

Pimpernel's, the bakery from which the cake for Gerda's tea-party is obtained, I believe to have been Maynard & Son which was situated in The Borough (Y.M. D3) which itself is in Yeovil High Street.<sup>3</sup>

I had always suspected Mrs Solent's tea shop was The Cottage Cafe which was opposite The Three Choughs and which closed sometime about 1970. However I was uncertain if it existed in the 1920s. I now know from the sign above the door that it was established in 1873. A speciality of the cafe was the provision of "Dainty Teas". The interior had a beamed ceiling and was very old fashioned. These premises are now occupied by Humbert's Estate Agency which stands at the corner of Hendford and Waterloo Lane (Y.M. D3).<sup>4</sup>

The 1843 map of Yeovil reveals that what is now Preston Road (Y.M. C2/B2/B3/A3) did in fact used to be called Preston Lane<sup>5</sup> so

my earlier surmise that the Solent home address was here would appear confirmed. To hazard a guess based solely upon my own reading of the text of the novel, I believe Wolf and Gerda had their home in the row of terraced houses which stand in Preston Road between its junctions with Christopher Close (Y.M. B2) and Preston Grove (Y.M. B3). Powys describes their home as the last in a row of villas at the extreme western limit of Blacksod. My own understanding is that for a Victorian/Edwardian terrace house to qualify for the description of a villa even the most humble need only the addition of a bay window such as these have.

This would mean Larkhill Road (Y.M. B2) would be the scene of the buttercup fields at the end of the novel although this area has long since been built over, as it was encompassed within the town during the massive boundary expansion which took place in 1928 to the north and particularly the west of Yeovil.<sup>6</sup>

If by extreme western limit of the town Powys meant the limit of the town boundary prior to 1928 then it would mean the Solent home would have been not just in the proximity but in the shadow of what is now Summerlands Hospital for the Elderly but was then, to give it its proper title, Yeovil Union Public Assistance Institution, i.e. Yeovil Workhouse.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks entirely to Eve Batten I am now able to reveal that Torp's yard did exist and was based upon the premises of Appleby & Childs, Memorial Designers & Sculptors of 71, Middle Street, Yeovil. So the Chequers Street of Blacksod is Middle Street (Y.M. D3/E3). I have been unable to trace any photographs or drawings of these premises. However, an advertisement reproduced from the 1948 Yeovil Guide reveals they

were the makers of the War Memorial which stands in The Borough (Y.M. D3).<sup>8</sup> The advertisement claims Appleby & Childs also had premises at Weymouth, Bridport and Chard, so it was not a one man business as was Torp's. It should also be said that this was a respected and respectable business, as was Whitby & Son the basis for Malakite's. It would seem Powys was already running the risk of libel actions before he wrote *A Glastonbury Romance*.

The business closed in 1961 and the site of the yard is now occupied by the entrance to the Tesco supermarket next to the Liberal Club in Middle Street. The supermarket is likely to move premises soon but the Liberal Club should remain as a suitable landmark for a few years.

The yard itself where pretty Gerda rode her hobby horse like a young Rhiannon [sic] had high iron railings and gate in front with various stones laid out for display and weathering and the workshop was behind these. It was narrow, little more than ten or twelve feet wide between the high walls of the Liberal Club on the left and Lush's green-grocery on the right. I specifically asked a retired monumental mason who served his apprenticeship with Appleby & Childs if he could remember any beautiful young girls with long blonde hair in connection with the business and his reply was that he could not.

\* \* \*

*Bradford Abbas: The History of a Dorset Village*<sup>9</sup> is now indisputably the book to consult about the village. It contains an extensive history of Clifton Maybank House and an infinitely more sober description of Bradford Hollow than my own. The book also elaborates on the Powys connection with the village.

*Sherborne Behind the Seen*<sup>10</sup> is ideal for an armchair exploration of the landscape of *Wolf Solent*. Originally published privately in 1936 it contains many beautiful drawings by Hubert Jones including one of Bradford Hollow. It should be of particular value to

those scholars with an interest in earth sciences.

Publication of *Working Yeovil Steam*<sup>11</sup> means that I must now in the time honoured tradition end with a whimper. Even for someone travelling the line to and from Waterloo, like myself many hundreds of times, Semley cannot easily be deduced to be Gillingham and trains did indeed stop at Semley "for Shaftesbury" before the station was closed.

As for Mr Malakite going to Weymouth it would have been Pen Mill Station and not Yeovil Town Station from which he departed and yet it was at Yeovil Town Station that Wolf Solent arrived when he travelled from Ramsgard to Blacksod by train. The two main railway stations in Yeovil have been merged together to form a single Blacksod station. A thorough description of the highly complicated railway system in the area is best left to the experts.<sup>12</sup>



Bradford Hollow near Yeovil, by Hubert Jones. See *The Powys Review*, No. 24, p. 29

NOTES

I am grateful to the six intrepid members of the Powys Society who were brave enough to accompany me for the various walks which I led in *Wolf Solent* country earlier this year. Their questions and observations were most valuable. "Except seven, none returned from Caer Sidi".

<sup>1</sup>Leslie Brook, *Yesterday's Yeovil: A Sketchbook*, Buckingham: Barracuda, 1989, p. 21.

Leslie Brook, *The Book of Yeovil: A Portrait of the Town*, Buckingham: Barracuda, 1978, pp. 112-113. My Y.M. references are again to *Yeovil Street Plan with Index*, G.I. Bagnet & Son Ltd., Ripple Rd, Barking, Essex.

<sup>3</sup>*Wolf Solent*, p. 242; *Old Yeovil: A Collection of Interesting Photographs from the Past*, Yeovil: Fox & Co., 30 Princess Street, 1987 p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>*Old Yeovil*, p. 15; *Yesterday's Yeovil*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup>*The Book of Yeovil*, inside rear cover.

<sup>6</sup>*The Book of Yeovil*, p. 32; Leslie Brook, *Yesterday's Yeovil and its Street Names*, Castle Cary: Fox Publications, 1979, pp. 26-27.

<sup>7</sup>*Yesterday's Yeovil and its Street Names*, p. 24; *Yesterday's Yeovil*, p. 12; "Nancy Cooper", Llewelyn Powys, *Somerset Essays*, 1937.

<sup>8</sup>*Old Yeovil*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Eric Garrett, *Bradford Abbas: The History of a Dorset Village*, Yeovil: The Oxford Illustrated Press, 1989 p. 89..

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Fowler, *Sherborne Behind the Seen*, (1936), Illus. Hubert Jones, Sherborne: Sherton Press, 1986.

<sup>11</sup>Derek Phillips, *Working Yeovil Steam*, Yeovil: Fox & Co, 1989, Frontispiece, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*; See also John H. Day, *Steam Around Yeovil: The Final Years*, Castle Cary: Badger Publications, 1985.

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# Susan Rands

## *The Gateposts of Stalbridge Park*

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Photograph: S. Rands



The gateposts at the entrance of the long drive uphill to Stalbridge Park are set in a high wall five miles long surrounding the large park. According to Ralph Wightman writing in 1965, “the mansion inside the park has entirely vanished. Only the gateposts surmounted by some heraldic heads remain as evidence that this was once a mansion capable of entertaining kings. Inside the wall there is the pleasant farmhouse of the home farm, and all the land of the park is now used for agriculture. The height of the wall suggests that at one time fallow deer might have been run here”.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the mansion, built in 1638 and once the home of Robert Boyle, the scientist, was demolished in Powys’s day I have not been able to establish. The park lies next to the church where Powys’s grandfather was rector. His father was born in Stalbridge and lived most of his early life there. As paternity is one of the main themes

of *Maiden Castle*<sup>2</sup> it seems probable that these heraldic heads were the origins of those on the bedposts in that novel.

The description of Enoch Quirm could apply to these heads: “brow, nose, mouth and chin ... [are] modelled on a scale of abnormal massiveness”, his eyes “dull, lifeless, colourless, opaque ... empty of every gleam of human response”, eyes which “neither softened nor warmed ... neither lightened nor darkened” but “were simply there as if someone had found a great antique mask”, and his “head [is] covered with small stiff curls and so low did these curls grow on his brooding forehead that Dud was reminded of some gigantic bust he had seen once” (55). Enoch has “a tremendous face ... with lines about the mouth, wrinkles above the eyebrows, a certain upward twist of the eyebrows combined with a sombre opening of the great Laökoon mouth” (245). The open twisted mouth of the heads is particularly noticeable, and by Dud are associated with Enoch’s a “tragic ... face” “sodden with some abominable suffering” (168). The description of the heraldic heads on the bedposts in the novel could also apply to the stone heads on the gateposts: “was it a lion’s head, a bird’s head, a dragon’s head or a human head?” (17) There is no contradiction here, for Dud can imagine finding out that Enoch Quirm was “the living incarnation of his mother’s ‘Questing Beast’.” (145) Further Enoch Quirm and Dud’s mother were “brought up ... at the lodge of the park-gates of the very place where ... our ancestors had lived” (241).

Taking all the evidence together it seems hard to resist the probability that a familiarity with these heads played a large part in the presentation of the theme in *Maiden*

*Castle*. Although as yet there is no revealed record of Powys visiting Stalbridge, it is only ten miles from Sherborne and about twenty from Montacute, and Llewelyn's essay 'Stalbridge Rectory'<sup>3</sup> gives an idea of its significance to the children of Charles Powys.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Wightman, *Portrait of Dorset*, London: Robert Hale, 1965, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> My page references are to *Maiden Castle*, London: Picador, 1979. The relative pages in *Maiden Castle*, London: Cassell, 1937, are 43, 233, 157, 5, 133, 229.

