

# The Powys Review

NUMBERS TWENTY-NINE & THIRTY





# The Powys Review

## **Editor**

Belinda Humfrey

## **Reviews Editor**

Simon Barker

## **Advisory Board**

Marius Buning, Department of English, Free University, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Glen Cavaliero, St Catherine's College, Cambridge

T. J. Diffey, School of Cultural and Community Studies, University of Sussex

Peter Easingwood, Department of English, University of Dundee

Michel Gresset, Department of English, Paris VII University, France

Ian Hughes, Department of English, Normal College, Bangor, N. Wales

Ben Jones, Department of English, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Charles Lock, Department of English, University of Toronto, Canada

Ned Lukacher, Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago, U.S.A.

J. Lawrence Mitchell, Department of English, Texas A & M University, U.S.A.

Elmar Schenkel, Department of English, University of Leipzig, W. Germany

**Correspondence, contributions, and books for review may be addressed to the Editor, Department of English, University of Wales, Lampeter, Dyfed, SA48 7ED.**

**Copyright ©, The Editor**

**We are grateful to Mr Francis Powys and Laurence Pollinger Ltd., for permission to quote from the writings of John Cowper Powys and T. F. Powys, and to the late Mrs Evelyn Elwin for permission to quote from the writings of Llewelyn Powys.**

**The Powys Review may be obtained from Booksellers for £6.50, or from Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed, for £6.50 plus £1.50 postage.**

**The Powys Review is printed by J. D. Lewis & Sons Ltd., Gomer Press, Llandysul, Dyfed.**

**ISSN 0309-1619**

# Contents

<b>Geoffrey Gunther</b> John Cowper Powys's Most Puzzling Novel	3
<b>Peter G. Christensen</b> The Rôle of Fate in History: <i>Owen Glendower</i> as Epic Historical Novel	8
<b>Oliver and Christopher Wilkinson</b> A Forging by Fire: John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg	14
<b>H. W. Fawkner</b> The Mineralogical Microplatonism of John Cowper Powys	22
<b>John W. Dowding</b> John Cowper Powys's 'Six Precious Words'	27
<b>Judith Stinton</b> Chaldon Herring: A Place Apart	32
<b>L. R. Leavis</b> T. F. Powys in Perspective: The Significance of <i>Father Adam</i> [1919] and <i>The Market Bell</i> [1924]	42
<b>Victor Golightly</b> Gwyn Thomas's 'Duality'	50
<b>Robert Mighall</b> Arcadian Perspectives: Llewelyn Powys and George Orwell	57
<b>Rowena Griffiths</b> A Rose for the Mistress Rowena	66
<b>Herbert Williams</b> JCP on TV	69
Notes on Contributors	70

---

# Geoffrey Gunther

---

## John Cowper Powys's Most Puzzling Novel

---

I enjoy reading *The Inmates*, and not merely because of a regressive pleasure in its enchanted world of wish fulfilment. Its generosity of spirit and disarming candour inspire me to offer a supplementary view to that of Susan Rands in a recent issue of *The Powys Review*. Interesting as is her account of the story as a psychological allegory, I am by no means convinced that “the puzzles and inconsistencies of *The Inmates* can be understood when viewed in the light of this model.”<sup>1</sup>

In his Prefatory Note to *The Inmates* John Cowper tells us that he is attempting “to defend the crazy ideas of mad people . . . as against the conventional ideas of sane people”.<sup>2</sup> He claims that in the former is a crazy wisdom and goes on somewhat cryptically to link this with William James's theory of a “multiverse rather than a universe”.

This article argues that if these aims are properly understood, the novel reveals itself as a profound and highly successful work. Some such defence is needed where a work has been described by its author, perhaps light heartedly, as a pot boiler and by one of Powys's best critics as his “most prosaic and most baffling novel”.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the novel refuses to yield to any conventional notions of good sense and good form. Powys, by this stage, is turning his back on the coherence and cumulative power of great art. Even if the novel is compared with the work of its acknowledged predecessors, Rabelais, Aristophanes, Heine and Poe, we will find it disappointingly lacking the very bravado which Powys so admired in these authors. There is a touch of madness about the whole novel but it is an endearing almost cosy vagary rather than

any grand illusion. John Hush's words to a menacing attendant offer a typical example:

‘Not personal questions of course,’ he went on, ‘though I can't believe the poor fellow's name is really Pantamount. I expect that's a nickname, eh, like Totti Cream-bo; one of those school nicknames—for, after all, Glint Hall is a kind of school, isn't it?—a school from which we poor inmates that you chaps are treating for our various manias are hoping—I'm sure I am'—and the crafty John straightened his shoulders and threw a wistful and nostalgic glance towards the window—‘to soon return cured into the ordinary world! It would be more polite, I expect, don't you fancy so, Mister officer, if I were to address him by his real name? Some name, I expect, like Brown or Smith—though, of course, it might be, for we never know in these confused days, Romanoff or Hapsburg. In fact I might chance it, mightn't I, and call him Mr. Jones?’ (197)

Here, beautifully captured, is John's slightly feverish and anxious intention to do the right thing, to play society's game. We feel an imprisoned energy perhaps ready to break though in a hysterical crescendo but kept like almost everything in the book to a strictly anti-climactic mode. A childish and often ludicrous cunning is used to propitiate the ‘sane’, to hide from them what is happening behind the nursery doors of the inner world.

The inmates suffer from the merciless glance of dispassionate curiosity. They use all their ingenuity to avoid it. As in all Powys's books the irreducibility of individual consciousness is being championed. And here, perhaps for the first time, his own fiction has finally no claim to any higher ontological status than the fancies of his

eccentrics and madmen. Were he to put such characters into an organized, controlled and finished fiction it would be to implicitly reduce their vagaries to the level of, at best, charming nervous instabilities and fantasies. No organic richness of closure of the text can be allowed to imprison them within the walls of a triumphant wholeness. The book's openness, fragmentation, and deprecatory humour reflects the validity of their escape from all binding harmonies and any single vision. The lessons of art, like the lessons of society, are to be unlearned. The fiction, as well as the inmates, must reveal to us our own power to evade the inner and outer judges of normality, the tyrannies of rational censorship.

The restricting asylum stands for the ordered traditional cosmology, enclosed by its wall and almost completely by the world stream. It is the universe of an anthropocentrism reflected in the notions of richness of personality and of art so rejected by the book.

'I'd tell them we should reduce our lives to two dimensions, and cut out this damned personality once for all: Be in your bodies, I'd tell them—be in your bodies to the limit, and then when your bodies don't satisfy you, be *in the spirit!*' (114)

These words of John's are echoed by all the other inmates in their rejection of "the cruelty of old custom" (121). Old custom based on myths of the defeating of disorder has reached its grotesque epitome in Dr Echetus's sanity. This merciless maimer of animals and men, is brought to this inhumanity not by any sadistic impulse but because he can react to the universe only as a detached rational onlooker and searcher for completeness of knowledge. And to understand the novel's greatness is to see its commitment to a constant forcing of the reader's participation beyond the merely voyeuristic and judgemental. We move in a world of paradoxes, lacunae and of incoherent events, stories and theories. There is no great epiphany, no clear reflection of the world of social reality, no final

solution, no significant victory. The so-called waking world is a dreamlike world, where reality is always a curious amalgam between data and construct. There is no one vantage point from which this amalgam can be observed or enjoyed. There is a transcendence, but by this stage of Powys's writing, it is not something realizable but rather a reminder of our precious and inalienable ignorance. The mysterious Tibetan lama who finally liquidates the sadistic Gewlie, is a *deus ex machina*, made deliberately grotesque and opaque. The incident is just as silly, arbitrary and finally unserious as it would be in any dream.

The *human* mystery, the supreme reality, is the mutuality of relationship between the dreamers, a mutuality denied by the scientism of Dr Echetus, and precluded in sado-masochistic relationships such as the one between Rumpibus and Tottie Creambo that so distresses John Hush's girlfriend Tenna Sheer. To be really insane is to ignore the reality of mutuality, as John realizes.

'How terrible', he thought, 'if I were really and truly insane and she were only a fancy of my madness?' (52)

Whilst the inmates have lost the immunity from suffering that deluded autonomy confers, they are free in the sense that each is committed to a reciprocal relationship with the strangeness of the universe. They escape from the restrictions of authoritarian personality and the empirical control of the senses, into a world of elemental, playful and mythical energy. Language itself takes on a spontaneous and free character, nonsense rhymes and childish play reflecting a real world of chance associations and mysterious connections rather than any construct of a unified order presided over by a law enforcing divinity.

Minor epiphanies<sup>4</sup> do occur, some with a grace recalling the Wessex novels, but they are without any culminating status, merely forming part of the extraordinary assemblage of particulars voyaging together through space and time. Only comic extravagance can finally do justice to the facts of life, of

“real life, life that’s the opposite of all the fables and fairy-tales and fancies and all the silly escapes, in which the people who shut us up here love to indulge” (36) as Mr Lordy says. In the social world of the ‘sane’, the uniqueness of the particular is disguised by false convention. Pride, tyranny and of course snobbery become possible, whereas here, as the saintly Ursie Mum Tickle sees, there are no two inmates even faintly resembling each other in the nature of their mental afflictions.

Life and art must both do justice to the unstructured nature of experience. Love is love but it expresses itself also as hate and fetishism; it is complex, irreducible, playful, possessive, all these things and hence real. John and Tenna *live out* contradictions; they do not manipulate them in order to somehow gain anything. In society, on the other hand, Family, Authority and Love all tend to fix the free subject as a squirming object, surveyed, measured and judged.

For Powys of course there can be no abiding in the divisions between subject and object, self and other, mind and matter. Reality is psychic, conscious; the relationship between all objects, animate and inanimate, is reality. The mystery is always an expanding net of relationships between apparent particulars. The odd whimsical glimpses we are given of this, are an encouragement to the reader into active exploration, not passive reception of a stale consensus. And the writing in *The Inmates* shows a fine balance between the psychic quality given to the outside world and the physicality with which mental events are endowed—“she flung one thought at least against such a jagged block of blue-black ice in the sluice of her consciousness that it broke into sharp-edged bits of ice” (100). The overall effect is similar to the description of the benign gardener’s gaze:

The object wasn’t isolated from its surroundings but absorbed and included in all its particular relations to its position in the world, so that a considerable segment of the object’s environment, together with a fair stretch of the causes and antecedents that had

made the object what it was, were embraced in one glance by the unnaturally wide scope of Daniel Frogcastle’s vision.

If this had the effect of diminishing the intensity of the gardener’s gaze, it also had the effect of giving it weight, a balance, a dispassionate consideration that seemed to challenge the cosmos to catch such a gaze off-guard (102).

This last sentence could well be taken as a defence of this and other of the later works.

John’s escape from Glint is certainly not a result of his logical or practical abilities. One important factor is that he is able to transform his physical environment by imagining it as a *temenos*. He *orientates* himself towards the mystery of the East, the sun rising between the two fir trees, as well as recalling Rembrandt’s picture of Christ at Emmaus. Typically John is seen both as genuine shaman with his Siberian larches and cigarettes of “the smoke of Heaven”, and as “idoltrous weathercock” (176). The river which almost surrounds his prison is neither an imprisoning object nor an absolute to be worshipped, a symbol of a divine authority figure, as Father Toby sees it. It becomes a mixture of boundary, wall, the stream oceanus, goddess and world serpent. The physical dimension is imaginatively transformed.

In changing ourselves we change the world. Of course John’s methods are idiosyncratic and certainly offer no universal blueprint, but they are *his*. He is being himself, not in the sense of fulfilling his personality but in the sense of realising his own unique cosmic haecceity. Only ‘sane’ minds try to structure reality unambiguously and impose it on others, seeking to enclose like repressive institutions the irreducibly subtle and formless. So much that seems odd, fetishistic and childish in Powys and his characters is designed to jolt such smug paradigms. Like modern physicists<sup>5</sup> he postulates a world of impinging and paradoxical atomic molecular and cosmic energies, energies which produce a reality absurd, unserious and ultimately free, and yet which menace our rational minds, which

in turn try to control them with everything from rampant empiricism to divine hypostases, to belief in a unified selfhood. The inmates on the other hand have lost such defences, like the naval-commander Serius-Ocius who advocates not control over the seas but a plunge into them:

'This plunge of the *self* into the *not-self* is what we call pleasure; and the more we enjoy this plunge, and the more often we make it, the more pleasure we get from life. Therefore we must struggle to disregard and forget all the impressions that hinder this plunge and we must force ourselves at every possible moment, and along with whatever else we may be doing, to keep a portion of our mind free not only to make the plunge, but to immerse itself in the element into which it plunges.' (152)

This, typically is not *the* truth but an aspect of a truth. The very openness to experience can make a person suffer, as does Tenna, the malady of "*being a skin short*" (161). This is one reason Powys creates a vision of such healing and restorative comedy. We share the burden of all created things, our happiness a fragile rainbow bridge spanning the abyss between two horrors, ennui and angst (182). And to escape, it is necessary to be a little mad, to avoid "what some people always have at the back of their minds. . . their own concern, their own affair, their own purpose, their own interest" (184).

There is a great image of freedom in the world of shadows and reflections as Twin Hither jumps the shadow of the monumental prison-gate. Out of this kind of complete innocence, comes the inner freedom that Powys portrays as having real significance. We need to be aware that not only this incident but the entire work is nothing less than a rediscovery of the mystical positiveness of the irrational, the inconsequential and the unproductive.

This realization has immense importance for our appreciation of *The Inmates*. Like Dr Johnson, Powys believed that the only end of writing is to enable the reader better to enjoy life or better to endure it. His later

works, like much modern art, tend to have a psycho-provocative role rather than to provide an aesthetic experience. The self which they address is not something controlled or constructed. Our individuality may be only the result of blemish or defect, as in the case of the chipped cup, "which was now from henceforth totally, inexorably, ineluctably, irremediably, separate from all other cups" (195), yet it is still mysteriously precious, the partaker in relationship with the cosmos. As John Hush concludes, no truth is to be learnt, but rather a deprogramming must take place from

the opinion of the hierarchy of ages, the academic poppycock of ages, the traditional abracadabra of a rabble of priests, professors, lawyers, doctors, scientists, politicians, divines, whose pontifical claptrap and up-se-daisy assumptions are simply the milk of those old moo-cows of habit, custom, tradition, and vain repetition. . . put over on us. . . by those who want to rule (242).

Only against this can the nonsense of the book be appreciated, its artistic poverty understood. It is no good attempting to counter with yet another general Truth. To prevent the emergence of such a focus we have the apparent proliferation of *parerga*<sup>6</sup> and examples of seemingly immature, arbitrary, wilful and careless writing.

Towards the end of the book particularly, the symbols march together with much that seems contrived and arbitrary. But the ending is particularly effective. Father Toby Tickle's worship of the bounding river represents the exclusivist attitude not only to faith, but to form as well—a tight knot controlled by an outside God or by the unitary and rigid consciousness of a creator. Of course in Powys even for such a view something can be said, yet this imperial idea is a dangerous temptation towards authoritarianism, just as dangerous in its way as the complacent materialist scientism of Dr Echetus.

There can not be, must not be, any controlling viewpoint. We have in the ending, all the horror of the rational command and

control of differences, in Colonel Cochineal and his understanding of the unalterable, in Lord Tom Tiddler's "in fact they are reducible to one simple-simple-simple-" (298), and in the adherence by the priests to their Absolute God. The reader's own hold on a judgmental and critical position should itself be swept away. The irrational viewpoint veers wildly from the macabre to the inconsequential, a seemingly arbitrary selection from the apocalyptic and irrational flow of events making up reality. The writing is full of clumsy excess, childish improbability and ghastly incongruity, yet all tending to an equanimity which laughs and accepts in spite of everything.

Even in Powys's first novel *Wood and Stone* the opposites of the self and of the world cannot be reconciled. In the early novels there is a feeling of great strain between their conventional technique and form and this viewpoint. This is to some

extent mastered in the great quest books but hovers over the fate of such characters as Sylvanus Cobbold and Uryen Quirm, who remain bizarre oddities in a world of normalcy. *The Inmates* presents us with an experiment, an unscientific one perhaps, but one that is forcing the reader to participate in the irrational with all its dangers and joys. It is a profound, prophetic and humane work. Our response to it will not be just a relishing of its vagaries but an experiencing of the divine mystery inherent in the incomplete, the imperfect and the creaturely. This is not a rejection of the metaphysical scope of the earlier great novels. It is written for all of us who cannot 'know' truth and yet are faced by the extraordinary mystery of the 'not-two, not-one' of our self-hood. Like many classical Taoist texts<sup>7</sup> it carries its own radical criticism of the verbal material it must depend upon.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Susan Rands, "John Cowper Powys's *The Inmates*, an Allegory", *The Powys Review*, 26 (1991) 49.

<sup>2</sup>*The Inmates* (1952) (London: Village Press, 1974). Subsequent page references in my text refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup>G. Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>As when Antenna Sheer seems to turn from a crumpled leaf into a bird of living air (p. 44), or when the redolent cowshed becomes a "morbidly agreeable earthly Hades" (p. 212). The chipped cup mentioned below in this article is a particularly striking example.

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of this type of viewpoint see for example Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam,

1975), and Gay Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (London: Fontana, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>This seems a useful term to use here for Powys's following of a rhythm of drifting without apparent purpose from any focus of significance. The slide of John's thoughts as he seems about to formulate something significant about the portentously named Father Wun is a typical example (p. 129).

<sup>7</sup>"... 'thoughts', speaking in the plural, are really only another name for the inexplicable phenomenon, speaking in the singular, that we call our consciousness" as Sirius-Ocius says (p. 163). The tao which can be named is not the tao.

---

# Peter G. Christensen

## The Rôle of Fate in History: *Owen Glendower* as Epic Historical Novel

---

Writing to Louis Wilkinson on 6 November 1942, John Cowper Powys asks, "But do you agree with Tolstoy in 'War and Peace' who says that war is all Chance!"<sup>1</sup> The initial impression we get here is that Powys wants to defend the rationality of history against what he takes to be Tolstoy's attack on this idea. However, when we look at passages from both novels, we find that Powys believes more strongly in a version of chance than Tolstoy, whose complicated arguments about the illusory control over events in history can hardly be reduced to the size of Powys's discussion.

This essay first discusses Powys as a misreader of Tolstoy in order later to present the idea of fate in *Owen Glendower* as the key to its hybrid genre, a synthesis of historical novel and epic for which Powys's beloved *Iliad* served as the prototype. Powys mistakenly believed himself to be continuing Tolstoy's project in *War and Peace* by affirming that fate rules history, but he missed the complexity of Tolstoy's argument. Powys's idea of fate in *Owen Glendower* is illuminated in his *Enjoyment of Literature*, where Homer is presented as accepting fate, and from the comments we realize that he glosses over differences between the epic world and the present. This discussion is part of a longing on his part for a totality of existence similar to the nostalgia for such a past presented in Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*. However, unlike Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin after him, Powys does not subscribe to the split between epic and novel, for he hopes that the idea of fate as a transhistorical concept can overcome the distance that cuts off the epic world from our historical present. Unfortunately, fate can not serve this purpose convincingly, and Powys fails to accept as a given the hybrid nature of the historical novel, so well pointed out by Alessandro Manzoni, on its own terms.

In the major authorial intrusion in *Owen Glendower*, five key paragraphs concerning "fate", Powys writes:

It seems to a superficial eye as though the whole course of human history often depends on the turn of a hair, on the tilt of an eyelid, on the fall of a feather; but to a more philosophical mind these trifles are only the instruments of what we call fate or destiny, a force for which in our nescience we have no adequate name.

Had Owen at that moment heard the words of his ally, uttered in that lower tone, it is probable that his pride in his Welsh followers would have reluctated at their being regarded as less daring than le Borgne's Gascons. Providence however—to use the popular term—saw fit just then to incarnate itself in an extremely blood-thirsty gnat, whose attack upon the Prince's face was so fierce that it caused him to leap from his seat with an oath, an oath that completely drowned his companion's words.<sup>2</sup>

Powys continues, speculating that "in one sense thousands of lives depended" on the attack by the gnat, and he adds that, if needed, "some other instrument, no less trifling" would have carried out the gnat's "shameless purpose" of letting Henry of Lancaster die in his bed.

The argument here suggests that Powys is defending what he criticizes in Tolstoy, the belief that chance rules all. However, he wants to make a crucial (probably ill-conceived) distinction between chance and fate, the latter of which we can neither name nor describe. His considering the idea of Providence as a "popular" term for fate not only oversimplifies theological argumentation throughout the centuries but also serves to eliminate the idea of a deity that might allow some degree of free will. Powys really wants us to take seriously the possibility that history is unfathomable and bordering on meaninglessness. He approaches an irrationalist position that would make any effort at social change totally arbitrary.

The passage concludes with the following statement:

Yes, there come moments, even in the decisions of commanders of such a host as this, when a pressure, light as the impalpable air and ubiquitous as grains of sand before an invisible wind, urges

the course of events in a certain direction, a direction either contrary to, or favourable to, drastic action.

The anxiety of a Worcestershire gnat to taste Welsh blood was only one manifestation of the impalpable form that was exercising its pressure upon these two men. To a superstitious mind it might almost have seemed as if the dead bones of King John, repentant for the injuries which during their life they had inflicted on that monarch's people, were projecting some numbing and drugging spell upon those who were conspiring against the walls that guarded the tomb (819).

Here Powys makes history look even more irrational, as he anthropomorphizes the gnat and uses the word 'pressure' to suggest that nature is animate as well. Finally, as if this were not enough, the forces of the dead are mentioned to keep us further away from a discussion about human agency in history.

Before we turn to the way that chance and fate are used in the action of the novel (as compared to the above authorial insert), let us look at some passages from Tolstoy's arguments about history in *War and Peace*, many of which are at the beginnings of Books 9, 11, 13, and the First Epilogue, and throughout the Second Epilogue. Tolstoy's reasons for asserting that events are beyond understanding are actually quite different from the ones that Powys implies. Fate for Tolstoy is not the same abstract, independent force it is for Powys.

Concerning the major figures in the invasion of Russia, Tolstoy writes:

The actions of Napoleon and Alexander, on whose words the event seemed to hang; were as little voluntary as the actions of any soldier who was drawn into the campaign by lot or by conscription. This could not be otherwise, for in order that the will of Napoleon and Alexander (on whom the event seemed to depend) should be carried out, the concurrence of unnumberable circumstances was needed without any one of which the event could not have taken place. It was necessary that millions of men in whose hands lay the real power—the soldiers who fired, or transported provisions and guns—should consent to carry out the will of these weak individuals, and should have been induced to do so by an infinite number of diverse and complex causes. (Book 9)<sup>3</sup>

Tolstoy suggests that we use the idea of fatalism to explain events we do not understand, a criticism that he could have aimed at Powys. Despite the feeling a man has, that he can do something or abstain from an act, once it has been done, it

"becomes irrevocable and belongs to history" where he inevitably obeys laws laid down for him.

Tolstoy stresses what Powys does not: a multitude of small actions and causes, the power of millions of men, and the interaction of personal and collective life. Powys's fatalistic and animistic considerations mask the fact that he can not seriously conceive of the idea of power in this system. His theory underestimates the value of collective action, the very thing he wishes to defend, as his war-effort essays against the Nazis in *Obstinate Cymric* indicate.

Tolstoy believes that there are laws of history that we do not know. He does not postulate a transcendent, abstract fate as Powys does. Tolstoy tells us that for a better understanding of history we need to change our focus away from kings to find these laws:

To study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved. No one can say in how far it is possible for man to advance in this way toward an understanding of the laws of history; but it is evident that only along that path does the possibility of discovering the laws of history lie, and that as yet not a millionth part as much mental effort has been applied in this direction by historians as has been devoted to describing the actions of various kings, commanders, and ministers and propounding the historians' own reflections concerning these actions. (Book 11)<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to Tolstoy, Powys exhibits a dread of finding any historical laws whatsoever, and along with it he fears that history might aspire to become akin to the sciences in formulating such laws of causality and consequence.

Neither Tolstoy nor Powys wants to put the kings in control of history, but they come to this position from different points of view. Powys invokes fate, and along with it an unknowable First Cause who can provide the rationale behind Owen, the sacrificial prince, who follows his own calling, even while leading Wales to destruction. Powys wants to make a favourable moral judgment about his royal hero, whereas Tolstoy reserves many judgments about the much analyzed figures of Napoleon and Alexander I.

The activity of Alexander or of Napoleon cannot be called useful or harmful, for it is impossible to say for what it was useful or harmful.

If the activity displeases somebody, that is only because it does not agree with his limited understanding of what is good. Whether the preservation of my father's house in Moscow, or the glory of the Russian army, or the prosperity of Petersburg and other universities, or the freedom of Poland or the greatness of Russia, or the balance of power in Europe, or a certain kind of European culture called 'progress' appear to me to be good or bad, I must admit that besides these things the action of every historical character has only more general purposes inaccessible to me. (First Epilogue)<sup>5</sup>

This passage expresses a moral relativism which Powys does not endorse. Powys wishes to justify Owen despite his sins and errors. For those who might wish to judge Owen unfavourably, Powys includes an appeal to both the unknowability of the future and to utopian hopes. In other words, there may come a time when Owen's unsuccessful fight for freedom will be seen to have made more sense than it does now.

It does not take us long to find Powys's ideas on fate in *Owen Glendower*. We find so many fleeting references to chance, Providence, and destiny, that a character's assertion of free will flies in the face of the narrator. At times, Powys treats his characters as puppets oblivious to their unjustified assumptions about free will. When the sexy Lundy tries to embrace Rhisiart and perhaps lure him away from Owen's cause, he declares "my fate is my own", but we know it is not (305).

Although not every single sentence mentioning fate can be taken as an affirmation that it is the ruling force of history, the overall cumulative effect suggests that this situation constitutes life. Along with this belief in fate comes a sense of despair before history. At one point Owen puts himself entirely at the mercy of chance, as if to act resolutely were to sin against the true nature of the universe. Powys writes elegiacally:

A pair of late wood-butterflies, linked together in love, came fluttering past; and in a mood of languid superstition, giving the fancy no more weight than the insects themselves possessed, as they drifted awkwardly by on their double set of wings, he told himself that if they settled on a patch of ragwort near the path it would be to Avignon he would go, and if on the loosestrife by the water it would be to Rome; whereas if they drifted away without settling at all it would mean a church of Wales independent of them both.

The pair of airy lovers, however, did none of these things (411). It seems that Owen is fated not to make his choice of using fate or chance.

Or is it just that chance does not allow him to do this? The system of the novel sets up these questions to the point of infinite regress. Whereas we might say that the Welsh are 'fated' to lose to the English, as they were generally outnumbered, Powys's use of fate as an abstraction works against an idea such as this.

Powys was a great lover of epic poetry. The battle between Greeks and Trojans reminded him of the struggles between Welsh and English. Again and again in his essays we see his reverence for Homer and Vergil. In an essay on Homer in *The Enjoyment of Literature* (1938), Powys writes that the Homeric "secret" is partially lost to us today, that it distinguishes itself from the Christian message, and that in art and contemplation it can be partially recovered by those who seek it. For Powys, this "secret" involves the acceptance of fate.

What I have presumed to call the 'secret' of Homer is indeed the isolation of, *and the poetic deepening of our consciousness of*, those recurrent situations, significant human gestures, in the span of any ordinary life, that in the nature of the case have been repeated since the beginning. What the Homeric way of thought delivers us from is that accursed habit of taking the essentials of life for granted which cheapens, debases, and vulgarizes all, and steals the heart out of the very mystery of being alive.

The Homeric 'secret' restores to the relation between man and wife, child and parent, chief and companion, comrade and fellow, that overtone of poetic dignity that in its essence is a religious acceptance of fate. It gives back to life, and it gives back to death as the inevitable rounder-off of life, the sense of a tragic and a pitiful grandeur, which our overbalanced concentration on absorbing realistic details takes away.<sup>6</sup>

Although Powys hopes that the Homeric Age had such a harmony between persons and between people and nature that this totality of being can justify the butchery of the Trojan War, he knows that he may be engaging in wish-fulfilment. So he goes on to express the Nietzschean idea of taking life for what it is, "grim and pitiful, with its own strange, sad beauty, and at least able to be justified—as an incredible tale."

Just as the harshness of the Homeric Age can be justified by the tragic endurance of the people, the warfare of the time is made more acceptable by Powys's invocation of the democratic spirit which he claims also showed itself then:

And it is the same with the basic dignity of human beings themselves. Along with the thoughtless cruelties of that age of 'pitiless brass,' following perhaps only too closely upon a kindlier age, the legended 'Saturnian age' of peace and the unbloody cult of the Great Mother, along with women sold for so many heads of cattle, along with the reckless sacking of cities, and all the slaughter and the blood, there does appear—stress the proud aristocratic note as much as you please!—a grand primeval natural democracy in these poems, wherein to be a man under the sun, or a woman under the sun, is a thing *in itself* of magical awe and reverence.<sup>7</sup>

The appeal here is not to political 'democracy' but to cosmic feeling, and the passage shows Powys's weakness in sizing up political situations, a problem already evidenced by the continual appeals to fate.

In *Owen Glendower's* many references to Homer and the Welsh epic past, including some which link the two periods, we can see the desire to present the age of Greek epic as an era of a lost totality. Such references also indicate that Powys wished for his novel to be judged an epic as well. The first of four major allusions to Homer in Part One of the novel links Owen's domain with dwellings in both the *Mabinogion* and Homer's poetry:

It was clear that none of our friends, even if they had been ten times more numerous than they were, would be without shelter that night. Owen's domain was indeed a 'Llys', as the old romances call such a place, worthy to be compared with the primeval ones of the ancient Welsh myths, mentioned so constantly in the 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi.'

Like the Homeric palaces it was two stories high, the upper one devoted to the women of the family and their feminine attendants and the lower occupied almost entirely by one enormous hall, strewn with last year's bracken, with an open fire at the centre, round which at night, when the tables had been cleared, the whole company of warriors and their retainers could sleep (112).

The other three references to Homer in Part One of *Owen Glendower* continue along the same lines of linking Powys's novel to epic. Tegolin, the girl with whom Rhisiart falls in love calls to his mind passages from Homer (152). In the monastery of Valle Crucis, Rhisiart finds a real Welsh spear, "the sort of thing that our ancestors, the Trojans used" (201). He speculates that with such a spear, "Hector must have wounded Patroclus." Later the plain of Maelor is spread

out before Rhisiart's eyes in "a curious Homeric light" (324). In each case the epic imagery bears the burden of bridging the world of 1400 with the Greek world rather than marking their separation.

Georg Lukács, writing under the influence of Schiller in *The Theory of the Novel*, also gives a high value to the Greek epic and Homer's world. Although his idea of 'totality' in the epic age is not entirely the same as Powys's, both writers posit a Greek epic world that links people with each other and with nature. Lukács, however, believes what Powys does not, that our historical age is so fallen that Greek totality can never be recovered:

For the epic, the world at any given moment is an ultimate principle; it is empirical at its deepest, most decisive, all-determining transcendental base; it can sometimes accelerate the rhythm of life, can carry something that was hidden or neglected to a utopian end which was always imminent within it, but it can never, while remaining epic, transcend the breadth and depth, the rounded, sensual richly ordered nature of life as historically given.<sup>8</sup>

Accepting the fallenness of the world in this age of the novel, Lukács distinguishes between two primary types of contemporary realism, that which portrays heroes of abstract idealism (those for whom the world is a series of tests), and that which uses disappointed romantics as protagonists. To the first group belongs Don Quixote and to the second Oblomov. Lukács tries to mediate between the two categories by proposing the novel of education in the tradition of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as a workable hybrid.

Powys, on the other hand, tries to reconcile the two types of novels by using two protagonists, Rhisiart, an abstract idealist, and Owen, a disappointed romantic. Furthermore, he has the abstract idealist serve as a follower of the disappointed romantic. Such a strategy goes hand in hand with the appeals to the epic world to heal the broken historical European world.

Lest it be objected that I am without justification in considering the fifteenth-century world of *Owen Glendower* to serve as a stand-in for Powys's and our own twentieth-century world (so lamented by Lukács during the World War I era), let me indicate that Powys himself did encourage us to see links between Owen's time and our own. In the article, 'My Welsh Home', from *Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-1947*

Powys compared Owen to Joan of Arc and William Tell. He saw in *Glendower* a representative of the Welsh spirit throughout the ages up to the World War II period when Great Britain was trying to withstand the German air attacks.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately for Powys, appeals to Homer and fate, along with the celebration of a national hero do not suffice to turn a historical novel into an epic. Mikhail Bakhtin pointed this problem out in his 1941 lecture, "Epic and Novel", included in *The Dialogical Imagination*, generally considered to be a response to Lukács. He insists that the epic world cannot be linked to contemporary reality, and that the stress on personal experiences and the free thought that grows out of them keep novels about historical materials from becoming epics. None of Powys's appeals to the Greeks, from Bakhtin's perspective can outweigh the concrete historicity of the political debates in the novel represented by the discussions of Lollards, Franciscans, Cistercians, peasants, and university men. Similarly, the narrator's strong interest in Rhisiart's psychology disqualifies *Owen Glendower* from the genre of epic.