<sup>3</sup> *Dorset Essays* (1935); *Somerset and Dorset Essays*, London: Macdonald, 1957, pp. 190-198.

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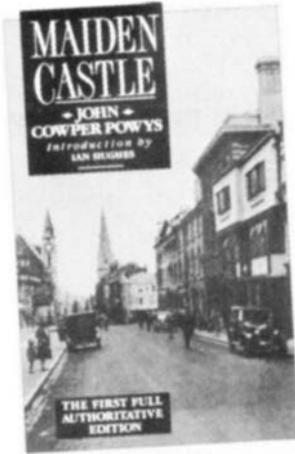
## The Powys Monuments

### A note by the photographer, Jean E. Bellamy

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At regular intervals along the coastal path between East Chaldon and Ringstead Bay, Weymouth, in Dorset are to be seen curious monuments to members of the Powys family. These are way-marks, the creator unknown, in Purbeck marble, in the form of sculptured whelk shells standing in stone niches, each one set at a different angle, dedicated to John Cowper Powys, Llewelyn Powys, A.R. Powys and T.F. Powys. T.F. Powys lived at East Chaldon, 1908-1940. The portland stone carved by Elizabeth Muntz, which marks the burial of Llewelyn Powys's ashes, is on the cliff top of south of Chydyok, his home above East Chaldon.





*Maiden Castle*,  
JOHN COWPER POWYS  
Introduction by IAN HUGHES.

Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1990, £35.

Readers of Ian Hughes's article in *PR* 12, "A Poor Ragged Maiden: The Textual History of *Maiden Castle*", will know that the fourth of Powys's Wessex novels was severely cut before its publication. The deletions being made without consultation, the book was the maimed product of an arbitrary editorial hand. The shortcomings noted by so many of Powys's critics, such as the abruptness of the transitions and the relative poverty of its descriptive passages, were the result of the novel's being hacked up to about four fifths of its original length.

This new edition provides the full text, with the cuts replaced. As Dr Hughes points out in his Introduction, there was fortunately a second typescript held by Laurance Pollinger at the time that Cassell printed *Maiden Castle* from the Simon & Schuster edition of 1936. The present text derives from this copy, and therefore represents the novel as Powys originally intended it to be. So *Maiden Castle* can at last take its true place in the canon, an achievement on which both the editor and his publishers are to be warmly congratulated.

And what is that place? Will this edition effect any significant modification in the judgements on the novel that have hitherto been made? The answer is Yes and No. No, to the extent that it

offers no new incidents or characters; yes, in that the proportions and atmosphere of the story have been enlarged and enriched. But before going further it may be worth pointing out that the form in which a book is printed subtly affects one's reactions to it. In the case of *Maiden Castle*, we have a significant change of shape. The first English edition was dumpy when compared with those of its three predecessors, and coupled with the outrageously eccentric cast of characters (omitted from this version) the format accentuated the oddity of the book and its affront to standards of conventionally naturalistic fiction. It seemed asking to be called 'a story book', and represented Cowperist mannerisms in their most blatant form. But this new edition is tall, elegant in appearance, and very similar in lay-out to Cape's edition of *Wolf Solent*. The poor ragged maiden appears a much more smooth, sophisticated creature now.

Ragged was indeed the word for the original text: Powys himself employed it, referring perceptively to the New York editor as a "Snipper, not a Slasher". Hughes has already given some glaring instances of the inconsistencies resulting from the undoctored use of simple cutting. (This particular reader has to confess that many of these had escaped him: do his fellow critics have to admit the same?) To read this version alongside its predecessor is an instructive experience. The nature of the cuts and their effect upon the novel afford a useful insight into how alien Powys's genius was to the outlook of the average literary editor.

The Snipper seems to have concentrated on four areas of Powys's art. First of all, and most damagingly to the story itself, he cut down extensively on the passages of verbal controversy, with the result that the important dialectical role played by Claudius Cask was much diminished. *Maiden Castle* is Powys's most Lawrentian novel, with extended passages of dispute and argument that recall *Women in Love* and *Kangaroo*, and this new edition places the conflict between Dud No-Man's philosophy and that of his father in a far closer connection with the materialistic creeds of Cask and Dunbar Wye. Such dialogue may not be Powys's chief strength any more than it is in *A Glastonbury Romance*; but its restoration does help to widen

the nature of the book's concerns and to introduce a lively element of authorial self-criticism.

The editor also tended to excise descriptive passages. Now at last the author's responses to Dorchester are restored in their loving particularity; the sense of place is as developed as one always felt it should be—Powys's descriptions are never merely padding, but integral to his theme. And alongside these accounts of the river meadows, of the streets and houses, of the Glymes lanes and of Poundbury Camp, a great many reflective passages had been sacrificed, passages where the author's voice emerges from his narrative in order to place matters in perspective and to ponder on the cosmic marvels implicit in the smallest manifestation of human or inorganic life. All these cuts were clearly made in order to highlight the bare bones of the story and to keep things moving—in other words, to diminish the novel's singularity and to attempt to make it congenial to tastes far other than those to which the author addressed himself. No time either, therefore, for many characteristic pieces of introspection; and here, in the case of Wizzie Ravelston, the loss was especially damaging. Her affinities with Dud and with Enoch Quirm are greater than one had been allowed to suppose. The elements of pathos and of the poetic undercurrents of human consciousness are here far more in evidence.

The matter of the excavations at Maiden Castle now appears central to the novel's theme in more ways than one: the cuts themselves hewed out of the book many treasures carefully enshrined in it. Above all they obliterated that sense of the depth and multi-layered nature of human experience that provide, paradoxically, the actual continuity of the typical Powysian novel. It was a temporary victory of the Roman obsession with ordered rationality over the expansive vision of the Celt: that victory has now been reversed and *Maiden Castle* rescued from the limiting dictates of a penny-pinching naturalism. If there are no significant modifications to the bare bones of the plot, none the less the full version reclothes the skeleton and makes Powys's achievement in the two subsequent Welsh historical novels the less surprising. As a result one now awaits with all the more impatience for the uncut *Porius*.

GLEN CAVALIERO

*Violet to Vita: The Letters of Violet Trefusis to Vita Sackville-West,*

Edited by MITCHELL A. LEASKA and JOHN PHILLIPS.

Methuen, 1989, £16.99.

'It was like beginning one's life again in a different capacity'. The explosive passion of her first few days with Violet Trefusis was for Vita Sackville-West a sexual and psychological rebirth. Vita wrote that, as Violet lay on the sofa listening to Vita talk out 'the secret of [her] duality', '[Violet] appealed to my unawakened senses; she wore, I remember, a dress of red velvet, that was exactly the colour of a red rose'. Red roses, as a cliché of romantic love, were not to re-surface again as symbolic of the women's relationship. Instead Violet and Vita would forge their own clichés for a fatal passion: clichés born, on Violet's side at least, out of a fierce hatred of domesticity and a tamed life.

In 1973, a year after Violet Trefusis's death, Vita Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson published his mother's autobiography, found hidden in a locked bag in a secret cupboard after her death. It told the story of her difficult and dangerous affair with Violet Trefusis, embarked upon in 1918 when Vita had been married for four and a half years, and had two small sons. Denys Trefusis, Violet's husband, burned almost all Vita's letters to Violet. Mitchell Leaska and John Phillips describe the present volume, of Violet's letters to Vita, as an attempt to set the record straight. 'With Vita's side of the correspondence obliterated, only the confession itself [Vita's autobiography] was left to illuminate her part in the affair, making it in essence Vita's story. But Violet has been dead now for eighteen years and the letters published here, most of them for the first time, document her side of this ill-starred passion. That is the sole justification for this volume'.

The care and meticulousness with which Leaska and Phillips have gone about what must have been a very difficult editing task seem to belie this rather bland defence. *Violet to Vita* is a painful book to read. It raises all kinds of questions about marriage, lesbianism, fidelity and loneliness. Leaska and Phillips's scholarly alibi sidesteps the pressure that the book exerts on us as readers to answer certain questions about ourselves. What are we doing uncovering again Violet's agony as Vita inexorably withdrew her attention? 'I *insist* on you burning my

letters,' wrote Violet in July 1919. 'You ought to know that jealous people stop at *nothing*. *It is so dangerous*. If ever they were read, then where would we be?' As we read through this tangle of exhortation, reassurance and remorse, betrayal itself seems to become infectious. For reasons of our own discomfort alone, it is vital that this book is read.

Until the appearance of this volume, we had access to Violet's letters only through the selection published at the end of the 1976 biography of Violet by Philippe Jullian and John Phillips. Strangely, they include some that Leaska and Phillips have missed out of the present volume. It would be satisfying to know their principles of exclusion, since exclusion there clearly has been. It might also have been gratifying to have some of Vita's later letters to Violet (written during the 1940s and 50s and the only ones from her to Violet to survive). These letters, written twenty years and more after the end of the affair, testify to the continuing hold of the memory of their passion over both their lives: 'You are the unexploded bomb to me ... This letter will anger you. I do not care if it does, since I know that no anger or irritation will ever destroy the love that exists between us. And if you really want me, I will come to you, always, anywhere'.