Furthermore, Powys's narrative voice in the novel departs radically from the voice of the teller of epic as characterized by Bakhtin:

The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'. The important point here is not that the past constitutes the content of the epic. The formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past. The epic was never a poem about the present, about its own time (one that became a poem about the past only for those who came later). The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendant.<sup>10</sup>

In this framework the epic cannot be a work of political criticism, if reverence for the past is to prevail. All long poems of criticism about 'governmental' affairs must fall into the genre of the novel. *Owen Glendower* depicts a world in which violence jeopardizes democratic ideals which are already individualistic and as such inconceivable in the epic world. Powys underlines

the danger of such violence by making appeals to another epic past behind the fifteenth century. The prehistorical world of the aboriginal dwellers is glimpsed, but it never emerges, except implausibly in the figure of Morg ferch Lug, presumably a survivor of the aboriginal peoples into the present.

Morg, however, is not the hero; Owen is. For Bakhtin, he cannot serve well as the epic hero, for he does not have the required wholeness. According to Bakhtin:

The individual in the high distanced genres is an individual of the absolute past and of the distanced image. As such he is a fully finished and completed being. This has been accomplished on a lofty heroic level, but what is complete is also something hopelessly ready-made; he is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself. He is, furthermore, completely externalized. There is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation.<sup>11</sup>

Such a description could not take us farther from Owen. Powys's novel, in accounting for Owen as a fount of legend, tries to get us to accept a man, who, when he dies and becomes the avatar of mythical Bran, gains coherence between his internal and external nature in his last moments. Unfortunately, readers are not likely to be convinced by a historical figure who attempts to become the hero of epic in his last hours. The epic requires someone who has had no gap between authentic essence and external manifestation throughout his entire life.

In contrast with Bakhtin and Lukács, Alessandro Manzoni in his great essay, "On the Historical Novel" (1850), a monument of nineteenth-century literary criticism, sets up the historical novel as the direct heir of the epic, and he vindicates Powys's simultaneous appeal to both epic and novel. In the second half of his essay he traces the development of the epic poem from Homer to the historical novel, noting important stages along the way. He states that Lucan, with his *Pharsalia*, founded the historical epic. He was the first to take as the subject of a long poem "a complex event from historical times".<sup>12</sup>

In describing the burden that the historical novel suffers on account of its successorship to the epic, Manzoni writes:

The fact is the historical novel is not a false genre, but a species of a false genre which includes

all compositions that try to mix history and invention, whatever their form. Being the most modern such species, the historical novel is only the most refined and ingenious effort yet to meet the challenge, as if the challenge ever could be met.<sup>13</sup>

With these words in mind, we should note that logically Powys would have done better inscribing his *Owen Glendower* in the tradition of the historical novel rather than Greek epic. He was paying attention to fifteenth-century historical realities that were outside the boundaries of the Homeric world view. And in order to break down the readers' resistance to that strained analogy between past and present, he turned away from Tolstoy's investigation of how much the masses might determine history despite the visibility of so-called Hegelian world historical figures like Napoleon. Powys was thus left with espousing a notion of fate as total acceptance which was both anachronistic and mystifying in terms of the examination of social forces that the historical novel requires.

The problem may be that Powys had too much recourse to the imagination at the expense

of history. Manzoni describes such a problem when he writes:

A great poet and a great historian may be found in the same man without causing confusion, but not in the same work. In fact the two opposite criticisms that furnished the lines of argument for the trial of the historical novel had already showed up in the first moments of the genre and at the height of its popularity, like germs of an eventually mortal illness in a healthy-looking baby.<sup>14</sup>

Powys's reflections on the gnat and the wood-butterflies do count as appeals to the imagination, and they do cause confusion as we try to figure out why Owen's actions puzzle us today.

Whereas both Manzoni and Tolstoy could accept the belatedness of the historical novel, its uncouth, irrational blend of history and imagination, Powys could not accept his own belatedness with respect to epic and weakened his novel by making inappropriate references to what he conceived of as Homeric fate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Letters to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-1956* (London: Macdonald, 1958), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Owen Glendower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940 and London: John Lane *The Bodley Head*, 1941), pp. 818-19. Page references within my text refer to these editions.

<sup>3</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, tr. Aylmer Maude and Louise Maude, ed. George Gibian (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 669-70.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 919-20.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1256.

<sup>6</sup>John Cowper Powys, *The Enjoyment of Literature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup>Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, tr. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: M I T Press, 1971), p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-1947* (Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1947), p. 81.

<sup>10</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup>Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, tr. Sandra Berman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 96.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126.

---

# Oliver Wilkinson and Christopher Wilkinson

## A Forging by Fire: John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg\*

---

### LETTER 1

Hotel Schenley  
Pittsburgh  
Pennsylvania  
[February: 1912]

... Do you know what I am thinking about now? Shall I tell you? I am thinking about Egg Jellies—at 5 cents the bag. I have just had a tremendous Bath during which my mind ran upon ashes and sand and also upon the fingers that would inflict this delicate punishment.

I had no wish to eat anything this morning—I seemed tired of everything—so I ordered Country Sausage—and was presented with blobs of Sausage-meat, in three raw gobbets, & I actually put a morsel into my mouth—ugh! I had to spit it out. I think that a great many middle-aged Procuresses must have disappeared lately in Chicago. Fancy! after talking of eating *you*, I eat instead a highly-seasoned oleaginous concentration of Miss Perot, Miss Daniells, Mrs Quizzlinnan, and that other thing, with a snout like a little female wild-boar, that we said we would go out shooting!—Loathing! Disgust! Nausea!—an ounce of civet good apothecary!—I must go out and buy some of my girl's red Carbolic toothpaste to clear my imagination with!... I will not touch with the tips of my fingers a single human being until I see Frances again. It gets on my nerves to think that my mouth has actually been touched by that Tape-worm Mrs ----- and that Maggot ----- . I wish the real Jack and Frances could be buried directly they separate; and quaint puppets—tagged and wound-up, to nod and leer and propitiate—occupy their places till they meet again!

You demon of mine, you mad solitary sea-cat, why have you infected me with your villainous loathing for nice warm, kind, well-meaning, well-rounded human flesh & blood?

\*Based on the readings given at the Powys Society Conference, 30 August 1992, by Micheline Patton, Isobel Powys-Marks, and Oliver and Christopher Wilkinson.



J. C. Powys, c.1916

(from G. Arnold Shaw's leaflet advertising *Wood and Stone*, *Rodmoor* and other Powys books of this year)

I tell you I wish I could wash my spotted memory clear of every single sexual emotion I have ever had—except for you; (and I'm damned if that word describes anything *we* ever feel) as you would wash mouth, eyes, throat and every pore of my skin with biting saturnian soap!

Even as I write this your being and essence flow over me, like a flood, and I am clean of all—The salt-cold Frances at her priest-like task of pure ablution round Jack's human shores...

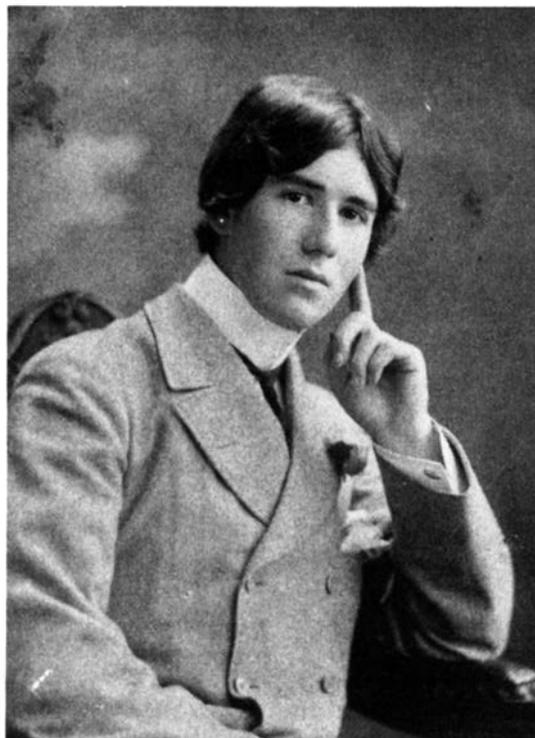
That was John Cowper Powys—or Jack, as he is known in the letters—writing to Frances Gregg in February 1912. They had only just met. Jack was 40, Frances was 27. Frances had introduced herself after one of his lectures, and submitted a poem for him to

look at. It is only the second letter he wrote to her.

Frances Gregg was a member of Ezra Pound's young Imagist group in Philadelphia. Her best friend was Hilda Doolittle, who became H.D., the poet.

Jack fell in love with Frances. As he was already married, he enchanted Frances and his colleague, Louis Wilkinson—Louis Marlow, the writer—into marrying each other. All within three months of meeting her! After this Jack became extravagantly jealous, and pursued Frances more than ever.

The correspondence between them lasted nearly thirty years. At times Jack was writing once or twice a week. There are some gaps—between 1915 and the early 20s, for instance; they were seeing a lot of each other so there was little need to write. Apart from a few letters written in the 20s, all Frances's letters are missing up until 1935. Jack ceremoniously destroyed all of her early letters, burying them in the ground or setting fire to them on what he refers to in



An early portrait of Louis Wilkinson  
(Photographer: Adolphus Tear, 5 Westgate St., Ipswich)



Frances Gregg.

his letters to her as “a burning ground of Siva”—Siva, the Hindu god of destruction.

The marriage of Louis and Frances was happy to begin with—against most of the odds—but after four or five years it began to break down. One irritant for Louis was the continued presence of Frances's mother—Julia Vanness Gregg—whom Jack refers to in the letters as “the Madonna”. Frances, apart from two very short periods in 1912 and 1937, lived with her mother, Julia, for the whole of her life.

In 1919, at a time when she was very ill, Frances and Jack tried living together in California but, for a variety of reasons, the experiment failed.

The other letters here come from the second volume of the forthcoming collection **JACK AND FRANCES** and were written between 1935 and 1941. They are no longer meeting but are constantly writing to each other. Frances, long since divorced from Louis Wilkinson, is travelling with her two children, Oliver and Betty, and her mother,



Left to right: Frances Gregg, Louis Wilkinson, Julia Vanness Gregg, J. C. Powys.

Julia, in an old car, around England, never staying in one place more than a year. Jack has moved with Phyllis Playter from Dorchester to Wales where he is to stay for the rest of his life, writing. Jack had met Phyllis Playter in America, lived with her there from 1923 and they had both travelled to England in 1934. In 1936, Phyllis's mother and aunt travelled over to live next door to them in Corwen, so that Phyllis could look after them.

There is a brutality in some of Frances's remarks to Jack that perhaps needs a brief explanation. Sometimes she speaks to him in harsh tones that are not heard, in quite the same way, from any of his other correspondents. The clues to this side of their unique relationship can be clearly seen in that early letter from 1912 where Jack refers to "my girl's red carbolic toothpaste to clean my imagination with", where he refers to the 'priest-like task' of her "washing his

mouth, eyes, throat and every pore of his skin with biting saturnian soap!"

Jack had recognized in Frances an individual incisive discriminating faculty that he valued and needed, which he refers to as her "*savage* clarity of mind". It is as if—in addition to being in love with her—he elected her as his own (very personal) mentor and critic, and as a scourge to beat back the demons that tormented him at that stage in his life. It was a 'corrective' relationship.

Jack (so it appears) was tormented and sexually fulfilled by visions of obscenity and cruelty. There is a poem by him to Frances Gregg, written in 1912, in which he flaps black wings of evil as the Devil and as outcast from all the world. His mental sadism was stultifying to mental progress. He could hold thousands in rapt attention from the lecture platform, when all the winds of heaven and all the inspirations of other people's genius poured through him; but he had, by the age of forty, published only two slim volumes of derivative verse. He had power, but he also had this secret: that when the lecture was over, and he was on his own, he would be the white worm sliding into a morass of delightful abomination. Frances saw this. She did not cure him of his mania, but she put it into perspective. It was as interesting as any other manifestation in human life. It was absurd and disgusting but Jack need not worry overmuch about this; many aspects of life were childish and absurd, disgusting, too, but understandable, and must not be given ridiculous pride of place.

This seems to have been a new idea to Jack. It was a belittling idea of immense deliverance. One traces this in his letters to Frances. Even in that first letter, about 'eating procuresses' and so on, he begins—*just* begins—to laugh at the monstrosities of his own imagination: while he lusts honestly enough for his own kind of love-making.

In later letters, he begins to talk about writing. Then he begins to write—articles, pamphlets, some (many think) of the greatest novels ever written, and the greatest autobiography.

Frances was, of course, not responsible for all this. She saw the genius in Jack, and saw that it had to be released into ways that would be an addition to his lecturing. That was the important point, to release his power, by any means possible. She was not a woman to wallow in erotic delight or in the love of a great man; though she did not under-rate either. In any case she loved Ezra Pound whom she thought the greater man.<sup>1</sup> She loved Jack, too, however, and saw the complex infantilism, the chaotic guilt that made a great part of his genius sterile; and the first task was to make that genius potent, to bring his forces together, even if it meant a forging by fire.

They loved arguing. Jack, particularly in the early letters, refers often and with obvious relish to their “queer metaphysical rages against each other”, and looks forward to meetings when “actually and really our voices are lifted up, to the dismay of all present, in one of our ancient fierce disputes” and to moments when they are on their own and “able to talk and scold to our hearts’ content”.

And it is quite clear that Jack *likes* to be scolded (“I need my Frances to take down my pride a peg or two!” he says in one letter), even if the “savagery of her attacks” sometimes leaves him, in his own words, “positively gasping”. He can be hurt but he always ends up asking for more. In 1913, we find him writing, “[Frances], my persecutor, I beg you (even under the lashes) not to be kind. . . not that kindness is exactly in your vein; but I *have* seen it & shuddered. . .” And in 1921 he writes: “. . . It would certainly be wonderful to have a Frances to talk to who didn’t hit quite so hard. . . but would that be Frances at all? *perhaps not*. . . and for that reason I am now today writing to you to beg for a good familiar old-time *thrashing!* So send it to me—for after so long a silence every letter you put into every word. . . and every word you put into every sentence. . . ought to smite with the fury of. . . I can’t think what, but something pretty stinging. . .”

“Look here, Frances Josefa Gregg,” Jack wrote on another occasion to reassure

her, “Don’t you ever get the idea that Jack can *ever* under any circumstances be caused to suffer by any other girl than you, for he cannot.”

So—here we are in April 1935. Jack is now 62. Frances is 49. Jack has sent Frances, in Essex, his book *The Art of Happiness*.

## LETTER 2

FRANCES:

The Nook  
Popes Hall  
Wakes Colne—Essex

My dear Jack,

Thank you so much for your birthday gift. What a rich gift, your book, and the photograph. I do thank you so very much.

The odd thing is that your books more and more approach my desire, or my need, or my wish, or whatever you like to call it. And it is impossible to say whether the change is in me, or in you. I say that it is in you because I am so narrow and obstinate and tenacious and can find little to do with my own thesis except to seek words to put it to. This book is written with your great gift of sincerity that is like a strange and magical reverse to your treachery. I think that you did really want to help people to be happy. But more than that, that you had the right reason for happiness, of courage, and that the thing was nobly written. That it was beautifully written, magically written, written as only a true great poet could write, goes without saying.

What I call your ‘infantile fixation’ is responsible for much . . . and, most poignantly, that you are not that great poet for which your gifts were destined. There is yet time. But do not think that you can cheat and steal your way to it. It can only be by way of a true miracle. Your ‘young men’ who are your disciples are no more than heroic children. . . . I know that you will quote the great poem by which I set such store. . . “unless you become as a little child”—and, as always, confusing the issue by misreading ‘become’ as ‘remain’ . . . You and others of your sad ilk have *remained* as little children, spying into the domain of maturity and stealing such sweets as your impotence could cope with. . . but blind, blind, blind to their true meaning, and to their true intent. You, with those god-like gifts, and with your deep child-like cunning, and with that something that is so

sweet, and pure, and beguiling as to be almost heaven-like in your nature, become so plausible in your writings, that I could tremble. . . . except that never once have you tempted me. . . . therefore I know that the incorruptible are safe from you, and for the rest, the dead must bury their dead.

And that brings me to the second of my thongs, with which, loving you as I do, I seem eternally trying to flay you. I wish that you would speak more guardedly of women. You know that I do not like them really, so that I am no sentimentalist pleading for the frail. I only say that you know nothing about them, and for your own dignity's sake should use a shade more discretion in writing of them. What, actually, when it comes to it, do you know of women, except of such strange harlots as we who have come your way. Do you really think, dear Jack, that my mind is so shallow that I have forgotten our deep struggle in California. I—a woman—struggled for your honour, and I—a woman—was forever dishonoured by you. You won, and involved me terrifically in your doom. Such poor weapons as I had I have used. But time is getting on, and unless you come to my aid it may be that I, too, shall have this weary round to repeat. I am not sure, though. Certainly I have a most mysterious sense of security in the midst of all my failures and defeats and difficulties, a feeling of quiet and sure wisdom.

I note that you say that 'happiness' releases magnetic currents of good. Do you know that I. . . . in that secret heart we all conceal. . . . believe that the terrible malice that you have directed towards Llewelyn and towards me, in your moments, accounts for our ailing lives and broken wings. We have, each in our way, *raged* at you,—as you would never rage openly at anything, but never never never have we felt anything but love for you, and that love goes far to sustain you through your healthy maladies. Do you know that when I saw the house burned [at Happisburgh, Norfolk] and they said. . . . "Why should that happen to us?" that I said, "It does not surprise me, Jack has been here. . . ." That need not trouble you. You could not help it, but you have gathered just those forces about you. I knew that it would strike when we saw those slimed worms forcing themselves through the soil at my threshold and I was so shocked and frightened. These are the realities. But we are such cowards.

You will think that this is a poor return for your gentleness in sending me the book, and the

photograph. Yet it is my love. I will never speak to you except truly.

. . . Llewelyn's anti-Christ book<sup>2</sup> gives me so much joy—as it would him, Christ—it holds almost the pure essence of Christ's teaching, and you cannot believe that he would care how the teaching comes. I think—except among your vain, old men like St Paul—there was never any inclination in Christ to glorify himself. He loved man, and life, and identified himself with them, and he showed, even as your way to happiness teaches, that one may go down into the jaws of death, and the more deadly jaws of pain in life, and still *choose* the path of life and that great peace which I would give you.

Love—from the last fastness  
of your living heart—Frances.

Phyllis Playter, Jack's wife in all but title, helped Jack's work by her constant reactions as an intelligent and sensitive reader. Frances in her criticisms of his books is, to some degree, at cross purposes—and 'cross purposes' is the right phrase. Frances is a Christian of an evolutionary kind that is desperately (the adverb is deliberate) needed if—in the words of Iris Murdoch, at this 1992 Powys Conference—the immediate and future task is "to make Christianity credible".<sup>3</sup> Frances thinks that there "is a better thing" for Jack to do in his writings than his cosmological dramatisation of himself. Jack thinks that there is not.

Frances, in other ways, contributes a great deal to Jack's writings. He calls her "the greatest woman of genius I can imagine and have ever supposed possible". As those who saw and heard them together know, and as can be seen by some of their letters, Jack takes Frances's original ideas, from discussions and arguments with her, and puts them wholesale into his books. Frances does not mind this. She puts part of his letters to her into *The Buffoon*—written, with her help, by her husband, Louis Wilkinson—and into her macabre, uncharacteristic stories, 'My Case' and 'A Letter'.<sup>4</sup>

## LETTER 3

JACK: Dec 11th [1935]

... O if you could would might will write books or something as lovely as you write letters like this! ... Don't 'ee ever think (old friend) that Signore Jack doesn't realize that sickening tragedy of the strange and unaccountable obstacle —& where it lies is beyond my penetration!— that hinders your genius from writing book after book...

... Your clairvoyant cleverness in its awareness of the limitations of the outside brains—turns your genius from being a solid wedge, or a driving projectile of iron, into a *shower* of falling stars!

... A person could I believe write an essay on the value of *stupidity obstinacy egoism & simplicity* in ultimate matters of self-expression (like Hamlet you know too much, too well!). Think of Wordsworth's *stupidity!* to go on & on & on always being your own obstinate and narrow & original self banked up with your stupidity & complete ignorance of how what you do strikes others, so that your genius is like a blade in a tough non-conducting *wooden* handle...

Love  
& something...  
... I don't know  
what to Frances.

## LETTER 4

FRANCES:

West Mersea [Essex]  
[January 1936]

Don't worry about me, my dear Jack. If it is genius that is struggling so pitifully against the web of my personality and circumstances then it will see me through. Certainly I feel that I have beaten upon some gates and cried to those within for more centuries than the world has travelled—but what the gates are, or who I am, or where I am dissolves and becomes a nightmare. I do not know.

I think it has something to do with the dark sucking back and forth of this tidal mud [here in West Mersea]. It is pulled back and forth by other people's moons and destinies. And there is something in it too of the cry of these curlews which is lovely and death like.

And I do not like the people here—they are all broken and monstrous—they wash about me

like their own tidal silt, a refuse of sea bottom and earth surface...

This is a cessation of our warfare after so long—just the thing within my skull speaking to the thing within yours. But the rest of me, this broken and tormented body of Frances is glad of the ghost of your bony fingers twined into her ghostly hand. Dear Jack, at least this once you have succeeded in being a true Comforter.

Frances keeps travelling with her family—her mother, Julia, and her daughter, Betty. Her son, Oliver, gets a job running the theatre in a community centre at Plaistow, London, where his father, Louis, sometimes lectures. Frances keeps writing—some of her stories are published, and re-published in anthologies. Her health is bad, but her vitality great. They are often very poor. Frances's only *regular* income is a very small alimony from Louis. Julia's income, also small, is from her teacher's pension. Jack regularly enclosed 10/- or £1.00 with his letters to Frances. There was even a time in the 30s when, for a three year period, he sent her £4.00 at the beginning of every month.

## LETTER 5

FRANCES:

'Littlehampton 3pm. 16 DEC 1936 Sussex'

This letter is so tiresome  
that I would not read it if I were you.

My very dear Jack,

I did not leave your new book [*Maiden Castle*] unread and last night finished the last page. I have found one character to whom I was entirely sympathetic and understanding—Lovie.

How hard it is to sort out one's impression of a book... I wish that you had never been scolded by anyone in your whole life. You should not have been. There is little sin in you. Unfortunately you irritate people profoundly. You stand there, in the clouded infancy of existence, and we—little and big, worthless and grand, stupid and intelligent—have been hurried on into this present state of flurried and harassed adulthood... This prolonged infancy of yours is what annoys those who cherish you most. Children have a peculiar fate. The chief thing that is asked of them is to keep out of the way.

When adults have to do with them they tend, if 'child lovers', to treat them as though they were charming little animals. Their charm is then disarming and their presence becomes tolerable. But even Jack who so loves himself that he has written several huge books solely to record it, would hardly claim that he has any of the disarming gambolling charm of infancy.

Now there is no doubt in my mind that the erotic impulse is strongest in extreme youth when it is also sterile. I learned that from you as I learn everything from you. The erotic impulse is, of all qualities, incompatible with love. You—cosmic child—cannot 'love'. So, says Frances, love does not—as yet—exist in the universe. BUT its existence has been apprehended. Now after such an exciting swing into the unknown as the imagining of love, don't you think that it is a bit of a bore to have you wallow in your glauvous infancy describing the plain and coloured squirmings of the aborigines. How valuable these books of yours have been only I know. But I know too a better thing for you to do. So far your books have been chiefly remarkable for their astounding observation, and incredible lack of imagination. This lack of imagination is, as you know, typical of children. Children rise up out of the past, and bring with them dramatic memory. They seize upon myths, magic, saga, angels and devils, and all the imagery of past civilisations, as their natural metier. So we find you in your books, 'Once there was a great magician and his name was Jack, and there was a fairy and his name was Jack too, and God was Jack, and the Devil was Jack, and Don Juan was Jack, and again St Paul.' In short this child has no imagination but can only dramatise himself under a thousand threadbare guises.

Then here are we. We have no leader. We have no spokesman. We are not even a herd. One here, one there, lifts a blind face to where it scents the morning. It stumbles towards the light. Crumpled in its bleeding palm there is a message, all that it has for a guide. Some ironist, laughing in agony, has flung out the taunt—love thy neighbour as thyself. That, to animals who love only themselves. Not one to love another even as himself. The way of it not yet discovered. One child alone—whirling upon his axis like a dancing dervish—says 'I am incapable of love.' Then shocked, he sits down to write book on book on book to prove all the other things that he can do. Well, we've got the idea, dull as we men-animals are, Jack's a very fine fellow. BUT

let's hear more of his momentous discovery that 'love' is not—as yet—a human trait. So far it has only been imagined. So far, too, Jack has not tapped the source of imagination. Now, putting your virgin imagination and your momentous discovery together, is there not a book still unwritten for the writing of which Jack, at 64, must consider being born again?

That is all that I have to say about this last book which strikes me as being so steeped in death that it can only breed corruption. It can do no harm for only those already dead will assimilate it.

You will not like my letter, and no doubt again you will hate and scorn me, and I am sorry. But believe this, not a single hurt to Jack that that book recorded escaped my eyes. I was sorry and—even among the guilty as I was—I would have held your head against my breast and begged you to forgive us every one. We knew not what we did.

And now to the Christmas star I commit your soul.

## LETTER 6

JACK:

*See ten shillings cheque!!*

Dec 20 [1936]

No I wasn't at all mad at 'ee for your words over my book. Who *could* have been unless oblivious to the pleasure and thrill of deep & subtle thought; whether pro or con his wone self! But I do see there's a lot in your discovery of the sterility of children & also in the Not-yet-appearance-in-real-life of that Mysterious LOVE we read about in the New Testament & w<sup>h</sup> is certainly I do fully admit a very different thing from Amor or Eros or caritas—this mysterious thing called "agape" that no one seems to have even attempted except Frances, when an icicle-thorn presses against her throat, —to properly define or explain—such is the mystery of invention of *words* by the human race—the magic of words *feeling the presence beforehand of things to come!* The prefix "ag" or "aga" does appear in Homer in the word "aganaphrosune" where it's used by the ghost of Odysseus' mother for that "kindness" she had from him, the lack of which, when he went away 20 years & she thought he was dead, made her pine away & die! and this longer prefix "agana" is the word used for the *gentle* shafts of death when people die easy—men by the "aganish" dart of Apollo—women by the



---

# H. W. Fawkner

## The Mineralogical Microplatonism of John Cowper Powys

---

Apart from being a writer, John Cowper Powys is a teacher. He published various handbooks—*The Art of Happiness, In Defence of Sensuality, A Philosophy of Solitude, Mortal Strife*—that teach us how to cope with difficulties and frustrations, indeed with life itself. These teachings seem at first to belong to the common traditions of Western civilization, to be refashionings, in fact, of Christian patience, Stoic indifference, and Platonic sublimation. I want to suggest, however, that John Cowper's teachings deviate from this traditional array of existential strategies. I will also want to suggest that Powys's fiction, insofar as it is coloured by his ideology, does not negotiate the traditional stuff of Western thought but an altogether new, original, and unique planetary outlook. My immediate point of literary focus will be the relationship between Powys's novel *Maiden Castle* and Platonism.<sup>1</sup>

The Powys hero is constantly troubled by the impingement of events or beings that threaten his peace of mind and his life-illusion. Dud No-man is no exception. In Dorchester he gets involved in conversations and dilemmas that provide him with little satisfaction and much irritation. In the concluding parts of the novel he is at the end of his tether: "They're just selfish—that's what they are! I'd like to get out of this place" (324).

The hero, however, has at his disposal a totally reliable method of escape. This trick of his guarantees the attainment of serenity. "A singular peculiarity of the human mind is the power it has of hypnotizing itself, or, perhaps one should say, of anaesthetizing itself, at moments of great stress by the contemplation of small and insignificant

details amid the whims and caprices of the inanimate" (447).

All humans perform such minute acts of dreamy escape; but John Cowper Powys is not interested in such moments as accidents of the stream of consciousness, but as points of departure for an entire way of life—a cult, a religion, a system, and a defiance. This way of life replaces Christian patience, Stoic indifference, and Platonic sublimation. The programme of finding relief in pure sensations is a literary vision, an aesthetics, and an ethical theory for mankind.

I say that the programme is rigorous, because the precise nature of its rationale is carried out during a very long period of time with an unwavering, passionate, and dogged sense of commitment. The exact tricks of mind that are clinically described in the 20s and 30s are also the exact tricks of mind promoted in the 40s and 50s. The utilization of such exactness for literary purposes remains equally constant.

We need to distinguish, of course, between the programme and its phenomenology: the programme, as programme, is rigorous; but the sensations produced by the programme are the very reverse of rigorous:

'What you've got in you,' our friend thought, addressing the cuckoo-flowers, 'is an upwelling of Nature's shyest, purest secret. Old Wye would say you were the Platonic idea of the magic of flowers, cold and transparent, veined with the mystic greenness of some spiritual dimension just beyond the normal plant world!'

'Those mother-of-pearl sea-shells,' Dud went on thinking, 'that Wizz and I found when we went to Weymouth—they're the things that come nearest to these cuckoo-

flowers. And yet I don't know! No shell, however pearl-like, can equal the livingness of these fragile plants. And there's something else too. What they have about them is something that you lose after the first glance, something that belongs to things seen through mist, through rain, through water, something that belongs to things seen *in* water, seen in mirrors, seen in crystals, seen in polished silver! Generation after generation of old men and young children in Dorchester must have felt what I felt a minute ago. It's gone now, because I've begun counting their petals and examining their little fretted leaves. What was it that I felt, all of a sudden, just now? It was a glimpse of a reality just beyond our reality, a reality that I've been longing for all my days. (187)

The glimpse of the transcendent is sudden, furtive, translucent, radiant, and tantalizing. I call the visionary world of this type of experience the world of microplatonism.

A microplatonism is not Platonism. It is not a world of ideas, but a world of sensations. It is not an eternalist world of permanence, but a world of liquid evanescence. It is not a world beyond our reality, but a world "just beyond our reality" (187). The difference between "beyond" and "just beyond" is the crucial difference between the Platonic and the microplatonism. The microplatonism is in fact *so* close to "our reality" that it is part and parcel of it. The beyond is *in* the not-beyond; the Platonic is *in* the not-Platonic; the thing's soul is *in* the thing. This inherence of the spiritual aura of the thing *in* the thing causes it to glow with a mystic sheen. This shimmer of the appearance of the thing adds itself to the thing as a glossy zero-addition. This zero-addition is conveyed to the reader and to the eye through images of a polish that is transparent—a metallic pearling of surface that adds a depth, not to the thing, *but to the surface*. This soulfulness of the *surface* is irradiated through images of shells, pearl, mother-of-pearl, crystals, polished silver, water, etc. Water is nothing but the pearling of its surface, for even the depth of water is surface, even the surface of water is polished depth. Prophetic intimations of the advent of the epoch of

Aquarius give an occult outline to this apprehension of the order of things (187).

Objects apprehended in the world of microplatonism are no longer objects—they are minerals. Subjects in the dimension of microplatonism are no longer subjects—they are ghosts.

A ghost in the mineralogical sense is not a supernatural being: a ghost in the mineralogical sense is *almost* a supernatural being. There is an infinite distance between supernatural and almost supernatural, just as there is an infinite distance between Platonism and microplatonism, beyond and just beyond. The mineral is not a supernatural object; it is almost a supernatural object.

Because the subject, in mineralogical microplatonism, is no longer a subject, you cannot identify the world of the Powys novel in terms of so-called stream-of-consciousness fiction. In order to have a stream of consciousness, you must have subjectivity. But as I have suggested, the programme of John Cowper's entire literary and cosmic vision is a side-stepping of the subject.