This promise resonates with a terrible retrospective irony. The last 120 pages of this volume of Violet's letters—almost half of those that are included—are a series of increasingly desperate pleas for Vita to come to her. 'O Mitya [Violet's name for Vita], come back to me, come back before it's too late—Mitya, I CAN'T live without you'. Violet sought above all a vocabulary of authentic suffering. She described her own letters as 'reeling, gasping, dishevelled, gross, red, unpardonable, mad'. 'I love you wholly, insanely, hopelessly. And it is that that is killing me'. (29 March 1921) These letters tell hard truths about sexual deprivation and loneliness. As Vita became more and more secure in her role as Harold Nicolson's wife, Violet felt more and more like a marginal note to Vita's 'real' life as wife and aristocrat.

Violet's letters chronicle the struggle of two women to forge feasible feminine identities. Violet continually experiments with different narratives, offering them quite deliberately to Vita as distinct choices. 'Either you would be "pigging it" on two or three hundred a year in a rive gauche attic with me ... or else, you're the other thing, the wife of the Peace Delegate,

beautiful ambitious, prosperous, influential—but you can't be both!' Violet offers Vita an alternative to the norm of heterosexual womanhood in the shape of Vita the gypsy, Vita the madwoman, Vita the rebel. Her letters show feminine identity in the making, driven by energy so excessive that many of the letters, Leaska and Phillips inform us, are almost incoherent—unnumbered, undated sheets stuffed in wadges into envelopes. The unmanageability of Violet's feelings and her texts must have posed a major editing problem, solved by Leaska and Phillips with accuracy and discretion. The only textual drawback is their use of ellipses, liberally sprinkled throughout the letters. Most of the time it is hard to tell whether these ellipses are theirs or Violet's, and their note in the preface which attempts to deal with the problem leaves the reader still puzzling.

This is not a small point, because it brings up the question of sexuality and censorship. Some of the ellipses are clearly acting as censors: 'O mercy, the things I want to write! You remember the caresses ... It seems I have never wanted you as I do now—When I think of your mouth ... When I think of ... other things, all the blood rushes to my head, and I can almost imagine ...' The question is whether Violet is herself suppressing the scandalous articulation of her desires, or whether Leaska and Phillips have taken a decision to omit. If the ellipses are their responsibility, they share with the otherwise excellent introduction a spirit of evasiveness. All that they say about Violet guarding an image of Vita's masculine splendour without which Vita could not continue is entirely convincing, but they avoid all mention of the other very significant bond between the women: an obsessive sexual attraction. 'I want you to the point of frenzy. There are entire days when I think only of that', wrote Violet. It was with the memory of this sexual compulsion that the women would live for the rest of their lives, and it is as a candid record of their love that these letters deserve to be read.

SUZANNE RAITT

*People and Places: A Selection 1975-1987*,  
P. J. KAVANAGH.

Carcenet, 1988, £12.95.

As all left-handed readers will know, the correct way to read a journal is to start at the back cover and work forward. One of the many advantages

of this method is that P.J. Kavanagh's weekly look at his surrounding in *The Spectator* is come upon all the sooner. In the 272 pages of *People and Places* are collected fifty-four of such pieces, gathered as well from *The Listener*, *PN Review*, and other sources. Words in a magazine are read differently from those in a book; the eye skims a little faster over the page, and a little less is expected. Collected and published between hard covers, re-set from columns into paragraphs, such articles can often appear oddly disappointing on being read again (like sparkling stones from seaside pools, which turn into those dull grey pebbles you find in the car-boot six months later). How do Kavanagh's essays stand out, pulled from the water and left to dry in the sun?

This book is a delight. Whether writing about the Severn bore, a drive through New York State, or whether there is an after-life for cats, he draws the reader in to share his poet's newly-made view of the world. (Cats do go to Heaven, by the way—Kavanagh concludes—for 'if it is only human souls that survive, in the after-life there will be only us—which is a hellish thought, and therefore unlikely'.)

One does not read a book like this straight through from front to back, or back to front for that matter. Far more fun is to pick out pieces here and there at random (as with a box of chocolates). To do this, the entertaining and seductive index is more useful in selecting essays than the formal table of contents. Who could resist following up such index entries as these: "Cadman, unfortunate birdman, 22 ... Chadwick, designer of drains, deserving of statue, 246 ... Eastwood, Clint, sheep impersonating, 140 ... ruins, of Irish houses, 135-8; pleasures of children in, 135."

Many of the pieces in this collection are concerned with the countryside and its seasons: in England, Wales, Connemara, Corsica, North America... and especially Gloucestershire. There is an intense sense of place and time of year in these writings which Kavanagh conveys—effortlessly it seems—to his reader. Take the opening lines of "Iceland", for example:

The first sight of Iceland from the air is of some islands which look like cakes which have been forgotten in the oven, cracked, burned black; a new eruption. Iceland is a palimpsest of lava-flows; the new stuff, last year's, looks like neat banks of coke in a coal-merchant's yard. There are patches of green, though, and the story is that the first Viking settlers liked

the place so well they called it Iceland to discourage other immigrants.

How instantly, too, is September evoked by his description of swallows gathering for emigration and twittering excitedly, "like a young human family when the Pickford's van has arrived". It is the little, unnoticed things which make up life that Kavanagh focuses his attention upon. One of the most memorable *Spectator* pieces actually describes a walk on which almost nothing happens: "so little happened on the walk that it would be worth describing". Another is solely in praise of the dunnoek, the lowly hedge-sparrow. As he remarks, with regard to G.K. Chesterton's writings, "it is precisely the 'small' and everyday that matters ... This could be described, fundamentally, as a religious point of view; it is certainly that of a poet". If Kavanagh returns frequently to the English countryside, these are no mere bucolic reveries. "Nature", he insists, "is the extravagant theatre in which our lives are played out". He does not avert his gaze from the modern world either. Here are descriptions of the Cruise Missile Base at Molesworth in 1985; the derelicts employed to collect litter at Lord's, after the crowds have gone; "Singles Night" at the *Mytton and Mermaid*, Atcham. These are described with the same curious, observant eye that Selbourne's rector turned on the flora and fauna of his parish.

Kavanagh also seeks out the unjustly neglected in English literature, writers so often ignored because they do not 'fit'. Margiad Evans, for example: 'I cannot believe she deserves to be forgotten ... There are many gifts a really good writer can give us, and to me the feeling of actually being there in the room with them is one of the most seductive. Death-obsessed she may have been, and with reason as it turned out, but everything she writes is bursting with the sense of life'. Two pieces are devoted to John Cowper Powys ("a man spinning creations out of the largeness of himself, as easily and unself-consciously as God on the First Day"); others to Richard Jefferies, W.H. Hudson, Francis Thompson and G.K. Chesterton. There are poets, too, whom Kavanagh attempts to rescue *from* their reputations: writers squeezed into pigeon-holes which limit rather than open up the possibilities of understanding. Thus Ivor Gurney, he insists, "was not a 'war poet'—whatever that may be—he was moved by sights and skies and friends on the Western Front and wrote

about them, as any poet might". Why label Henry Vaughan a 'Metaphysical'? Such "lumpings-together" only emphasize superficial resemblances, he writes, and obscure what is distinctive and uniquely interesting in each particular poet. It is no surprise, therefore, that praise is heaped on Alexander Balloch Grosart, who did so much to rescue the works of writers largely dismissed in the nineteenth century: the likes of Donne, Spenser, Marvell, George Herbert, and many more: "His scholarship has doubtless been superseded, but of the many who tidied the disordered sheaves of English verse, so that we can now have our annotated editions, and our clean texts in anthologies, Grosart stands out as a hero".

Whether dealing with people or places, these essays display a constant concern with language. Their author exhibits intense pleasure in the functioning of punctuation ("Trifles"), revels in nomenclature ("Naming Names"), and uses words himself to produce startling yet effective images. A comical example of this occurs when he places Chesterton in the First XI of journalism, compares his prose style with the bowling style of Ian Botham, then remarks, "Come to think of it again—put a big black hat and a *pince-nez* on Botham and he could pass for the Chesterton of cricket". The absurdity of this image is delightful, and invites one to look at writer and cricketer anew. A keen awareness of the relationship between language and actuality is also ever-present. Writing of the thousands of First World War graveyards in France (each plot marked, if possible, with the identity of its occupant), Kavanagh writes: "These cemeteries seem a humble, and almost infinitely laborious, attempt to put a known face on a nightmare. Which is what Gurney tried to do in his poems". It is language itself which he writes of here; his own as well as Ivor Gurney's. Even when discussing the rules of cricket—"a predictable frame inside which the unpredictable can safely happen"—Kavanagh seems to be speaking at the same time about the power of words, grammar, punctuation, to make a sort of sense of life. In this delightful collection P.J. Kavanagh bowls, bats, and fields the English language with an assurance not seen on the field at Lord's for many a year.

PAUL BENNETT MORGAN

*John Cowper Powys (Plein Chant, 42-43)*,  
Edited by BENJAMIN STASSEN.  
Bassac, 1988. FF120.