But if the side-stepping of subjectivity disallows the stream of consciousness, it also disallows narcissism. Those who understand John Cowper or his writings in terms of narcissism are victims of a gross insensitivity of mind, aesthetic as well as psychological. The entire programme of mineralogical microplatonism is designed to annihilate not only the ailments of subjectivity but subjectivity as such. It is precisely this disappearance of the subject that permits the Powys hero to exhibit his soul without being an exhibitionist, to catalogue his sensations without being a narcissist. To accuse the Powys hero of being a narcissist is like accusing a television screen of being a narcissist. In *Maiden Castle*, indeed, Powys points out that the "mental habit" of the Powys hero is an "anti-narcissism" because the transparency of the mind is absolutely "fluid and mediumistic" (191). If the mind is a transparent medium, consciousness becomes Buddhistic

rather than Platonic—it becomes a thing that is not even attached to its own body: “When a bell is struck with a mallet,” says the Buddhist, “the sound quite naturally comes out of itself.”<sup>2</sup> Dud No-man is a pure medium in this way:

It had indeed become such an intimate habit of his life-consciousness to live entirely in the sensations he got *through* his body that he had come to lose all definite awareness *of* his body. His cropped head, his hooked nose, his loose mouth, his bony figure, had come to be so non-existent to him that it always felt as if his real self—the sensitized soul behind all this—flowed through what it enjoyed of its vision of life as if it were disembodied. This mental habit of his, this almost morbid anti-narcissism [was] much more fluid and mediumistic than anyone confronted by his formidable and ever grim exterior could possibly have guessed. (191)

As most of us realize, this is a portrait, ultimately, of John Cowper himself. The writer can translate himself into an endless amount of fictional heroes precisely because his mediumistic life-sensation makes him transparent in the first place. John Cowper is transparent; but so are Dud No-man, Wolf Solent, and Owen Glendower. Anti-narcissism is the construction of a non-Platonic disembodiment of the ego. Anti-narcissism is *the narcissism of the void*. It is the void making love to itself, transparency looking at transparency, the medium mediating the medium. This is ultimate sensuality. Not a man savouring sensations, but sensations savouring sensations—the medium enjoying the pleasure of its own pearlescent purity.

This anti-narcissism is also an origin of the feeling or fact of impotency. For if, as we have just heard, the male has “come to lose all definite awareness *of*” his body, Anglo-Saxon sex of the Victorian and post-Victorian kind is going to be a major nervous trial—Victorian and post-Victorian sex being, precisely, a sudden sexual awareness *of* the body rather than an affirmation of sexual joy *through* the body.

The mediumistic, anti-narcissist programme of thinning out the ego and the body into a void is directly related to the science of phenomenology—what *Maiden Castle* calls “the art of reduction to essentials” (94). Through woman, and especially through her sexual demands, the hero comes to question his anti-narcissism—to ask himself, indeed, if it might be its opposite: “I’m alone, and I’m mad in my egoism” (94). But the theme of narcissism in *Maiden Castle* is ultimately there to clarify its opposite, just as the equally important theme of Platonism is there to clarify its mutation: microplatonism. Microplatonism at first looks very much like Platonism, just as anti-narcissism looks very much like narcissism.

\*           \*           \*

There is a heightening of consciousness in mineralogical microplatonism, but the heightening is often only slight. Thinking has left reality, but only in the minutest possible way, only according to the most fragile nuance of mineralogical illumination. We are still in touch with normal reality; things are still there in their former places, former colours, and former functions. The “romantic sensationalism” of the Powys hero is therefore perfectly compatible with his conception of himself as a “sardonic realist” (72).

As Vladimir Jankélévitch has suggested, the thing that gives an entity the lustre of its special charm is no ingredient in it. What makes those cuckoo-flowers in *Maiden Castle* so magic is no property in or of them. But it is not the Platonic idea of them that makes them enchanting either. Instead there is emitted from these flowers a microscopic suggestion of a beyond, a totally unreal aureole of fragile, mineralogical secrecy—as if some gnostic force is actually there in that delicate mystic greenness of the upwelling of small plants. They have the spiritual presence of a mist—of a thing gloriously compounded of the infinite atomization of its voidness of self-reality.

Jankélévitch refers to this effect as the minuscule work of “the immense almost-nothing” [*l’immense presque-rien*].<sup>3</sup> It is this almost-nothing that makes us prefer one piece of music to another: that makes us see this work of art as the ultimate thing, and this other, almost-identical work of art as commonplace, or only beautiful.

Patricia Fumerton has recently shown that this minuscule aspect of aesthetic enchantment was fashioned by Elizabethan culture into an entire science of artful minerals. In such aesthetic culture, minute medallions, minute poems, minute portraits, and minute gifts create an economy of enchantment produced by littleness, liminality, and solidity.<sup>4</sup> This liminal sense is important in the Powys world too, which is why it is microplatonic rather than Platonic. A Platonic world would create a sensation of two quite different realms: the realm of the real and the realm of the ideal. But John Cowper wants at all costs to eschew this bipartite apprehension of the world. Enchantment must be liminal, not dual; mystical, not theological; natural, not supernatural. At the end of the novel, the hero thus tells Nance that the art of living “at a somewhat different level from most people” is not to live “at a higher level, but a *different one*” (482).

John Cowper’s experience of microplatonic sensations, then, is liminal and minute. It is not Marcel Proust’s microplatonic retrieval of the intangibility of the objects and essence of lost time, for the mineral is not an object embedded in the subjectivity of the past or in the past of a subjectivity. The mineral may be fluid, but it is not itself part of a fluid process. It is part of a space, a land, a landscape, a mineralogy, a new world.

\* \* \*

Mineralogy is thus very much like love—or like being in love. Being in love is not a process; it is not a flowing of subjectivity through the fluidity of time, but an enchantment in which time solidifies into magic; a

spell in the course of which the objects of subjectivity crystallize into unimaginable mineralogies.

Speaking in the Tibetan tradition of mineralogical Buddhism, Chögyam Trungpa thus tells us that the microplatonic “flash” of Buddhism is like an image-sensation of love:

When we are in love with someone, because our whole attitude is open toward that person somehow or other we get a sudden flash of that person—not as a name or as a concept of what the person looks like; those are afterthoughts. We get an abstract flash of our lover as *that*. A flash of *that* comes into our mind first. Then we might ponder on that flash, elaborate on it, enjoy our daydreams about it. But all this happens afterward. The flash is primal.<sup>5</sup>

When No-man contemplates those fragile, microplatonic cuckoo-flowers, he is given precisely this “almost magical sensation of thatness.”<sup>6</sup> As soon as the cuckoo-flowers become an idea—become, in other words Platonic—the spell is gone, intangibility vanishes. What the rigorous programme of Cowperism thus aims for is not the hypothetical retention of the mineralogical flash, no prolongation of the ecstatic pearlescence of the plants—for that is impossible. Instead the rigorous system is—like Buddhism—a system designed to constantly keep man in the horizon of the recurring possibility of the sighting of such flashes of mineralogical microplatonism (“thatness”). The programme is a programme of readiness, a state of manipulative preparation and shrewd alertness. Truth does not come from the sky;<sup>7</sup> it comes from the mineral. The mineral, in its turn, is neither nature nor reality. It is what Chögyam Trungpa calls the appearance of thatness as “dot” or “spot”. This spot is not positive, psychological, theological, sociological, historical, aesthetic, ethical, or strictly factual in any empirical sense. It is not an originary reference point, but what Chögyam Trungpa calls a “primordial non-reference point”.<sup>8</sup> It is not a unit of consciousness, not a unit

of reality. It is neither real, nor ideal; neither active nor passive. It is not metaphysical, because it appears as a sensation in “nonthought” rather than as an idea in thought. It is not a unit of sense perception, for it is not an aspect of the intuitive stream-of-consciousness.

The Buddhist speaks of “the letting go of all techniques, and handing oneself over to the natural functioning of the Not-I.”<sup>9</sup> Since this mediumistic transparency is devastatingly obvious in John Cowper’s writing, I think analysis is forced when the academies try to fit John Cowper into the ready-made pigeon-hole of some supposedly distinguished paradigm of the so-called theory of the novel. The difference between the transparent not-writer and the self-present Western artist is as big as the difference between a cloud and a cathedral.

The act of understanding the mineralogy of cuckoo-flowers is, in the words of Chögyam Trungpa,

to realize that the literal truth, the symbolic truth, and the absolute truth are actually one thing, that they take place on one dot, one spot. One experiences reality as the great symbol which stands for itself.

[This] bliss is . . . the experience of tremendous spaciousness, freedom from imprisonment, which come from seeing through the duality of existence and realizing that the essence of truth, the essence of space, is available on this very spot.<sup>10</sup>

Those cuckoo-flowers in *Maiden Castle*—or in Dorchester, if you like—do not stand

there as things that are simply real. This is how the empirical botanist would see them. Nor do they stand there as Platonic things—as Carl von Linné would see them in his botanical idealism. Instead Powys’s cuckoo-flowers stand there as minute symbols of themselves.

This is what a mineral is. It is an irruption in space that enables us to see that the ecstasy of space (its beyondness) is shining inside it—as light shines in mother-of-pearl, in water, in polished silver, and in the hues of a small petal. In such quiet opalescence, nature makes a symbol of its own sacredness. But such a mineralogical showing of microplatonism “thatness” can in *Maiden Castle* also take place in a spot of wallpaper looking like an elongated cross (2) or in a tiny spot of blood-coloured paint (44). That too is “thatness”; that too is sacredness—a strange convergence, not of mind and object, but of the thing and its transcendent immanence.

This convergence is never metaphysical. It is mineralogical. It is completely unknown to the uninitiated. But they may stumble across it, feeling a momentary, passing, inexplicable happiness, perhaps even an ecstasy. As the Tibetan theorist will tell you, it is “not a question of oneness but rather a question of zeroness.”<sup>11</sup> It is this zeroness, ultimately, that causes Powys to give his hero the name of “No-man”. It is this zeroness, ultimately, that permits us to enter the anti-narcissism of the writer rather than his narcissism.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Maiden Castle* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990). All references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *A Treatise on the Ceasing of Notions* (London: Zen Centre, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien: La manière et l’occasion* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 34. This work is an excellent introduction to mineralogy, understood

according to the quasi-materialist tenets of new historicism.

<sup>5</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *The Heart of the Buddha* (Boston and London: Shambala, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> *The Ceasing of Notions*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Trungpa, *The Heart of the Buddha*, pp. 168-69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

---

# John W. Dowding

---

## John Cowper Powys's 'SIX PRECIOUS WORDS'

---

This is the key of the kingdom.  
In that kingdom there is a city.  
In that city there is a town.  
In that town there is a street.  
In that street there is a lane.  
In that lane there is a yard.  
In that yard there is a house.  
In that house there is a room.  
In that room there is a bed.  
On that bed there is a basket.  
In that basket there are some flowers—  
for YOU!

(chanted to me by twin girls)

In his letters to Nicholas and Adelaide Phillpotts Ross<sup>1</sup> John Cowper Powys uses capital letters<sup>2</sup> to emphasise particular words, as was his habit with many correspondents. Very often they show the urgency or stress of speech: 'HATE' (often, e.g. 24) 'DAMN! I MUST get to work' (14) 'THINK' (78) are typical examples; or they are used to declare the contents of a message or notice: 'SHOOT ON SIGHT' (27) 'SACRED TELEGRAMS' (of Isadora Duncan's, 59). But there is also a constant theme of linguistic analysis and aesthetic appreciation whereby Powys (and presumably Ross) examine the visual, aural, psychic and symbolic nature of our responses to words themselves. On 16 June 1940, for instance, Powys writes:

I think you are gathering great powers out of the soil of Scotland. And what a brave word SCOTLAND is! England [sic] looks like the sea and the chalk cliffs and hearts of oak under whimsy-wanton humours, leather jerkins, quarter-staves and long-bows; but SCOTLAND looks like horses and armour and the red-blood-deep reflections in tarns, and that white, infinitely sad and strange look—itsself like white armour of water long, long after the sun has gone down and there's

no light left in the sky, only light among the reeds, that strange white light of armour, armour on the ground, armour on tombs, armour on ghosts! (26)

As well as responding to the visual shape, the aural quality, and the historical and symbolic aura of words, these letters show Powys's deep awareness of the etymology of words in Welsh ("Shall I tell you of a real Brythonic word before the Brythons?" the above letter continues), in English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Old French and other languages. The letters cover a period (1939-1963) when Powys was writing about Rabelais, Joyce and Dostoievsky, as well as producing his own historical-mythological novel *Porius* and other works.

After Xmas 1942, Powys requested that Ross help him use a Book Token for a Guinea on 'an ORIGINAL FRENCH RABELAIS' (47) and in January 1943 he thanked him, commenting on "the soft papery parchment, so pliable like willow-wood. And the illustrations—for I loathe all others I've seen of Rabelais: Doré's I hate especially—are perfect too, and the print so good for my two light-houses, my green-grey fortune-owners, winners and spinners" (48). Thus a complex tactile, aesthetic, etymological, symbolic, psychic and spiritual awareness of words as things-in-themselves becomes evident through the correspondence, as it does throughout John Cowper Powys's literary oeuvre. It was encouraged by Nicholas and Adelaide Phillpotts Ross, who sent him a "top-notch book on words"<sup>3</sup> in September/October 1942, and in this letter thanking them, Powys even claims that the book did "start off" Phyllis Playter and himself: "as you might help a person by pushing a boat with that person and his



LA THALAMEGE

Cover of J. C. Powys's *Rabelais*, tr. Catherine Lieutenant (1993)

wench on board, sitting so damned pretty and cosy and snug and smug, with the oars across the row-locks and doing nothing about it and indeed there is now't to do if you don't get up off your seat and use an oar as a punting pole!" (45)

Powys had a craftsman's sense of the author as word-smith engaged with the elements of universal and timeless truth through language. In October 1949 he examines "this lovely word SOPHROSYNE", "roughly it must mean the condition of being wise" (100) and at 5.40pm on 1 January 1950, looking at the sun at the end of its "short arch" through the fingers of his left hand, he "let pass", "like the telling beads, those berries, those dew-drops, those orbs, those rondures of blood, of water, of tears, of sweat, of male semen, of female semen, of glue, of gall, of honey, of sap, of wine or

ICHOR which the Gods call by an unknown name but which mortals call LIFE'S QUIDDITY" (101). This meditation shows how many senses and thought-processes Powys brought to bear on the choice of a word.

In "the little Review or whatever it could be called" which Powys wrote for Ross in May 1948, of Evelyn Hatch's translation of *Un Jardin vers l'Est* by Mme Claude Silve,<sup>4</sup> Powys makes clear that the philosophy which comes through to him from that text is very close to his own. "It is a philosophy whose pervading spirit is animism: I will not say 'the idea that' —I prefer to say the REALITY that the earth, the sky, the air, the water, the sun, the moon, and all the multitude of stars, with every pond that is dug, every fire that is lit, are full of LIVING THINGS, full of entities, presences, consciousness and spiritual souls; and that these 'souls', souls of animals, birds, fishes, reptiles, minerals, are like the souls of very young children, angelically and wickedly and pitifully innocent" (89). Nineteen years later Powys returned to this theme of the closeness his philosophy and feeling for language brought him to children: "babies and toddlers,—Oh I could tell you such stories about them and me—alone understand my attitude to life just as I understand theirs!" (137)

In his *Autobiography*, as in many of his works, John Cowper Powys acknowledges this closeness to the magical vision of childhood as one of the wellsprings of his strength as a writer:

the great point is that the most thrilling moments of happiness with a child are secret and magical and come from a level of reality which is completely different from the level of reality of grown-up people. Children's 'games', strictly speaking, are not games at all. They are the child's inmost reality! They are the child's life-illusion. They turn back to them with a sigh of relief from the impertinent intrusive activities of grown-up people.<sup>5</sup>

Powys has sometimes been accused of naivety, even childishness in his work, but the power he gained from his honest and

deeply-interpreted memories from his own early years give his writing a child-like magic power, rather than any childish weakness:

Many aspects of children's days are silly enough; but how often the whole course of our subsequent history becomes an attempt to regain this sorcery, this power of finding the infinitely great in the materially small!<sup>6</sup>

It was this concatenation of John Cowper Powys's philosophy and feeling for words, with his closeness to the feelings of very young children, which persuaded me, as a teacher in a modern First School, to try out one of his most evocative suggestions. In February 1955, Powys exclaims to Ross: "What a word is the word KEY, ha?" and it inspires him to rhyme in an extempore, and initially child-like way:

A key to you a key to me  
A key to everything we see,  
But where O where was lost the key  
To what's beyond Mortality? (126)

Two years later, in March 1957, this continuing thread of thought leads Powys to one of the most faithful expositions of his feeling about words. After speaking of another work for children (and for adults), Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, which Ross had on his bookshelves between a copy of Powys's narrative poem, *Lucifer*, and a book by or about the Swiss artist, Paul Klee, John Cowper says, responding directly to the look and sound of a new word:

of this latter I know nought but the name, but I like the name because it makes me think of KEY which to me is one of the six most exciting of words: what would be your SIX PRECIOUS WORDS? Let me think if can name MY six: Key, silver, grass, away, kite and wave. (I hesitate a little between grass and earth. What a beautiful sound EARTH is and so is AIR.) (136-137)

I sincerely hope that all readers of this article will use this invitation to a wonderfully

liberating experience for themselves, trying not to be too influenced by Powys's own choices. I have found that the procedure is very appealing and not at all threatening to our psychological defence-systems, so long as we do not regard it as a once-and-for-all decision, like taking out a mortgage! Tomorrow, or in half an hour, or immediately, you may choose a different six—Powys was quite open to this child-like flexibility with number and choice, in considering EARTH and AIR on top of his first six words. It is very interesting that rhymes, assonances, analogies, opposites and many other connections often arise within the six. The process is obviously akin to story-telling and versifying, but it also bears a resemblance to the kind of word-association games popular amongst children, and to procedures used by psychologists to identify sub-conscious themes in thought.