In his foreword to this double-issue of the journal *Plein Chant* the editor, Benjamin Stassen, laments that, a quarter of a century after his death, John Cowper Powys and his work remain "astonishingly unknown" to French-speaking readers. Despite the publication of translations of his novels and plays, and even recent reprinting in more accessible paperback editions, Powys has not become as familiar in francophone countries as have other English-language authors such as Faulkner or Lowry, both of whom enjoy cult followings. The aim of the present volume, then, is to change this situation, to open up the work of John Cowper Powys to the French-speaker and to bring the author—at present a 'figure de dehors'—and his work, in from the cold.

The collection is divided into two sections, one focusing on "John Cowper Powys today", the other on texts and criticism. The first is subdivided again, opening with the highly personal accounts of four francophone writers of their contacts with Powys's work and with their conceptions of the author and the man. This section can be conveniently skipped by those not very fluent in French and not particularly interested in emotional outpourings and self-indulgent rhetoric. Here is French writing at its most debased, awash with psycho-babble and exclamation marks. It is dated, too; it was, perhaps, a little naïve of Marc-Édouard Nabe to describe himself in the list of contributors as a "gamin des sixties": *tu parles, mon vieux!* Jean-Pierre Otte's effort harks back to the same period, with its overtones, at times, of the academic talking blues. These four articles have, perhaps, some passing interest as outsiders' views of Wales, but only to the same extent as reading the *Western Mail* or listening to Radio Wales. At least they are prepared to admit that there is such a thing as Welshness, and that to be Welsh is not altogether a bad thing, even if their concepts of that peculiar state are a little confused and romantic.

It is a relief to move on to the sober academic prose. Belinda Humfrey's survey of research and criticism on John Cowper Powys since his death is a readable as well as useful essay. It is followed by Elmar Schenkel's discussion of translations of Powys into German and his reception by German readers, and Sven-Erik Täckmark's rather touching little piece as a lone Swedish

Powys enthusiast. For many years, he notes sadly, there was only one other person in Sweden with whom he could discuss the author.

Perhaps the general reader would be best advised to start with Charles Lock's chapter on John Cowper Powys's life and work, which might have been placed more appropriately at the head of the volume rather than at the beginning of the second section, devoted otherwise to translations from Powys's work and criticism. The texts offered in translation have naturally been selected partly on grounds of brevity: extracts from the 1930 journal, essays, five letters to Henry Miller and one poem, "The Ship". The last, alone, is presented in parallel text, and rightly so, for it is difficult to find much of the flavour of the original in the creaking French translation, which teeters between trying to imitate the almost Masefieldesque roll of the English verse-form, and giving up altogether and lapsing into prose arranged as poetry. The other translations of Powys are reasonably successful, perhaps the letters less so than the essays, whose more abstract style is more easily transposed into natural-sounding French, even if it does not sound like John Cowper Powys.

The critical essays cover a wide range of topics. Some will clearly be of particular interest to readers brought up on French literature. The obvious example here is Peter Easingwood's article, which considers not so much the influence of Rabelais on the author as John Cowper Powys's own interpretation—misreading even, using Culler's term *mélecture*—of Rabelais. The affinities between Powys's own philosophy and the latter's 'pantagruelisme' (as Powys understood it) is a topic to which a number of contributors refer in passing. Glen Cavaliero's essay on Powys and D.H. Lawrence, and Michaël Ballin's on Powys's debt to Shakespeare are both thorough and clearly expressed, as is Paul Roberts's discussion of the poetry, a somewhat neglected field in comparison with the novels, despite Roland Mathias's 1979 study.

Other contributions, such as Penny Smith's analysis of the concepts of freedom and free will in the early novels, Richard Maxwell on time and chance in *Porius*, and Thomas Southwick's interpretation of *Owen Glendower*, fall more into the category of straightforward literary criticism, and will thus be of greater interest to the more experienced Powys enthusiast.

Some of the contributions have been composed in French, others translated by the editor. This leads to a certain unevenness, even seasick-

ness as we lurch from one to the other. In their approach and their modes of marshalling their arguments writers are naturally influenced, if not controlled, by the language in which they work, so that translation involves not transposing words only but ways of thinking. In this respect, the volume is not entirely successful, and the juxtaposition of the four opening pieces with translations of essays by respectively an English, German and Swedish writer—so different linguistically and culturally—is especially unfortunate. The translation, however, is generally smooth, though at times I felt that the translator-editor had not fully understood the English before him, for example in the reference to the '3<sup>e</sup> programme de la BBC', on p. 228, which will doubtless mystify many francophone readers. It is most refreshing, though, to find that the translations are in *Belgian* French. John Cowper Powys would surely have approved. Nonetheless, the translations contain as a result quite a number of words and phrases which are utterly charming to the initiated but will puzzle the anglophone reader struggling through the volume with school-level French and only a medium-sized dictionary of 'standard' French.

The volume is beautifully produced, on high quality paper, an unusual treat in a paperback. It has been carefully designed throughout, with an attractive lay-out. The translations of Powys's own writings are cunningly presented in a larger typeface than the rest of the contributions so as to give even such short texts a greater prominence. Black and white photographs and drawings abound, but the photographs have not reproduced well and are linked only loosely with the surrounding text. Finally, a useful bibliography is provided, listing separately those works available in French and those not yet translated, together with a brief list of secondary material.

For Powys scholars, this collection may cover much familiar ground, although a few of the critical essays seem to be directed towards their needs. For French-speaking readers coming to grips with John Cowper Powys for the first time, or wondering whether or not to attempt reading him, this should prove a valuable *vade-mecum*.

CERIDWEN LLOYD-MORGAN

*Sylvia Townsend Warner, a Biography*,  
CLAIRE HARMAN.

Chatto & Windus, 1989, £16.95.

Having worked already on the *Collected Poems* and *Selected Poems* of Sylvia Townsend Warner, Claire Harman has been in a position to tackle this poet's biography and has brought off this enterprise superbly. For this was a life carrying important connections with leading circles in the earlier years of the twentieth century, involving creative work in a number of different directions and several close relationships. Sylvia's first years with her parents, in houses attached to Harrow Public School, gave her an exceptional educational and cultural start; but her passionate attachment to her father, George Townsend Warner, a brilliant and admired scholar and teacher, harmed her in another way. It was natural for her to form an attachment to his close friend, Percy Buck the musician, rather than take the same interest in the younger men around her. So began an affair with an older man, married with five children, which lasted for nineteen years. The relationship with Buck launched her out on a career as a notable musicologist working for the Carnegie Trust on an editorial project assembling the scores of Tudor church music, bringing her in touch with a wide group of friends.

A crucial point in her life came when she suddenly discovered her gift for poetry, which for her always tended in a musical direction. The inspiration came with days in the Essex marshes and her talents remained associated with an enduring love for the English countryside. But, already through her friendship with sculptor Stephen Tomlin, she had come to know the Dorset area, round East Chaldon, and with this country, the near neighbour to Tomlin's cottage, "the recluse and philosopher, with a very fine head, who was thought to be a writer". This, of course, turned out to be Theodore Powys, and from then on Sylvia haunted this part of Dorset and became a close intimate of Theodore and his wife Violet. Through Tomlin's literary contacts she was able to be a real service to him towards opportunities for publication; indeed it was in this way that such works as *The Left Leg*, *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*, and *Unclay* came into print. It followed that David Garnett of the Nonesuch Press, and Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus began to encourage Sylvia's gifts as a writer as well. Her poems, under the title of

*Espalier* came out, with her successful novel *Lolly Willowes* and the later *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*; so that from then on she became accepted as a well-known full-time author.

The long term contacts with ecclesiastical circles she had developed through her career in music and her devotion to the countryside are reflected through all her life's work, making it aesthetically devotional in many ways, yet strangely devoid of Faith. Perhaps Theodore's sentiments in *Soliloques of a Hermit*, "I am without a belief—a belief is too easy a road to God", reflect Sylvia's position too. Here she differed in temperament from her lover Valentine Ackland, who seems to have been a natural believer. Though Valentine lapsed from her original attachment to the Catholic church, at the time of her marriage in Westminster Cathedral, into a state of hedonism, she could not avoid her later return to this creed; though distate for the liturgical changes of Vatican II finally impelled her towards the Society of Friends and she died a Quaker. Still her instructions for her funeral were for the Anglican committal in the churchyard of St Nicholas at East Chaldon. Sylvia, in her turn, clung to a dedication to Communism, even defending Stalin against all odds. However, her imaginatively mental atmosphere seems to have been in many ways similar to that in Charles Williams's 'Spiritual Thrillers', though the magical figures in these often tend to be sinister while hers in *Lolly Willowes* are beneficent. But the aesthetic High Church level is there, and the great debt throughout to the language of the Authorised Version. And the compositions of Benjamin Brittain often strike this same note too. Since Brittain and Peter Pears held her in admiration, it is not surprising that in 1976 a Sylvia Townsend Warner Day was actually held at the Aldeburgh Festival.

Like so many of their contemporaries, Sylvia and Valentine became caught up in the challenge of the Spanish Civil War, speaking on the same platform as John Cowper Powys, actually visiting Spain, and working hard for Basque refugees. It is ironical to consider now that if the side they supported had won, Spain today might be in the same situation as Czechoslovakia, a country striving for freedom from a Marxist tyranny, rather than a prosperous member of the European Community. Still, nothing could dampen their ardour, and they later weighed in energetically to help the West Dorset war effort during the Second World War. One of their real achievements then was to salvage a large number of

valuable books in danger of being scrapped, which were sent to blitzed libraries, some rare drawings going to the India Office. Theodore, who had moved to Mappowder, where he spent his last days, felt the move justified when Sylvia's first cottage, 'Miss Green's', was bombed. Continually interested in the two women, for he had known Valentine when she was first drawn to Chaldon as a congenial milieu, and before meeting Sylvia, he was always sympathetic to Sylvia's troubles. (Another nearby source of support was Alyse Gregory, Llewelyn's wife, who had troubles of her own.)