However, I was not prepared for the amazing responses drawn from quite young children (six and seven years old) when I introduced them to Powys's magical question. The children in my class, their parents, and the school staff had just gone through the gruelling procedure of central-government dictated Standardised Assessment Testing: Powys's seemed a much more respectful, friendly, and comforting task. The children rose to it in an incredibly individual and creative way; their choices, in contrast to those in the Department for Education's tests, were consciously differentiated; each child wanted six words of her or his own, yet they were happy to discuss and compare their choices aloud. There was none of the usual worry for rubbers either, confidence was increased by the pleasure of the task itself, and any help asked for was freely given. Each child's choices seemed to spring from deep wells of individual identity, from memories, affections, hopes and fears. I cannot do better than to quote from a recent book *Assessing Children's Learning*<sup>6</sup> by a colleague, Mary Jane Drummond, who describes the experiment in one of her chapters:

a Norfolk First School teacher . . . introduced his class of six and seven year olds to the idea, who were fired with enthusiasm. Their lists of words were astonishing: not just for their diversity, but for the way in which they could be read as minute portraits of their authors' present understanding of the power and enchantment of words.

For example, Lindsay, who loves animals, who is as small as a mouse and influential as an elephant, wrote:

Cat, dog, mouse, bird, elephant, butterfly.

Giles, who reads *The Beano* in a literary way and has interesting hobbies, wrote:

Hallowe'en, incandescent, rats, dogs, barn, Beano, (and insisted on adding 'catapult').

Cara is quite unpredictable, full of ideas and little dramas:

May, Thursday, Book, impossible, magpie, if.

Alice is beautiful and precious, one of those children who seems to be full of light. She wrote:

china, crystal, drop, light, shine, blossom.

Tom is the class wit; his paper reads:

Friday May 34th

The cat sat on the mat.

As for Matthew! Whatever can one say about Matthew?

impact, impulse, interface, Shanghai, ice, cold.

His teacher challenged him to write a sentence containing these six words: undaunted Matthew wrote the sentence shown in the figure.

Matthew's six favourite words.

My six favourite words  
The impact of the impulse  
in the interface is the  
opposite of ice cold.

The teacher treasured these pieces of writing and at the end of the summer term, included them in the portfolio of work that the children took with them into the next class. The receiving teacher was delighted with these miniatures, and the insights they offered into the children's thinking. The canvas was small, certainly, but the pictures of learning were glowing, intense, individual.<sup>7</sup>

Since the appearance of Mary Jane Drummond's book last year, other teachers

and educationalists have adopted John Cowper Powys's invitation, and all have been surprised at the variety and revelatory quality of their own and children's choices. Many choose words for their sound quality rather than their meaning; thus Jessica (aged 8): Hey! Oy! T-shirt, menice [sic] NO; and Paul (8): Piccadilly, chick, licked happy, plant, can't.

A boy of ten chose words with subtle consonantal blends: Turf, crisp, trickle pugnacious, crinkle, and mug.

Teresa (14) liked these for their "weirdness" and their "wooing sounds": Skew whiff, smudge, protein, wiggle, wriggle and wobble.

Clare (19) also chose for sound quality Rainbow, feather, blancmange, splodge pillow, bluff, (and also 'chimney').

Some children choose for homeliness thus Keith (aged 9): tranns [trains], poam [poems], desk, safe, mum, dad; and another Clare (aged 4), with a homing-in perspective, dictated: World, parties birthday, Barbies, bang, and smash!

Many seem to choose from a well-known diet, such as Julia (aged 7): netball, ice cream, football, horses, foals, deers whereas others go for exotics: tiger elephant, spider-monkey, car, people traffic-lights (dictated by a boy of 5).

But always there are firm intentions, and criteria for the selections of words are complex and can be quite magical in their effects: choclayt, food, mad, sweet, sleep October (Laura, aged 9).

The connections, or conjunction of dissimilars, seem to hint at wonderful word spinning abilities latent in every child, but which we perhaps stifle with too prescriptive teaching methods: ball, pillow, wildest slimy, Dad, Mum, smell (or perhaps 'small' (James, aged 8)).

John Cowper Powys's deep feeling for the sound, the visual qualities, and the magical symbolism of the words used in common speech and literature seems to convey itself very powerfully to children when they are presented with his simple procedure. Words have this tangible but

also talismanic presence for children just as they did for John Cowper Powys. He was right to associate this treasure-trove feeling he had when selecting and exploring words with the way in which children get hold of words, repeat them, play with them, and make them keys to their games, or a password for a group. It is common to hear children, when they go out into the playground, latch on to a word from classroom discussion, or a new name they have heard, shouting it repeatedly as they run in the wind, exercising their limbs and lungs, collecting like-minded friends, and giving their group an identity. Giles (whose SIX PRECIOUS WORDS were given above) astonished me one day by running around the playground from group to group, shouting one of those great resonant names heard on the foreign

news, seeking an echoing response: "Sir Aboubaka Tafawa Balewa!" Perhaps I was the only one who entered that particular cult that day!

This joy and relish in language is perhaps something easily lost in these times of acronyms and government-led doublespeak. As a means of gaining real insight into children's preoccupations, their realms of discourse, and their feelings for the concrete and symbolic presence of words, John Cowper Powys's little exercise knocks a great deal of official educational directives into a cocked hat, and opens vistas into all sorts of literary landscapes which children and their teachers, along with readers of Powys, can explore together, the veritable KEY to the kingdom.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. Uphill, ed., John Cowper Powys, *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, selected by Nicholas and Adelaide Phillpotts Ross, (London: Village Press, 1971). Page numbers in parentheses in my text refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Capitals, rather than underlinings, if we are to trust Ross and Uphill. But see Introduction, pp. x-xi, and also facsimile text facing page 64, compared with printed text pp. 98-99.

<sup>3</sup>Ivor Brown *A Word in Your Ear*, (London: Bodley Head, 1942).

<sup>4</sup>Claude Silve (pseud.), *Eastward in Eden* (London:

Gollancz, 1942. Reprinted by Greenwood Press, London, 1978, with *Just Another Word*, in one volume).

<sup>5</sup>*Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1934), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Jane Drummond, *Assessing Childrens' Learning* (London: David Fulton Publishers, 1993), pp. 40-42.

Thanks to Fred Sedgwick, and children of schools in Norfolk and Suffolk, especially Acle V.C. Primary and Heigham Park First School, Norwich.

### Thomas Hardy—Man of Wessex: a Video

Script and commentary by Gerald Pitman; Filming and Production by Ray Cooper and Jonathan Eckardt.

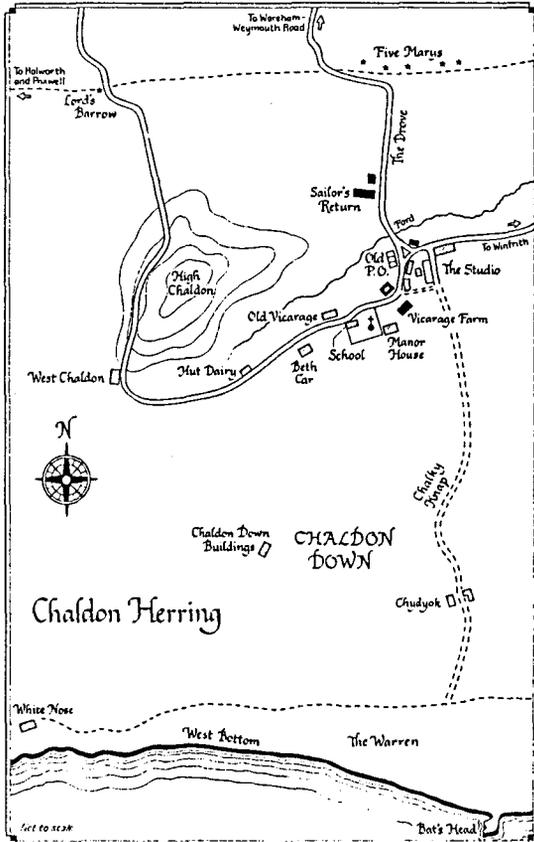
This is a delightful video which explores the Wessex countryside through the seasons with close reference to the scenes of Hardy's poems (especially) and novels. Thereby, of course, it also presents many locations of J. C. Powys's Wessex novels and it will certainly be enjoyed by his readers.

(It is obtainable from Wessex Video Services, The Steps, Bridge St., Sturminster Newton, DT10 1BZ. Tel: 0258 472167.)



# Judith Stinton

## Chaldon Herring: a Place Apart



In 1901, Theodore Powys gave up his Suffolk farm and went to live at Studland in Dorset. Here, he rented a cottage opposite the old post office (which was housed at that time in a stable block). Studland had the advantage for Theodore of being conveniently close to the sea. He had never (except for his birthplace at Shirley in Derbyshire) been more than a good walking distance from the sea, and seemed to want that proximity. Unfortunately, at Studland, he was not alone in this preference. As Sir Frederick Treves noted in a book published in 1906:

Sad to say, Studland is by no means an unsophisticated village. Any simplicity it may present is rather on the surface. A crowd of charabancs and wagonettes will crowd its lanes in the summer, a thousand initials will be found carved upon its sandstone cape, while an ample refreshment room permits the tourist to have tea 'at separate tables' on the beach. The red brick epidemic, moreover, has seized upon it mercilessly.<sup>1</sup>

Steamers plying the coast were perhaps the last straw. Studland, during the three years that Theodore lived there, was visibly becoming a resort.

So, in 1904, Theodore Powys moved to Chaldon Herring (or East Chaldon as it is otherwise known) to a cottage, coincidentally again in the vicinity of the post office.

Theodore's younger brother Llewelyn, a witness to these developments, has provided a flamboyantly-affectionate account of how Theodore came to settle in Chaldon. When Studland, he wrote, "became overrun with summer tourists, he took his stick from his chimney-corner and set out to find some unpretentious village, where he would be altogether free from molestation. He walked on and on, over the downs. He went into Corfe, into Kimmeridge, into Arishmell Bay, until eventually he arrived at Winfrith, and from there debouched to East Chaldon, which very possibly is the most hidden village in Dorset."<sup>2</sup>

Llewelyn was fond of dramatic exaggeration, but on this occasion he was telling no more than the truth. Dorset has a generous share of secret places, but Chaldon is still surprisingly hidden. It is easy enough to conceal a hamlet in such a hill-ridden county, but a village of three hundred souls is surely another matter. . .

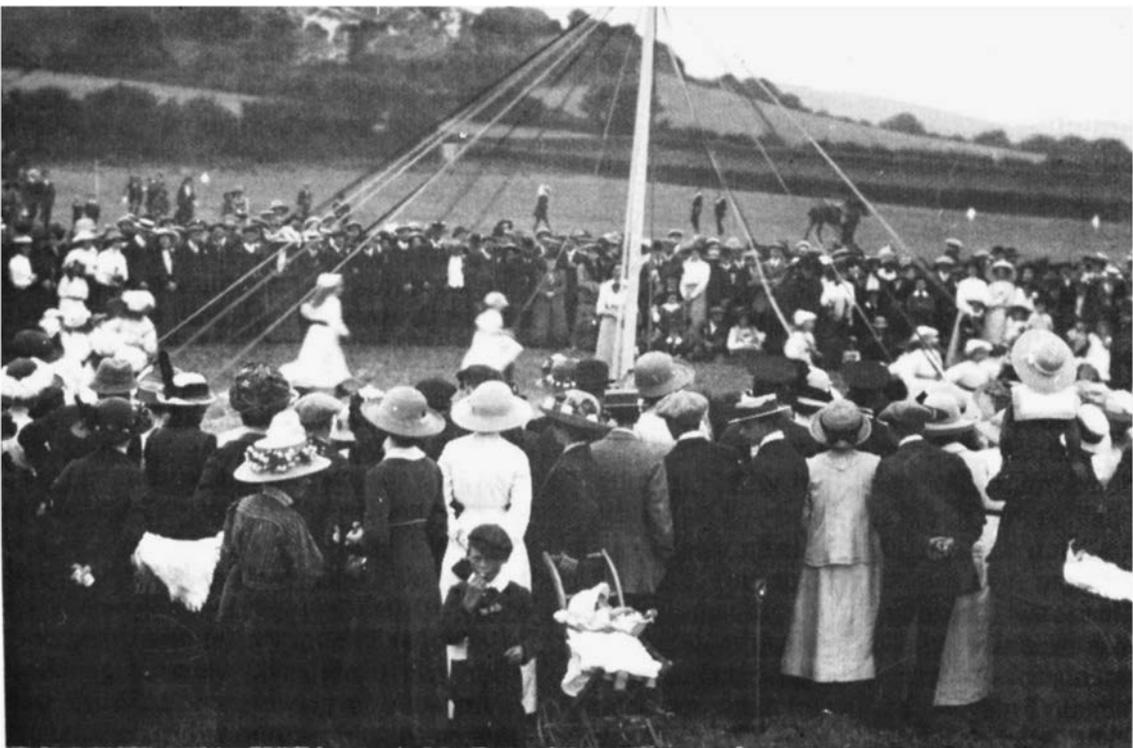
The approach to the village has changed

very little, once the visitor has left behind the hyperactive Dorchester-Wareham Road. A narrow lane leads up over the shoulder of downland which forms the village's northern limit (and its parish boundary), a limit signposted by a line of barrōws called the Five Marys. Then, and only then, is Chaldon Herring exposed way below, to vanish again on closer approach. Another line of hills to the south of the village blocks any view of the sea.

From East Chaldon, the road loops, apparently aimlessly, round to the farm settlement of West Chaldon (though long ago it went on to Holworth) and back again to the main road, about half a mile from where it left it. It was a dead-end road, which was further barred by seven gates between the two Chaldons in the days when Theodore Powys lived there and daily took his walks.

Not only is Chaldon physically—topographically—an enclosed village, it was also, and to some extent still is, a *closed* village (that is to say, one which served as a

part of a larger estate). Owned post-Domesday by the Herring family who gave the place its name, it passed through the hands of several landowners until in 1789 it became part of the Weld Estate—an outlying part of a great estate centred on Lulworth Castle. In the most recently-available Census, that of 1891, almost all the employed males gave their occupation as farm labourer, working directly or indirectly for the estate. In many ways, Chaldon was typical of such a village, with few shops, one tiny alehouse, and a small, almost static population (actually in decline at the time when Theodore arrived there). Such a set-up led to an ostensible—perhaps ironic—acceptance of the *status quo*—and to a deep, unflinching fatalism which can still be found amongst the older members of the village, a fatalism unaffected either by religion (church attendances were poor, except at Christmas and Harvest Festival) or by the radical socialism which took temporary root in the nineteen-thirties, nurtured by the writers Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine



Postcard: East Chaldon, c.1903.

Ackland, who were residents at that time.

Such were the qualities which must have appealed to Theodore, when he half-chanced on Chaldon in 1904. He would not have chosen the village for its picture-postcard charms. When he moved to Beth Car in 1908 after his marriage to a local girl, Violet Rosalie Dodds, he was inhabiting what David Garnett called “the only eyesore in the lovely collection of long low white-washed cottages buried in deep thatch which formed the village.”<sup>3</sup>

Anyway, beauty in Chaldon was barely skin-deep. In 1935, Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote in a letter to one of her visitors, “Those pretty cottages you saw at West Chaldon have just had a foot of filthy water in them, because the farmer didn’t clear out that stinking ditch.”<sup>4</sup> Acerbic and concerned enough, but Sylvia’s treatment of the village people in her letters tends to be jokey, as if they were characters out of some rustic saga. In 1925, for instance, she wrote to Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus about the marriage of Bob and Florrie Legg, “I have been staying with Theo. Chaldon Herring was out of its wits over the marriage of the post-mistress’s son and the roadman’s

daughter, a large smooth creature like a bedroom ewer. Such a to-do as never was, the lane strewn with confetti and dead primroses, and a case of whisky, three casks of beer and forty pounds of butter consumed at the wedding feast!”<sup>5</sup> She adopted much the same tone (a less successful imitation of his own) in her portrait of Theodore, which ran for about seventy-six pages before her subject made his dislike of it plain and the project was abandoned.\*

Yet Sylvia knew the villagers better than this, just as did Theodore himself. Harsh village life shaped some strong personalities, especially women, like Grannie Moxon, tough and shrewd, whom Valentine Ackland regarded almost as a mother, or Mary Jane Legg, the sharp-eyed, long-standing Chaldon post-mistress. Sylvia’s feelings about Chaldon and its inhabitants were more finely expressed in her poems (some of which adopt Theodore’s tone and his characters much more successfully than does her prose, by mirroring Theodore’s

\*Separate extracts from this appear in *A Chatto & Windus Miscellany 1928*, pp. 55-62, *The Powys Review*, No. 5 (1979), pp. 13-23, and *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, ed. B. Humfrey (London: Peter Owen, 1980), pp. 127-136.



Postcard: West Chaldon.

own reflections: taking them one stage further). In “Mrs Summerbee Grown Old”, the rector’s wife from *The Left Leg* rejoices that the branches of the churchyard elm had been lopped. Freed from its overshadowing, the rector and his wife “Can walk beneath/ Untroubled by/ The fear of death.”<sup>6</sup> In her old age, Mrs Summerbee can still comfort herself with little consolations. Grasping Farmer Maw (Farmer Mew of *The Left Leg*) makes an end to his life after taking care to leave his farm in a well-ordered state. His thrifty widow, with earthy practicality, stuffs his coat with straw and uses it to scare away the rooks.

Sylvia speaks more directly of Chaldon in a tender poem entitled “Dorset Endearments”.

‘My Doll, my Trumpery!’  
O sleepy child lulled on the jogging knee  
With eyes brilliant as gems new-fetched from  
the gloom  
Of the mine you stare about the cottage room.

On the ceiling badged with smoke the flies crawl.  
The flowery paper sags from the damp wall.  
The wind bellows in the dark chimney throat,  
the rain  
Darkens the dish-clout stuffed in the broken  
pane.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.  
Time drips like water from the alarm clock  
That jars your Daddy from bed for the milking  
at five,  
And will do the same for you if you live and  
thrive.

And before the narrow fire on the wide hearth  
She sings to her child, her jewel new-fetched  
from the dark  
Of the womb, and dandles him on a weary knee:  
‘My Doll, my Trumpery!’<sup>7</sup>

This unsentimental portrait of mother and child sets them both, sharply-lit—the child with “eyes brilliant as gems”, a “jewel new-fetched from the dark”—against a dim, damp cottage interior, but one crammed with detail. Such a room must have been typical of a “pretty cottage” of 1930s rural

England, and it was a state of affairs which appalled both Sylvia and her friend Valentine Ackland.

Valentine Ackland’s polemic, *Country Conditions* (1936), which was written at Rat’s Barn in the valley between East and West Chaldon, argues that small villages had become more isolated, with the labourers living under worse conditions than they had been in the 1840s: the “Hungry Forties”. She records, matter-of-factly, the bloated plaster, the tiny, almost windowless, crowded rooms, the sooty chimneys, the dripping thatch—the realities of the poverty which looked so picturesque to those motoring through on their way to somewhere else.

Ackland notes, too, the “dull and hopeless work” undertaken by most of the men, for 48 hours in winter and 53½ hours in summer, while their wives strove vainly to clean floors which were crawling with damp, or quieten children or cook inadequate and stodgy food. The case studies she cites are those of Chaldon families. The names have been changed, making identification difficult, but the country conditions are all too recognisable.

It is often forgotten that the population of villages—and Chaldon was no exception, as Valentine Ackland demonstrates—was a shifting one. If a man fell out of work, he and his family had to uproot themselves to find new employment. Theodore elaborates on this regular shift, at the opening of his novel, *Innocent Birds*.

A country village has a way now and again of clearing out all its inhabitants in one rush, as though it were grown tired of that particular combination of human destinies, and shakes itself free of them as a tree might do of unwelcome leaves.<sup>8</sup>

To the estate, too, the labourer was insignificant and disposable. In *Country Conditions*, Ackland reproduces a letter she had received from a Dorset woman concerning housing: “I would like to tell you”, the woman wrote, “that although the farmer takes 3s per week from his men for the cottage, the

same cottages are only counted as out-buildings and so the farmer pays no more for the cottages to the landlord than he does for a pigsty or cowshed".<sup>9</sup> (And he probably kept the latter in better repair, in the same way that farm buildings received electricity before most of the houses.)

As far as is discernible in its modern history, Chaldon was always a poor place. The vicar of 1843, James Cree, describes his little parish as "one of the poorest, and hitherto most neglected in the kingdom". Even allowing for some clerical hyperbole (the letter was an appeal for money) there must have been some truth in this statement.

Theodore Powys, who lived in the village for over 35 years, had as much opportunity as anyone to observe this poverty, yet he did not—except in quiet and kindly private ways—attempt to alleviate it. Instead he identifies himself with it. *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, his confessional of 1918, provides a rationale for his choice of Chaldon as a home. In this work he describes himself as a priest, whose "proper place . . . is in a cave, a narrow cave where he lies with his back against a sharp rock."<sup>10</sup> (If he is a priest,

then he must surely be a hedge-priest: one tending to the poor, and living among them.) His wants, he says, are simple: "a bowl of porridge with salt, bread crisped by the fire, tea, the virgin herb of the sun, and brown sugar, the sweetness of our Mother's breast".<sup>11</sup> He would like, he remarks, to live without hurting anyone on the earth.

Set in his country fastness, Theodore shuns industrial life, the life of the "vile working devils" who would even go so far as to "pour petrol" into his hermit soul. For him, real work is the kind he sees passing him daily: "I see an old cart trundling along filled with turnips, going about a mile an hour; I see a rabbit-catcher half-hidden in a rabbit hole, quietly wondering where to set his next snare, and turning at last his slow steps to the inn to exchange a rabbit for beer."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his writing Theodore continues to respect, to celebrate, the agricultural way of life, the various and undervalued skills it required, whilst even by 1918 being disillusioned by the country people.



Once I said, 'I love poor men.' And I believed that they were true, noble, simple, and kind, and of all men, I loved most the men in the fields; I thought that the gentle life they led in the country gave their minds the colour of deep grey waters. I thought that poor men dwelt so near the mud that they were always clean; I thought that only spoiled children were cruel and ugly, and that all the poetry of the world came from the cottage.<sup>13</sup>

Theodore was, I believe, partly attracted to Chaldon because of its poverty, its holy poverty—which he espoused, and then found to be too difficult to sustain: too bitter, too restrictive.

More rewarding always was the penniless grandeur of the landscape, the "great fields, filled, every one of them, with stones, everlasting stones; not smooth shining pebbles—sharp zigzag flints. And the chalk of the hills in places broke through the thin covering of grass, like the skin of a beggar showing through her ragged clothing."<sup>14</sup>

Here, in this desperately beautiful place, Theodore would take his daily walks "going by the inn to the Hill"—the hill of High Chaldon, which is almost on the doorstep of Beth Car. From the top of High Chaldon the walker can see for miles. To the north, beyond the Five Marys and the main road, in Theodore's time the heath began, a densely private expanse, with few paths. This is a part of Hardy's Egdon Heath, now eroded and tamed (though never as huge and as wild as Hardy would have it). "Heath-croppers" (wild ponies) wandered across the land, and here and there squatters had made their own small-scale enclosures, erecting a house or two amongst heather and bracken: random stopping places.

In Powys's novel, *Mr Tasker's Gods*, Henry Turnbull climbs the Five Marys' hill and looks down on the village of Shelton (one of the many fictional names that Theodore gave to Chaldon). Shelton stretches out before him like a medieval map:

Towards the north were spread out acres of green woods, the remnants of an ancient

forest much loved by King John, who came down there, no doubt, to relieve himself of his spleen against the barons. . . . Occupying all the middle of the valley was the wild expanse of heathland. The mid region was entirely dominated by the heath, that only allowed a few green fields and fewer ash trees to poach upon its domain. In three or four places the wilderness, with its grey fingers, even crept up and touched the main road to the town.<sup>15</sup>

In *Father Adam*, an early work of Theodore's (only recently published) Gabriel Adam's mentor, good Mr Martin, takes up residence in a caravan on the heath. Mr Martin believes in the possibilities of love, and on the heath at the end of the story, he is instrumental in uniting Father Adam with Eva Owlsworth, the keeper's daughter. The heath can be a place of happiness, where "The March sun danced and flamed and shone boldly. . . the rabbits romped beside their burrows; the first bee of the spring hummed by."<sup>16</sup>

In *Mr Tasker's Gods*, a grimmer, disturbingly savage novel, the heath is once again shelter to one of Powys's saintly characters, Molly Neville, former missionary and now an outcast because she assisted her mortally sick brother to die more easily. Her cottage on Merley Heath stands alone in the wide-open spaces, a shining light on dark nights. Alice, a servant-girl from the vicarage, takes refuge here after being assaulted on the heath. On the heath, too, Henry Turnbull is kicked to death.

Extreme examples, these, from an extreme novel, which is one of Powys's blackest. The heath is more commonly the place where his most light-hearted works are set—in the village of Tadnol, to be found, like its namesake, in the middle of the heath. Tadnol, Theodore observes in a later work, *Kindness in a Corner*, "is a village where the heath is the hill. And although the heath is but a little above the village, yet to those who lived at Tadnol it often seemed to be in the clouds."<sup>17</sup>

Distance lends enchantment perhaps, to the heath when seen from High Chaldon or

the Five Marys. Turning his back on this inner world, the onlooker is facing what Theodore describes in *Mr Tasker* as “the outer world... the way to the sea”, a direction in which “the scene was grander and stretched with more varied colour”.<sup>18</sup>

From no high point inland, however, can the sea be seen. Climb out of the valley seaward, past Chydyok farmhouse or Rat’s Barn, and not until nearly the last moment—when you reach the high cliffs—can you see the sea. For (and I’m quoting myself here), although Chaldon Herring is set in a valley no more than two miles from the sea, it has the feel of an inland village, watertight, and contained by a ring of rounded hills. Here the coast is a distant country. Only the emerald grass suggests its presence, soaked so often in sea mist that it glows blue-green as burning driftwood.

Only the grass suggests the sea, except sometimes in the stillness of the night when the wind is coming from the south. Then the sound of the sea can be plainly heard, as if it were just a stone’s throw distant. In this valley, sea-awareness can sting like salt. Sylvia Townsend Warner felt it one evening on approaching High Chaldon.<sup>19</sup>

It is just here, walking up from the village... in a November dusk, and perhaps carrying the afternoon milk, that I am apt to remember the sea, little more than a mile away, but hidden behind the tall downs. And it will suddenly become very real to me: I shall hear the slow speech of the waves locked in a winter calm; a reserved, whispering voice; as though I had come to the edge of the cliff. I shall feel the authentic stab of surprise, almost of terror, with which one realises, as though one were perceiving the true stature of an enemy, how far up the sky is the line of the sea.<sup>20</sup>

As I have said, Theodore seemed to want the sea’s proximity. Francis Wingrave, hero of Theodore’s largely-autobiographical early novel, *Cottage Shadows*, chose to live in a village “within easy reach of the sea” (and one which was also “far too plain and simple to attract any common visitor”).<sup>21</sup>

Theodore was physically brave. He wasn’t afraid of the sea’s moods; once he waded along the beach between Studland’s Big Sea and Little Sea on a pitch-black stormy night. He was a strong swimmer.

Nevertheless, he stayed down in the valley, between High Chaldon and Chaldon Down. His brother Llewelyn—and it perhaps says something about the difference in their characters—braved the elements by living up on the cliffs, in one of the former coastguard cottages at the White Nose.

“White Nose” as Thomas Hardy insisted it was called (not Nore or Nothe), because it resembled the Duke of Wellington’s nose, is where the chalk cliff ends. Beyond lie the volcanic-grey, “burning-cliffs” of Holworth; the nettled and hummocked fields which mark the lost village of Ringstead; and the hill-figure of George III, riding his horse high above Weymouth Bay—different worlds, and places which Llewelyn also knew intimately—but the pull, the tidal pull, was always back to that bounding line of cliffs, chalk-white above Chaldon.

Llewelyn had been familiar with the White Nose cliffs from his youth, those “proud, immaculate promontories” as he called them in *Skin for Skin*, which he so rejoiced to see again, “my eyes blind with tears, home at last after my exile in Africa” (in 1919).<sup>22</sup>

He had walked there from Weymouth as a boy of 15, whilst recovering from whooping-cough. This was in April 1899, a time when the old signal house was still standing: “a row of firm, one-storied wooden houses shining with pitch and white paint”. He and his brother William had picnicked at the look-out on top of the White Nose, on one of childhood’s perfect days (lingeringly recalled in *A Baker’s Dozen*).

The view from the great cliff was different from anything we knew about. The sea was blue, the sky was blue. The waves were white, the cliffs were white—white, blue—blue, white; and the air we breathed of a salty, crystal quality, softened with fragrance of

downland flowers. Far up above the sprouting cornland behind us the larks trilled with tireless ecstasy.<sup>23</sup>

Llewelyn knew this breath-taking highpoint from every angle, describing in an essay called "The Sea! The Sea! The Sea!" the excitement of glimpsing it on the landward side from a train window. When the train emerges from the Upwey tunnel on the way to Weymouth, "the free waves under the White Nose cliffs first appear in a miniature seascape setting, across the rushy dykes of Lodmoor."<sup>24</sup>

Llewelyn moved into the coastguard cottage in 1925 on his return from America. The cottage—No 5—was found for him by his sister Gertrude, at his own request. Meanwhile, he and his wife Alyse Gregory stayed briefly with Theodore and Violet in Chaldon, going up to view the cottage "which looked very well". Cosmopolitan Alyse must surely have had some misgivings about moving to so wild and lonely a place, but if so she did not reveal them, even to her diary. Llewelyn's health had been deteriorating and the White Nose was as suitable a spot as any for the open-air cure then fashionable for the tuberculosis from which he suffered.

Even today, this section of the cliffs—though a part of the Dorset coastal path—is inaccessible to cars. It is still possible to walk along the cliff-top, in evenings or out-of-season, along the routes once used by smugglers, gypsies and fishermen, without encountering a soul. In those days it was deserted enough for Llewelyn and Alyse to sleep out at nights in Llewelyn's revolving shelter, or for Llewelyn to use an upturned fishing boat "soundly leaded against the weather, keel and sides" for his study.<sup>25</sup>

Llewelyn had the ability, the facility, sometimes magical, sometimes hacklike, to produce an essay on anything that he saw around him: on the ravens which still nested there, or the cliff foxes tunnelling their dens into the chalk; on an old clock-weight dug up from his garden. He notices at Christmas the gypsies selling mistletoe and the farm boys with holly in their caps. Most of all,

though, he absorbs the landscape—Middle Bottom, to which he once perilously climbed, down to its "virginal beach, shaped like a horned moon"<sup>26</sup> or Bats Head, where, as he observed: "on afternoons of the wildest weather a man may rest . . . in tranquility, some peculiarity in the structure of the cliff causing the rushing gales to cast themselves straight up from its sheer walls, so that the crest of the headland remains in an absolute calm."<sup>27</sup>

At White Nose, and later at Chydyok, midway between the cliffs and Chaldon, Llewelyn continued to explore and write minutely about this landscape. His desire to possess it was like that of a lover. Theodore knew it equally well, but differently. In photographs his face is often as set and rigid as a blind man's, and indeed he could find his way in total darkness, almost by feel alone. Sylvia Townsend Warner recalled one November afternoon when, out walking, the pair were overtaken by early nightfall. Without hesitation, Theodore found their way home. He knew, Sylvia noted, "every gap in a hedge, every breach in a wall, every sagging strand in a barbed wire fence".<sup>28</sup>

This walk had been over towards Ringstead, about as far as Theodore ever cared to travel. Llewelyn had travelled to far parts of the world, to such places as Kenya, America and Israel. Yet Dorset was ever the dearest. In an uncollected essay called "Green Corners of Dorset" Llewelyn wrote, ". . . when I am in company I dislike, or when I am sick, or when I am unduly agitated it has been my custom to open wide the mind's cage door and let my thoughts escape to certain spots in Dorset, 'green corners' of my native county, that I know and love".<sup>29</sup>

Golden-haired, Llewelyn had enjoyed a sunny childhood, perhaps (despite the death of his sister Eleanor) unusually so. The four-year-old child is remembered as jumping up and down and shouting "Happy me! Happy me!" Mentally, emotionally, he remained rooted to those places which had formed a background to it—that is, Montacute, and the country around Weymouth. Childhood memories were

sharpened too by intimations of mortality, as he constantly struggled with ill-health.