One of the admirable qualities Sylvia displayed during these years was a heroic constancy in her love for Valentine in the face of threatening rivalry. The tragic tension between them in this situation illustrates the difficulties facing a relationship which can be less secure than more usual ones with greater accepted social commitment. Valentine, in her turn, performed the feat of overcoming by her own decision a serious weakness for drink, and putting her earlier promiscuity behind her sternly. She, too, had suffered from her beloved father's superstitious prejudice. Both found their mothers difficult, thoroughly tiresome at times, but at least Sylvia was able to make good copy out of hers in stories like, "My Mother Won the War", one of the many accepted by *The New Yorker* over the years. Perhaps her most notable writing, apart from a stream of novels and poetry collections, could be said to be her translation of Proust's study *Contre Sainte Beuve* and the life of the novelist T.H. White. Valentine's poetry was appreciated by others apart from Sylvia, and her stories were published in journals and put on radio, but she always felt her reputation could never compare with her friend's.

What Claire Harman has achieved is to present a West Country milieu (to be compared, perhaps, with that near Abergavenny in Wales, promoted by Eric Gill) where learning and the arts flourished in a background of beauty, while an individual could pursue an extreme passion in privacy. And at the same time to arrive at the extraordinary feat of co-ordinating a complex and original life with its impact upon a range of exceptional men and women, who have made distinguished contributions to our own century.

DÉSIRÉE HIRST

*The Riverside Chaucer,*

Edited by LARRY BENSON.

Third edition, based on *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. ROBINSON;

Oxford University Press, 1988, £8.95 (paperback).

For three decades the second (1957) edition of Robinson's *Works* of Chaucer has been authoritative—so much so that persons presuming to quote in print from another edition during that time will have struck some of their readers as mildly eccentric. The Robinson *Chaucer* managed to retain its status despite the conspicuously antique flavour of its critical interests, and despite the inhospitable nature of its glossary (wherein many will remember struggling to make a plausible choice from formidable lists of meanings, especially in the case of slippery words such as *corage*: "heart, mind; nature, disposition; desire, will, ardor; courage, encouragement"). Add to these disadvantages the fact that the manuscript on which Robinson based his text of *The Canterbury Tales* has lost its former eminence, and it will be clear that a revised edition was becoming a matter of some urgency.

In the event, the transition from Robinson to Riverside (eased by assonance) is most welcome, even if not unreservedly so. *The Riverside Chaucer* is up-to-date and hospitable and it is a major edition: but it also entails compromise and inflation. Compromise, in that it takes Robinson as its foundation while at the same time radically modifying, so that the texts of the poems somehow manage to be "at once revisions of Robinson's texts and new editions in their own right" (p. xli). Inflation, firstly in that Robinson's solo monument is superseded by the Riverside Institute's edition-by-committee, with a general editor and a team of *thirty-three* Chaucerian scholars (whose number is perhaps divinely ordained, to befit a poet who enjoyed Dante?); and secondly in that the physical bulk of the volume is now inflated to 1327 pages, owing to the addition of glosses on each page and to a considerable expansion of the Explanatory Notes and the concluding Glossary.

The Notes are going to be extremely helpful to readers. They are comprehensive to an extent which no single editor of Chaucer's corpus could hope to emulate nowadays, while also being more realistically adjusted to the needs of non-specialists than were Robinson's. Thus, whereas

his note on the Wife of Bath's indiscreet boast—"For half so boldely kan ther no man / Swere and lyen, as a womman kan" (her *Prologue*, 227-8)—stated cryptically, "Almost literally from RR, 18136f.", *Riverside* quotes the relevant lines from *Le Roman de la Rose*, offers a translation of them, and then informs us of a delightfully glib marginal comment on the Wife's words "in MS Cambridge Dd., 'verum est' (It is true!)". The non-specialist may be less grateful for the amount of bibliographical congestion in some notes: the Prioress's celebrated table manners are "possibly ironic (Hoffman, *Ovid and CT*, 26-28; Simons, *Coll. Lang. Assoc. Jour.* 12, 1968, 79; Brown, in Ch, ed. George D. Economou, 1975, 47-48)" yet they are perhaps "a necessary part of a nun's caring for her habit (M. Madeleva, *Lost Language*, 39)". Nevertheless here (p. 804) and elsewhere, the eye can soon learn to detach the instructive summaries of controversy from the indigestible heaps of abbreviated reference necessarily accompanying them.

Unfortunately the Notes also betray a reluctance to jettison dead issues. Is it really worth rehearsing, for example, that in 1922 Tupper proposed to identify the figure of Alceste in *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* with "one Alice Chester (or de Cestre), a theory neatly demolished by Manly's demonstration that Alice de Cestre was not a lady-in-waiting but an elderly washerwoman" (p. 1061)? Theories neatly demolished are surely the unwanted baggage of former editions—best consigned to oblivion in the process of revision.

As for the text itself, the *Riverside* is but modestly innovative. The spelling convention is avowedly "largely the same as that in Robinson". The general editor announces "obvious and pervasive repunctuation" (p. xliii), but several spot checks disclosed only one passage (at the beginning of *The Complaint of Mars*) which seemed to justify the assertion. However, there remains to be noted the edition's single most conspicuous departure from Robinson, whereby a selection of the Middle English words is now glossed at the foot of each page. Inevitably, this raises questions both of principle and of efficacy. On principle it might be objected that such glossing induces sloth and encourages a premature closing-down of responsiveness to the vocabulary. On principle, again, one may object that the page-glosses—while hardly comprehensive in themselves—are partly to blame for the pressure on space which inhibits the attempt

(laudable so far as it goes) to furnish a separate Glossary at the end capable of signposting representative usages. The result is an uneasy compromise. If we go back to the problematic word "corage" for instance, we shall find that its first two occurrences (in the *General Prologue*) are glossed on the page, but not some later occurrences with different—though still unfamiliar—meanings in the tales of the Clerk and Merchant. It is necessary, for some reason, to consult the Glossary for these. There, help is forthcoming—but it does seem to be the case that the incorporation of a double gloss system is limiting the efficacy of both.

Moreover, there are worrying signs of editorial oversight in this area. For example when the Host wishes he had the Pardoner's testicles in his hand "In stide of relikes of or seintuarie" (*Pardoner's Tale*, 953), *seintuarie* is translated below as "sanctuary, box for relics"—of which the first is meaningless in this context and the second inconsistent with the meaning "sacred relic" more convincingly offered in the Notes (p. 910). Given the complicated sub-contracting of particular tasks in the volume amongst its network of editors, loose ends of this kind are probably inevitable. Most readers will forgive them. Whether or not the *Riverside Chaucer* will be forgiven in the long term for all the compromises it is making—for straining so mightily to accommodate both learner and scholar, and for dithering between a desire to perpetuate a vintage formula and a desire to strike out afresh—the book is in any case remarkable for the sheer quantity and organization of elements marshalled for the reader's benefit. In the short term, it is an edition that no-one interested in Chaucer should be without.

ALCUIN BLAMIRE

*H.D.: Selected Poems*,  
Edited by LOUIS MARTZ.

Carcnet, 1989, £14.95.

"I say WHO is H.D.? They all think they know more about what and why she should or should not be and do than I", wrote H.D. to Viola Jordan in 1927. Today there is still debate about how H.D., poet, novelist, essayist, and film star, should be represented. The primary aim of scholars in recent years has been to take her rep-

utation beyond that of "H.D. Imagiste" and emphasise the richness and full extent of her middle period, the epics, and the still vibrant voice of the late poems,

Why did you come  
to trouble my decline?  
I am old (I was old till you came).

Professor Martz's selection corrects some past misrepresentations of the H.D. oeuvre only, perhaps, to risk others. In 1937 Norman Holmes Pearson, who was to become H.D.'s friend and literary adviser, made a selection of her work for the *Oxford Anthology of American Literature*. He asked her to compose some kind of prose piece to accompany her work. The response is personal in tone—especially in comparison with the critical pieces by Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens and Moore—revealing both hurt and contempt at the criticism made of her work as crystalline and escapist. In this 'Note on Poetry' H.D. expresses a reluctance to describe the process of writing in terms that are cut and dried. "Poetry? you ask. I am to say, who I wrote, when I wrote and how I wrote these fragments. I am to state this simply ..." But after musing ironically about the 'escapism' of her work which was forged, she implies, out of the suffering and bitter tragedy of living through war and personal loss, she writes directly of the motives and themes that inspire her poetry: "Actual memory, repressed memory, desire to escape, desire to create (music), intellectual curiosity, a wish to make real to myself what is most real ..."

The first *Selected Poems of H.D.* was published by the Grove press in 1957. Edited by Norman Holmes Pearson and with no introduction, it is weighted towards her earlier work, though it does include brief sections from *Trilogy* and 'Good Friend', the poem accompanying her critique of Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry in *By Avon River*.

The latest selection, issued in America by New Directions and in Britain by Carcanet is much more substantial. Another Yale man, Professor Louis Martz, succeeds Pearson as H.D.'s editor. His choice seems to be influenced by a desire not to duplicate Pearson's selection and he includes from the 1957 edition only the ten or so poems which could not have been omitted. One of the strengths of his strategy is that he gives a flavour of each decade, every phase of H.D.'s development, and includes a number of poems that are not otherwise published, except in the *Collected Poems, 1912-1944* (1983).

In the new *Selected Poems*, the 'Miscellaneous' section following the poems from H.D.'s first volume, *Sea Garden* (1916), includes three poems about betrayal written at about the same time—the period of the break-up of her marriage with Richard Aldington—but not published until 1969. As Martz suggests in the introduction to the *Collected Poems* they are important as indications of H.D.'s "strongly personal voice, breaking out of the Imagist confines". "Eros" explores love and sexuality with trepidation and wonder,

My mouth is wet with your life,  
my eyes blinded with your face,  
a heart itself which feels,  
the intimate music.

My mind is caught,  
dimmed with it,  
(where is love taking us?)

The poems of this period, for which Martz suggests the title 'Poems of Desertion and Despair', combine bitterness with eroticism. But, as Rachel DuPlessis argues in *The Career of That Struggle*, "male-female love is de-emphasised" and in the deeper ambiguities, "an alternative sexuality is debated". Sadly Martz does not include in this volume the eloquent and tender "I said", dedicated to her life-long companion, 'W.B.' (Bryher). This and other excluded poems from the 1920s—such as "We Two", "Heliodora" and the Sapphic fragments—reveal not simply women's anger (which for him is the most obvious theme) but rather poetic and subtle evocations of alternative visions, lesbian eros and woman-affirming values.

In his introduction, Martz focuses on H.D.'s conflict with male lovers and mentors (Pound, Aldington, and Lawrence) and her poetic 'reconciliations' with them in the late poetry. For example, his reading of "Calypso" (included in Pearson's *Selected Poems* as "Calypso Speaks") describes the action implicit in two opposed dialogues as a "sexual encounter ... resisted by the female, forced by the male ... ending with both at peace" and with the woman saying "he shall never get away". Martz interprets this progression as the woman's physical and emotional submission to the man's sexual power—a microcosm of the conflict—rapprochement with males he perceives in her oeuvre as a whole. He misses the ambiguity of Calypso's position and of her words: there is another message clearly

implicit in her vow—"he shall never get away with this (violation)". Indeed in the next section of the poem Calypso declares, "Man is clumsy and evil". It is a complex poem, full of contradictory feelings and statements, and as such particularly appropriate to represent the double bind of women in a patriarchal system.

Martz's harping on Lawrence in the introduction to these *Selected Poems* is ironic. H.D. remained exasperated with what she saw as Lawrence's rigid "woman-is-woman, man-is-man" philosophy. Her 'visionary' or 'prophetic' style, which Martz praises as one of the strengths of her poetry, is based on the wish to transcend the division. H.D. draws on a long and—in certain periods of history—occluded tradition of homosexual, bisexual, and androgynous themes in poetry.

A quarter of the new *Selected Poems* is devoted to miscellaneous poems of the 1930s, though H.D.'s work of this time is somewhat uneven. From the late 1920s until the long and productive surge of creativity during and after the Second World War, H.D. struggled with many personal issues and experienced periods of being artistically 'blocked'. Throughout this time, she did rigorous 'work' on herself, through meditation, dream analysis, writing by free association and reading intensively. She also made extended commitments to analysis, with Hanns Sachs, then with Freud in 1933 and 1934, and later with Walter Schmideberg. These years were an alembic in which she experimented with the chemistry of consciousness, not—as far as we know—using drugs (except tobacco), but reaching states which she described as "dope".

Martz inaccurately describes her analysis with Freud as "a few months of advice" which sufficed to bring forth the inspired poetry of the early 1940s. Freudian psychoanalysis, however, was just *one* element in a process of immersion, and the catalyst for renewed creativity, as H.D. saw it, was re-living the trauma of the First World War through the drama and suffering of the Second World War. In "The Master"—a poem which has attracted much critical commentary—she reveals the richness and ambivalence of her relationship with Freud, "I flung his words in his teeth ... his tyranny was absolute / for I had to love him then". She pays tribute to his wisdom and his gentleness, but implicitly criticizes his theory of penis envy (which he outlined to her in one of their sessions long before he published it). "*Woman is perfect*", H.D. declares in this poem,

for she needs no man  
herself  
is that dart and pulse of the male,  
hands, feet, thighs,  
herself perfect.

"The Master" rebuts Freud's diagnosis that her need for perfection was co-extensive with her bisexuality. In a letter to Bryher, she reports his conclusion, "you had two things to hide, one that you were a girl, the other that you were a boy". So, H.D. continues, referring in part to her writing block, "the conflict consists partly that what I write commits me—to one sex or the other". Freud thought that H.D. was fixated on the mother, but "The Master" responds vigorously with a double celebration of same-gender love and heterosexual passion: "I had two loves separate".

H.D. must be explicitly situated in relation to the lesbian tradition which begins with Sappho and ripens so profusely in our own century with Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and others. Martz places minimal emphasis on H.D.'s lesbian aesthetics and relationships, other than alluding to the fact that her work on Sapphic fragments "accords with a change in her style of life". He also distinctly underplays the role of Bryher, H.D.'s intimate friend for more than forty years. Bryher—to whom H.D. dedicates several poems from "I Said" in 1919 to *The Walls Do Not Fall* in 1942—has long been neglected in discussions of H.D.'s work. The two women read widely and extensively together, and corresponded daily about their ideas when they were apart. Bryher was a successful writer too, and many of her interests, particularly history, psychoanalysis and avant-garde cinema were enthusiastically shared by H.D.

The new *Selected Poems* includes extracts from H.D.'s epic poems of the Second World War and afterwards: *Trilogy* (1944-1946), *Helen in Egypt* (1961), and *Hermetic Definition* (1972). The mature long poems are fundamental to the breadth and power of H.D.'s oeuvre; one cannot assess her as a poet without considering them. However, it is difficult to represent them through brief episodes and fragments. Her interest in dream work (and its interpretation) and the narrative styles of modern cinema reveal themselves in the complex superimpositions within the poems, suggesting different layers of time and reality, a drama on many levels that demand new patterns of thinking by the reader.

Essentially H.D. strove to go beyond polarities. She is above all the poet of the intermediate—the twilight, the dawn, the transformation of physical into spiritual, the androgynous and bisexual, the grounds of consciousness that lie between sleep and waking thought, the merging of different streams of tradition, the palimpsest in which different planes of time complexly fuse. She is the poet of Isis, the many in the one, but also, throughout her oeuvre, of Hermes: from “Hermes of the Ways”, which Pound jumped upon as the exemplary Imagist poem to the invocation of “Hermes Trismegistus” which opens the middle poem of *Trilogy*. In this late poem, H.D. calls upon Hermes, whose symbolic metal mercury is neither fluid nor solid, to “melt down and integrate” the fragments of a shattered religious and cultural heritage. So she would do with her poetry.

ROSALIND CARROLL

*Eminent Victorians*,  
A.N. WILSON.

BBC Books, 1989. £15.00.

This book was written to accompany the six-part television series of the same name, presented by the author on BBC2 in the autumn of 1989. Television gave us numerous visual images, of course, which often made striking or controversial points: the movie film of Queen Victoria’s funeral juxtaposed with film of stumbling, gas-blinded soldiers in the First World War, the tourist-crowded streets of Haworth, interviews with descendants of Gladstone and Tennyson, numerous photographs taken by Julia Cameron. But the book, which is handsomely produced and a bargain at the price, remains as a permanent record of Mr Wilson’s narrative and interpretations and so this review will consider it as an independent piece of work.

Its title repeats that of Lytton Strachey’s minor classic, published in 1918. Wilson, an admirer of Strachey, chose the same title, he says, to “cut him down to size, to remind his ghost that there really *were* eminent Victorians, giants in those days”. He suggests in his Preface that recently we have witnessed a “Victorian revival” and that he himself (born in 1950) can recognise the “sheer bigness” of the Victorians since he is so much further away from them than

Strachey was. He is not sentimental or nostalgic about the Victorian age, since he declares he is ready to echo Lucky Jim’s exclamation, “Thank God for the twentieth century”. His attitude to Strachey is not therefore one of complete reversal.

His eminent Victorians are the Prince Consort (for his range of interests and his representative Pooterism), Gladstone (for his typically Victorian contradictions), Charlotte Brontë and Julia Margaret Cameron (for their oddities as well as their creative achievements), Josephine Butler (for her courageous challenging of conventional sexual mores) and Cardinal Newman (for having been “one of the most remarkable people who ever lived”). As he knows, everyone can quarrel with the choice of just six Victorians, but this selection satisfactorily mixes the indisputably eminent with the less well-known. But an engineer, musician, painter or actor would have been welcome, since politics, religion and literature always predominate in such selections.

Wilson writes fluently and readably, without the graceful concision of Strachey. Occasionally, his syntax and grammar go awry (the agony of the Prince Consort’s death “was lingered out a little more”, the “combination of insanitary conditions and crazed Calvinistic theology were to carry off two of Charlotte’s sisters”) and once or twice his expressions jarred on me (the Prince Consort’s role was supposed to be that of “a sort of royal stud farm”, the Empress of India was “a name somehow better suited to a pig or a railway station than to a person”). There are a few omissions and errors. In view of his comments about Charlotte Brontë and her unwittingly embarrassing dedication of the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to Thackeray, it would have been entertaining to have a brief account of her meeting with him. Wilson says that the murderers of Burke and Lord Frederick Cavendish in Phoenix Park were not caught; in fact, five were hanged and eight imprisoned. Without demanding an inappropriate amount of scholarly apparatus, I should have liked to have some notes on sources and bibliography (if only in the form in which Strachey supplies them), a fuller index and a list of illustrations. I realise that Wilson has a low opinion of pedants, as represented by his comment on Gladstone’s diary, “the gradual publication of which is even now keeping an Oxford academic in full-time employment.”

His biographies are briskly written, often repeating familiar material but also throwing out

some unusual thoughts and suggestions, with occasional relevance to our concerns today. Prince Albert is portrayed, as we expect, as the model bourgeois husband and father, who brought respectability to the British court; that "the royal family is a sort of emblem of family happiness ... is the legacy of Prince Albert". Strachey, with characteristic brio, had said the same thing in *Queen Victoria*; the existence of the middle-classes "acquired an added excellence, and added succulence, from the early hours, the regularity, the plain tuckers, the round games, the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding of Osborne". Wilson indicates the esteem in which Albert was held by the poorer classes by noting the prevalence of his Christian name among them, whereas it was rarely used by the upper ten thousand. Yet he also tells us that the pictures of "nudes which look down from the walls of Osborne with such uninhibited voluptuousness reflect the early married happiness of the royal pair." A more solemn picture reproduced in colour in his book is Winterhalter's "The First of May 1851", in which the portrayal of Wellington's presentation of a gift to Prince Arthur, his godson, is a version of the Adoration of the Magi.

Another group portrait Wilson makes telling use of is Branwell Brontë's of his three sisters, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery: Emily seems to be "staring beyond us to some unseen Presence" whereas Charlotte "is doggedly staring, her jaw set, her courage and her sense of humour diminished but not extinguished by the reality of things". Wilson's sympathetic chapter on Charlotte Brontë includes, not surprisingly, a number of provocative comments on the art of the novelist. I found one of these puzzling. At one point, Wilson says that "novelists tend to write about the experiences they did not have" but he later wonders whether Dickens would have written better novels if "he had been compelled to live in Haworth and look after Mr Brontë".

The most formidable of the eminent Victorians treated here is Gladstone. Contrasting the "marginalised" position of the Church of England nowadays with its status in Gladstone's time, Wilson emphasises its centrality in Victorian life in general and in Gladstone's conduct and outlook in particular. While acknowledging the elements of the "unintentionally comic" in Gladstone's behaviour, elements which Strachey would have seized on, he leaves us in no doubt of the statesman's stature, seen especially in his

grappling with the Irish question. Newman, too, is treated with admiration and sensitivity, perhaps because in his late teens Wilson "was almost in love with Newman", whom he read obsessively. He admits that Victorian controversies over religious matters are "pathetically remote" but he values Newman for raising profound questions about the meaning and mysteriousness of life.

I found the chapters on Josephine Butler and Julia Margaret Cameron enlightening because I knew less about them than Wilson's other four Victorians. He writes enthusiastically on Josephine Butler and her eventually successful campaigns for the rights of women, including prostitutes. He argues that in the reforms she brought about she "made the century" in one sense and yet unmade it in another, in that "she and her like were to unpick the very fabric of so much that they took for granted and loved". Julia Cameron was a pioneer in a very different sense, an imaginative portrait photographer, who could reveal Trollope's tetchiness, Jowett's snobbery and cleverness, and the female sexuality of the two girls who sat for her.

Will this *Eminent Victorians* prove to be as much a period piece as Strachey's? Wilson may refer to Mrs Thatcher, the Queen Mother and Colonel Oliver North, but his approach has neither the cynicism nor the "caring" sentimentally that both characterise our present times. His attitude is basically positive and appreciative despite a few "daring" asides; after all, that was the fundamental reason for writing the book. Although the world, in Wilson's view, is worse than it was when Strachey wrote, we can now profit, he argues, from our understanding of our common humanity with the Victorians. *Eminent Victorians* has not the grace and sting of Strachey's book or, on the other hand, the solidity of the 1949 BBC compilation. But it is attractive, well illustrated in colour and black-and-white, undemanding and sometimes thought-provoking. Perhaps those are the qualities we should expect to find in a survey written in 1989.

DONALD HAWES

*Letting in the Rumour*,  
GILLIAN CLARKE.

Carcenet, 1989, £4.95 (paperback).

The genesis of Gillian Clarke's poetry is its exploration of her roots, familial, ancestral and mythopoeic, revealed in the significance of her domestic interior world and the rhythms of nature she perceives outside it—the enclosed territories of farms opening out to hills, sea and sky, and their animal, bird and flower life. Such interactions between the internal/external, domestic/natural, restricted/free are fruitful sources of tension in Gillian Clarke's poems. They are, of course, inherent in the conflicting demands on a woman, especially in the traditionally conformist role expected of a Welsh housewife and mother whose artistic creativity is drained away in repetitive chores. The housewife/poet dilemma was brilliantly illuminated in "Letter from a Far Country", where the writer's anger and frustration vied with a paradoxically satisfying sense of belonging to Wales and womanhood. Furthermore, Gillian Clarke's learning Welsh in her twenties, long before her move to Dyfed, would have accentuated that sense of belonging and intensified the tension arising from writing in English whilst acknowledging a committed sympathy for the cultural and linguistic aspirations of Welsh. Under such largely unresolved constraints, Gillian Clarke (like many other Anglo-Welsh poets, particularly women) had developed late, not producing poetry until her early thirties. When interviewed by Susan Butler, editing the anthology *Common Ground* (1985), Gillian Clarke discussed, in historical perspective, the changing roles of women, from her grandmother's rural environment in which, through Welshness, she underwent pressure to conform to 'respectability', then her mother's inferiority about her Welshness, expressed in trying to be English, to her own rediscovering Welshness and taking a pride in it. Her realised independence was paradigmatic of the new confidence of women reflected in the women's movement. Kenneth R. Smith (*Poetry Wales*, XXIV, 2) interprets her moving from a Cardiff upper-middle-class suburb to Blaen Cwrt as symptomatic of her search for a Welsh identity, after which he goes on to examine the significance of the home in a wider context:

For Clarke, life in the Welsh hills represents the continuity of women's lives, which is bound to service and enclosed in the home. The home in women's poetry retains this duality of heart for the nation and heart of women's collective experience. It can also serve to symbolise a nation under siege from a dark hostile environment, where the named homes serve to preserve life and culture. Yet in women's poetry it also symbolises the over-protection of women behind walls of social propriety, where the home becomes a window through which women view the world.

"Letter from a Far Country" (in Gillian Clarke's collection of that name) relates to her mother's family, "Cofiant", in *Letting in the Rumour*, to her father's: the cornerstones of her *oeuvre*, both long poems explore the influence of houses on their inhabitants, as defined in "Cofiant"'s opening lines:

Houses we've lived in  
inhabit us  
and history's restless  
in the rooms of the mind.

This sequence's chronological movement runs backwards, initially through family houses, including Gillian Clarke's present home, "Blaen Cwrt, longhouse,/ stepping stone for the west wind's foot", and concluding with "old lost farm/ and nameless hovels, halls and castles/ of the far-off dead long fallen to ruin".

Initially, Gillian Clarke explains that a *cofiant* is a nineteenth-century tribute to a dead person, including biographical material, sermons, letters and other writings, and concluding with eulogies and an elegy: the *cofiant* commemorating her great-great-grandfather inspired her poetic sequence which nevertheless records by name in its concluding genealogy the main male line of 31 generations of her father's family. The two outer sections, translated from the *Chronicles of the Princes*, record in factual detachment the bloodthirsty feuding of the princes Gruffydd (1047) and Bleddyn ap Cynfyn (1069). Within this frame, the poem's sections move in retrograde chronology from the poet's father through six generations to 1716, deviations from the first-born line accommodating two enterprising individualists. Interpolated prose passages elucidate factual material while highlighting the poetry by contrast: Jeremy Hooker's "A Winchester Mosaic" from *Master of the Leaping Figures* (1987) is a recent exemplar of this technique, but "Cofiant"'s emphasis is more on people, living on diverse sites.

Striking imagery proliferates throughout "Cofiant": 89-year-old Aunt Phyllis evokes memories of the derelict Carmarthen-Aberystwyth railway:

over and under the roads, like someone blind who  
remembers the way and steps out straight through  
a creeping cataract of moss and bramble

and Gillian Clarke's railwayman grandfather summons up closed stations near which "the trains' long cries are swallowed/ in the throats of tunnels". Grandmother is remembered through her gift of a china doll, the doll image being transmuted into her institutionalised pale face gazing from a hospital window. Great-great-grandfather, the original *cofiant*'s subject, satisfied conflicting callings as sailor and Baptist minister. Gillian Clarke discovered his baptismal site,

in a pool deep enough for a man  
to drown his devils in a mountain stream  
leaving his soul caught like a rag on a stone.

Twenty-five years later, his life was scarred by his baby son's death, the momentarily unsupervised toddler falling into the hearth:

my baby stood lifting his sleeves of fire  
like a small angel of annunciation ...

A short quotation from one of his letters reveals this as his first and greatest sorrow; another letter, on his wife's death nine years after that first tragedy, shows "grief for Peter" a contributory cause.

Contrasting prose passages frame the sequence on Broom Hall, the first briefly describing this Georgian property, the second an inventory of furniture and effects at the Hall's sale on its owner-builder's death. This represents the apex of family wealth, acquired through the landowner's father, a lawyer who made his fortune in London through hard work and opportunism, marrying money. The socio-economic switchback of rags to riches to rags is illustrated in the history of the Broom Hall squire's cousins' descendants who would later perform the same menial tasks as his former servants. Paradigmatic of this social flux, the final poem describes the sea's erosion and deposition, redrafting the coast, "writing at the edge / its doodle of scum, / driftwood, rope and bottles / and skulls of birds".

"Cofiant" is surely Gillian Clarke's finest poem, issuing challenging claims as the most significant Anglo-Welsh poetic sequence of the decade. It illumines universals, archetypal, quintessential Welshness, a perspective, through generations of a family, of the land and those that lived on it, in the tradition of the praise-poem that originated with Taliesin, but through recording that was significant in the lives of so-called 'ordinary' people.

Although "Cofiant"'s thematic material encompasses people and houses, nevertheless over half the shorter poems in *Letting in the Rumour* embody associations with *one* house, Blaen Cwrt. Its isolation is evoked in "At One Thousand Feet". The windmill that produces Gillian Clarke's electricity "lets in the rumour, / grief on the radio". In such a lonely ambience, she confesses, "I hold the sky to my ear to hear / pandemonium whispering". This sense of relationships across vast distances is maintained in "Neighbours", after Chernobyl:

Now we are all neighbourly, each little town  
in Europe twinned to Chernobyl, each heart  
with the burnt fireman, the child on the  
Moscow train.

In "Windmill", hers is also "drumming with winds from the Americas". Isolation's visionary properties enable the poet to view great distances. Similarly she may refocus in close-up, indoors, moving backwards in time to births and deaths within Blaen Cwrt. The suicide of Marged, an earlier inhabitant, from

poverty, loneliness, helplessness and post-influenzal depression, follows the deaths of her uncle and aunt to whom she had devoted her life, mentioned previously in "Letter from a Far Country" and "Nettles". However, "Marged" in this collection owns a single cow, her poverty contrasted with Gillian Clarke's comparative affluence with car, typewriter, radio, whisky: their only shared experiences, looking at the same hills, digging the same garden (in which Gillian finds Marged's broken crocks) and, above all, being women.

Thus remoteness, seclusion, intensify fears of increasing violence threatening from the external world: the setting sun on windows in "Fires on Llŷn" is misinterpreted as farms ablaze; "Talking of Burnings in Walter Savage Landor's Smithy" recalls two thousand years of burnings, though "The displaced leave with their burden, / smoke pressed between scorched sheets, / and all the bridges down" carries contemporary resonances. In "Night Flying", jet aircraft recall memories: "It's not like playing but remembering war, / crouching under the stairs for the all-clear" whereas, in "Times Like These", "At night the children's sleep / is racked by dreams. They wake crying of war". One senses again, from "In January", that undertow of unease that runs below the surface in much of *Letting in the Rumour*:

The cities can forget on days like this  
all the world's wars. It's we  
out on the open hill who see  
the day crack under the shadow of the cross.

Many of Gillian Clarke's poems relate to birth and death, sometimes juxtaposed. In her elegy for Frances Horovitz, "The Hare", what seems a baby's cry is later identified as a hare's—possibly trapped, in pain. Frances and Gillian "admitted / next day to lying guilty hours awake / at the crying of the hare" ... so that Gillian "saw all the suffering of the world / in a single moment". In this death-haunted poem, she nevertheless records the rhythms binding women to nature, the female life-force.

Alongside this intensification of human feeling one might set another sensitively caring observation of natural life, in "Seal", of a mother-love that seems human:

The pup lies patient in his cot of stone.  
They meet with cries, caress as people do.  
She lies down for his suckling, lifts him  
with a flipper from the sea's reach  
when the tide fills his throat with salt.

But only transiently human: two days later when she deserts him for the bulls, he will swim off into the Atlantic. In this context, Jeremy Hooker has perceived, in *The Presence of the Past* (1987), Gillian Clarke's intimate manner of identifying her biological and emotional experience with nature in so many of her poems:

As she feels the power of fertility and the fragility of each individual life, so her identification with all that gives life produces tenderness and fear.

This critical insight has undiminished relevance to her latest poems. *Letting in the Rumour* inevitably

traverses some familiar ground before exploring further, but the most significant new direction taken, thematically and structurally, is with "Cofiant", her finest poem in her most rewarding collection.

MERCER SIMPSON

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JEAN E. BELLAMY is a children's novelist and freelance journalist, contributing to 50 magazines, largely on country life.

ALCUIN BLAMIRE, lecturer in English at SDUC, Lampeter, is the author of many articles on Chaucer and of *The Canterbury Tales: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (Macmillan, 1987).

ROSALIND CARROLL is finishing her PhD on H.D.'s prose, at Cambridge.

GLEN CAVALIERO, Cambridge critic and poet, has published books on the English rural novel, E.M. Forster, and Charles Williams, since his *John Cowper Powys, Novelist* (OUP, 1973).

PETER CHRISTENSEN teaches English at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has published many articles on film and a range of major European writers, from Dostoevsky to Durrell.

GLORIA G. FROMM, Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, author of *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (1977) and editor of *Essaying Biography: A Celebration for Leon Edel* (1986), is editing Dorothy Richardson's letters.

DAVID GERARD was city librarian, Nottingham, then Senior Lecturer, College of Librarianship, Aberystwyth, before his retirement. He has published books on Libraries, bibliographical books on John Wain and Alan Sillitoe, and an autobiography, *Shrieking Silence*.

DONALD HAWES, formerly Professor of English, Polytechnic of Central London and Head of the Department of Language and Literature, Polytechnic North London, has published books and articles on 19th century literature, specialising on Thackeray.

DÉSIRÉE HIRST, lecturer in English at UC, Swansea, is writing a sequel to her Blake source study, *Hidden Riches* (1964).

CERIDWEN LLOYD-MORGAN, Assistant Archivist in the Department of Manuscripts, NLW, Aberystwyth, contributes to Welsh and French periodicals.

PAUL BENNETT MORGAN, Research Assistant, NLW, Aberystwyth, recently completed a doctoral study of Richard Hughes at SDUC, Lampeter.

MARK PATTERSON is writing a research thesis at SDUC, Lampeter, on the Matter of Britain in J.C. Powys's novels.

DANIELLE PRICE is engaged in doctoral research at UC, Los Angeles.

SUZANNE RAITT, lecturer in English at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, is author of *To the Lighthouse: Key Text Series* (Harvester, 1990) and *When Vita Liked Virginia* (OUP, 1991).

MERCER SIMPSON, formerly Senior Lecturer at the Polytechnic of Wales, has published articles and poems in *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, *Poetry Wales* and *The New Welsh Review*.

## USA/CANADA PhD Theses, 1954-1989

Michael Everest has supplied the computer print-out from the USA 'Dissertation Abstracts Online' database from which the following list has been abstracted. Note that in North America postgraduate research into the Powyses (other than that continued by many of the scholars listed here) appears to have almost died out since 1981. Is this so, or are numerous theses on the Powyses about to be completed?

- 1954 Martin Steinmann Jr., University of Minnesota:  
T. F. Powys: A Thematic Study (512pp.).
- 1955 Margaret Elizabeth Moorer Going, University of Michigan:  
John Cowper Powys, Novelist (232pp.).
- 1960 Harry Richards Sullivan, University of Georgia:  
The Elemental World of John Cowper Powys (258pp.).
- 1961 Christian Blanchard Hewitt, Boston University:  
The Novels of John Cowper Powys (294pp.).
- 1965 Robert Long Blackmore, Syracuse University:  
'Advice to a Young Poet': The Correspondence between Llewelyn Powys and Kenneth Hopkins (227pp.).
- 1971 Michael William Murphy, University of Wisconsin-Madison:  
The British Tale in the Early Twentieth Century: Walter de la Mare, A. E. Coppard, and T. F. Powys (330pp.).
- 1971 Dante Thomas, State University of New York at Albany:  
A Bibliography of the Principal Writings of John Cowper Powys and some works about him (147pp.).
- 1971 Howard S. Pechesky, New York University:  
The Fantasy Novels of John Cowper Powys (205pp.).
- 1971 David Allen Cook, University of Virginia:  
The Quest for Identity in John Cowper Powys: A Reading of his *Autobiography* and his Wessex Series (150pp.).
- 1972 John Alexander Brebner, The University of New Brunswick (Canada):  
The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels (n.p.).
- 1973 George Batty Blake Jr., New York University:  
Autobiography and Romance: The English Novels of John Cowper Powys (132pp.).
- 1973 Gwyneth Frances Miles, University of British Columbia (Canada):  
The Interaction between Landscape and Myth in the Novels of John Cowper Powys (n.p.).
- 1974 Bruce Rudolph Little, University of Kansas:  
John Cowper Powys: The Reputation of the Novelist in England and America (372pp.).
- 1974 Robert Vaughan Lancaster, Syracuse University:  
The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson 1957-1963 (388pp.).
- 1974 Michael A. Greenwald, Harvard University:  
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