In the conclusion to the same essay, Llewelyn observes: "When a man is harried, hustled, and hard driven by fate he will get small relief by bringing back to his mind the clamour and clutter of modernity. It is to the quiet pastoral places of his childhood, of his youth, that his thoughts had best be turned, dwelling in memory upon the long green lanes he knows. . ."

In his dreams, he writes, he returns as a *revenant* to the White Nose.

I see the proud promontory in February, when the ravens are beginning to 'theek' their dizzy nests; when the lambs are bleating at their mothers' udders; when celandines are showing like golden guineas in ditches; and daisies take the place of hailstones on every grass-warm bank. I see it at midsummer, when male stone-chats perch on prickly sun-yellow gorse bushes; when rabbits, big and little, scuttle for shelter in all directions; when stoats are as fat on land as the mackerel are fat in the sea; and when at night the moon irradiates each salty samphire plant balanced high up on the sea cliffs, on the lofty lonely faces of those chalk cliffs that, motionless as the sheeted sails of phantom ships, spell-bound, becalmed, flatly front the midnight waves. I see it again at the time of the autumn storms when rushing gales silence the moaning of the Shambles' lightship, when weed and bent, by constant friction of their waving stalks, stand loosely in tiny round holes of mud. . . I see it when foxes prowl in the twilight against the skyline, when Weymouth Bay, evening after evening, is lashed to fury. . .<sup>29</sup>

A place for all seasons, the White Nose is surely the place that Llewelyn loved the best.

Two writers—brothers—in the same landscape, approaching it in two very different ways. Almost all of Theodore's stories were written in Chaldon, and it was the inspiration for Llewelyn's finest work. Here, their sister Katie produced her poems, which lovingly detail sea, cliff and great field with an intensity born of her deep

feelings for this secret country. Much of Sylvia Townsend Warner's most evocative verse was written here—as indeed was David Garnett's novel, *The Sailor's Return*, a bitter little tale, set at the inn of the same name.

Valentine Ackland once said of Chaldon that it was "an extraordinary place: extraordinary things happened there and extraordinary people were to be found there; and to everyone according to his capacity it gave according to his need".<sup>30</sup>

Writers (Valentine Ackland herself included) evidently found Chaldon a source which they could copiously tap. Artists, too, were much affected by the landscape, including the painter Gertrude Powys and the sculptors Stephen Tomlin and Elizabeth Muntz. Chaldon is a place of stones—of flints scattered in the unrewarding fields, of chalk cliffs and shingled beaches. Recently, artists from the Common Ground project have been working there, and their sculptures may be discovered along the cliff path.

Chaldon is too, a place of bones. It is a very ancient landscape, with many prehistoric remains often dating from the Bronze Age period. These range from the Five Marys group north of the village, most famous of the burial mounds which star the parish, to the Round Pound (near Chydyok), a prehistoric cattle enclosure, to a Bronze Age village by the sea in Chainey Bottom, the outline of which can still be traced.

The past is ever-present in Chaldon. The barrows, and the slanting, dancing churchyard stones forever remind the passerby that life is short. Death is in the air, even when the larks are singing sky-high over the downs, and the hills are studded with lambs.

Yet death, here, may be easy, easeful, and is often so in Theodore's writings. The village of his finest novel, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, an allegorical tale of the Last Judgement, that village called Folly Down, bears a strong resemblance to Chaldon. Mr Weston, the wine-merchant offers a choice of two good wines, the dark and the light, the one "as strong as death", the other "as sweet as love". Only one person in Folly

Down selects the dark wine and he is the rector, the Reverend Nicholas Grobe. Since the death of his wife, Alice, he has no desire to go on living, and he calmly accepts Mr Weston's offer.

Mr Grobe poured out a glass of wine. He drank contentedly and seemed to fall into a deep sleep. But soon he sighed happily, and his breathing stopped.<sup>31</sup>

No one could have been more aware than Theodore of the more macabre aspects of dying, yet still for him only death could bring the peace which he so desired. For him, churchyard and barrow could offer a daily reassurance.

Be it accidental or deliberate (and it was probably a mixture of both), Theodore's choice of Chaldon as his home was a fortunate one. He and the village were well-matched. Indeed, to many of the visitors, Theodore and Chaldon were one and the same thing. In his letters, his brother John refers to Theodore as "East Chaldon", and for his family and friends the "white melancholy head at East Chaldon" as Llewelyn once called it, and which the sculptor Elizabeth Muntz later recreated in local stone, remained a monolithic symbol for the place.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sir Frederick Treves, *Highways and Byways in Dorset* (London: Macmillan, 1906), pp. 192-193.

<sup>2</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Skin for Skin*, ((1926) London: Village Press, 1975), pp. 91-92.

<sup>3</sup>David Garnett, *The Familiar Faces* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>8</sup>T. F. Powys, *Innocent Birds* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Valentine Ackland, *Country Conditions* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936), p. 40.

<sup>10</sup>T. F. Powys, *Soliloquies of a Hermit* ((1918) London: Village Press, 1975), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>T. F. Powys, *Mr Tasker's Gods* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), pp. 43-44.

<sup>16</sup>T. F. Powys, *Father Adam* (Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1990), p. 95.

<sup>17</sup>T. F. Powys, *Kindness in a Corner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), p. 65.

<sup>18</sup>T. F. Powys, *Mr Tasker's Gods*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup>Judith Stinton, *Chaldon Herring* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1988), p. 56.

<sup>20</sup>Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Theodore Powys and some friends at East Chaldon', *The Powys Review*, 5, 1979.

<sup>21</sup>T. F. Powys, *Cottage Shadows*, unpublished ms in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas.

<sup>22</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Skin for Skin*, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *A Baker's Dozen* ((1941) London: Village Press, 1974), pp. 41-42.

<sup>24</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Dorset Essays* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1935), p. 51.

<sup>25</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *A Baker's Dozen*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Skin for Skin*, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Dorset Essays*, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup>Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Theodore Powys and some Friends at East Chaldon'.

<sup>29</sup>Llewelyn Powys, 'Green Corners of Dorset' (unpublished).

<sup>30</sup>Valentine Ackland, *For Sylvia* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), p. 106.

<sup>31</sup>T. F. Powys, *Mr Weston's Good Wine* ((1927) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 233.

---

# L. R. Leavis

## T. F. Powys in Perspective: The Significance of *Father Adam* [1919] and *The Market Bell* [1924]

---

As one becomes familiar with the writings of the farmer, artist and heretic T. F. Powys, the more it seems to me that one comes to appreciate certain fundamental and inescapable concerns of the creative condition. For Powys may in a sense be a limited—and with some minor material and certain pet themes, a repetitive—artist, but his peculiar strengths lie in aspects where I feel that contemporary literature (despite common claims) for the last fifty years has shown a manifest inadequacy. His expression is connected with that evasive realm of the religious symbolist and allegorist that resides between visionary fantasy and realism. In such an area, the reader must judge and respond to challengingly basic qualities; those of the force and integrity of moral vision, independence of personality, depth of thought, and above all, power of a *natural* language. A Murdochian or other theory about literature will never serve in place of the genuine article here. The deep naivety connected with an unforced profundity of a real visionary poet, where apparent simplicity is imbued with subtle meaning, are (as we know from contemporary writing) incredibly difficult to find in art. Powys (with his love of the Bible, Jeremy Taylor, and of Bunyan) is a throw-back to a lost past tradition, though he is preoccupied with an interest in death which is as present in Shostakovich's memoirs to Solomon Volkov<sup>1</sup> of 1979 as in Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* of 1651. I wish to suggest in this short article about Powys in the light of two new works, how much he really does have to communicate to our century (which is quickly becoming 'their century'). I don't want him to rest in the hands of the mediaevalists and allegorists, as an alternative to the trendy literary-

theory 'ludic games' or 'politics' merchants.

D. H. Lawrence, someone generally worth listening to on literature, in 1929 wrote of T. F. Powys:

I don't agree that T. F. Powys is a better writer than Hardy. His is a wooden Noah's Ark world, all Noah's Ark. But amusing as such.<sup>2</sup>

We know by now how Lawrence in his development was influenced by his reading of Hardy's novels, so that his preference (and not mine) is not surprising in this unavoidable comparison, both Hardy and Powys being Dorset rural writers. And there is a side of Powys (the only side Lawrence could recognize) that does support this view—but had he read the bitter attack on the First World War ambience affecting English society of *Mr Tasker's Gods* (1925) or *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927)? 'Minor' Powys is at best charming, and often (as with his *Father Adam*) not to be dissociated from something tougher and more profound; but especially on women and sexual relations, he can lapse into an irritating quaintness or coyness, going with a village setting that reads like a folksy mediaeval pastiche. The late 'light' comedy *Kindness in a Corner* (1930) is a version of this softer, cosy mode, where a character can observe quaintly as a bucolic Duke Vincentio, "Life is a little matter, 'tis but a moment in a hollow tree wi' a naughty maid, 'tis now come, 'tis now gone." Even parts of the much tougher and less mellow *Mr Weston* could be seen to betray this kind of mannerism. Powys's mode of characterisation and emphasis would not appeal to Lawrence; a Sue Bridehead would involve him where even a Mary Crowle, the Salvation Army preacher

split between evil and good of *Black Bryony*, probably would not. Finally, understandably from Lawrence's particular position, Powys did not have at least one distinct foot in the modern world.

On the other hand, it is perhaps ironical that Lawrence himself, given what Powys *did* achieve, in the first part of *The Rainbow* wrote in a poetic prose aimed at evoking the rhythms and traditions of a rural world before industrialism, such as the famous:

They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, the rain sucked up in the day-time, nakedness that comes under the wind in autumn, showing the birds' nests no longer worth hiding. Their life and interrelations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive when the crops were to be shorn away. The young corn waved and was silken, and the lustre slid along the limbs of the men who saw it. They took the udder of the cows, the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men...

This is a literary, deliberately self-conscious poetry, not to be found in Powys, communicating extrovertly rather like that twentieth century master of past idiom, T. S. Eliot, in his daring pastiche of G. M. Hopkins's style in section V of *Ash-Wednesday*. Lawrence in his novels generally aims at the *effect* of spontaneity; Powys is far more reticently spontaneous and natural in his kind of poetry and in the art of his allegory, though in his way he can be as shockingly original as Lawrence. It is highly interesting that a passage in "The Left Leg" (1923) is remarkably close to part of Lawrence's "The Fox".<sup>3</sup> And surely Tom Brangwen's later marriage speech about a married couple making one angel, probably derived from Lawrence's knowledge of Donne, is not far from the spirit of Powys (who also knew his Donne)! On the subject of evocation of a pre-

industrial landscape, *Innocent Birds*, not really one of Powys's best novels, having a soft (if charming) area as if the author had been thinking of Captain Cuttle and Walter Gay of *Dombey and Son*, typically is permeated with a vivid language conveying the sounds of a sea-side rural village. There is the movement of the weather and seasons that can be heard and felt during periods of quiet meditation, but eternally present. The rather imposed tragedy of the novel is in fact subsidiary to this arresting sense of place. The book shows one of the tragic victims, a lost son who is not given a prodigal's welcome by his father, attempting to return from the city of Derby to his native village of Madder. He voices Powys's own vision of a modern cosmopolitan rootlessness, and the threatened nature of this rural isolation that is being swept into the past:<sup>4</sup>

He had passed Madder, as he had passed all those other little villages, those blank, withered spaces, for ever moving upon endless tarred roads. Endless, too, was the whirl of motors upon those roads; endless the human beings, all moving somewhere, all moving; but all, perhaps, as he had come to do, passing by their homes.

After the human disaster, despite the hints in the novel of the irreversible carnage of the First World War, the last chapter concludes meanderingly with the quiet unfolding of the universe:

In the silence Time came by. The seasons came too: spring with its chill snowflakes, hail, and meek primroses; summer, with its haymaking, and harvest, that follows so soon after the hay is gathered; and then autumn, with Chick and Pim throwing muddy mangels into farm carts, when the Madder leaves are yellow and the rain drips; and last of all, winter came. The four seasons passed, coloured by all human passions and desires, and by good and evil.

We should be grateful that the Brynmill Press has undertaken to print Powys unpublished material and reprint his novels, including a projected new biography by

Professor J. Lawrence Mitchell. So far, the never-before-published *Father Adam* (1990) in a last version, and *The Market Bell* (1991) have appeared with thought-provoking notes,<sup>5</sup> and one must hope that there is enough support to continue the project. The second book is clearly a major work, containing much that is toughly and disturbingly impressive and powerfully original—I find it the most impressive of the novels that I have read. It puts his most famous *Mr Weston's Good Wine* in a fascinating perspective—and both works are the product of a personality that was not worldly, but had a shrewd understanding of worldliness. *Father Adam* is a lighter, far less ironical and shorter work, a charming allegory with depth.

*Father Adam* was originally written in 1919, and so comes after the early, blackly pessimistic *Mr Tasker's Gods*, the first version of which was written in 1916. In *Mr Tasker*, whose Gods were his pigs, the one good son of a sadistic vicar was kicked to death to popular approval. This new tale is essentially positive with only disturbing undertones about human nature, a semi-comic-allegory on the meaning of and the human practicality of an adherence to the Ten Commandments in the village of Honeyfield. Here Mr Robinson, the evil squire, unlike other sexually violent figures in Powys, is a negligible, readily-mocked figure. Already one has to notice Powys's characteristic concentration on Good and Evil, and the continual shifting internal balance in his various books between pessimism and human cruelty on one side, and a moral depiction of the force of goodness. The reader is always struck by Powys's observation throughout his work both of stupid egotism and of delicate sensitivity in human nature.

Several critics on Powys use the word 'idiosyncratic' of his art; and *Father Adam* certainly shows this. There is a scene where the innocent Father Adam, an apostle on a mission to regenerate the world by following a religious literalism, finds himself tempted by the worldly vanity of Mrs Parley (a

beautifully-chosen name),<sup>6</sup> who is a professional flirt:

As he looked, Farmer Parley's wife became transformed into a wonderful being. She became, in that moment, the maker, the creator, the divinity that holds all bodies and souls together.

The fleshy lines of her female body proclaimed the word. The graceful poise of her head asked the grand question. She unwittingly became, in the Father's eyes, the very flower of God, prepared and given into His servant's hands to be sweetly plucked.

All else in the world faded; Adam saw her alone.

In his thought she was become the first and last. She was Nature—creative Nature—waiting for the budding wand of new life. She was the eternal woman waiting for the eternal man.

Only for a moment did the Father look at her so.

Mrs Parley's smile killed the vision, and she became at once more earthly and more safe. She changed into something merely pleasing to the senses, something to watch in a friendly kind of way. Her high tone was fallen. She was become a mere bait of sweetness, with every line of her, rounded off and matured, in order to catch the men. From top to toe, from birth to death, she had become only that.

As a tiny child, her eyes and kisses had spoken so, and as she grew, she taught every gesture, every movement of her body, to utter seducing words.

Little did Farmer Parley's wife guess how far she had carried Father Adam, nor how near to earth she had let him down again, by means of her natural and commonplace smile. Alas for Mrs Parley! Adam could only see in her now a true picture of the fallen woman who decked and made ready her bed, in the Book of Proverbs.

It is as if Powys has drawn most unorthodoxly on the idiom of the Authorized Version of the English Bible, Bunyan, and Shakespeare ("She was Nature—creative Nature—waiting for the budding wand of new life") and combined it with a more novelistic detachment that derives from knowing Fielding's comic seduction scenes (not that

there is Fielding's tone or sophistication, which would be totally alien here), and the morality of Richardson. One feels that Blake would have appreciated this passage. All of this is no mere echoing of any sources, but Powys's own idiom and personality. Mrs Parley, of course without being aware of the fact, is seen to have a natural elemental feminine majesty that 'Adam' is susceptible to. On the other hand, her feminine airs and allurements (artifacts she has cultivated in exploiting her childish sexuality) have a different effect from her calculations. She (living on men's responses) is immediately aware that she has somehow failed, and the writer shows he is as much interested in her feelings as in Adam's. She wrestles with her pride, while her husband maliciously chuckles at her humiliation the other side of the door. Mrs Parley, Bunyanesquely described as living "in the sunshine of sensation", is treated in a morality that is not Bunyan's. And this study is rather more complex than the "fear of female sexuality" attributed to Powys by the critics.

This allegorical meditation is on a far higher level than the flowery asides of commonplaces that allegorists sometimes fall into, like Hawthorne in his uninspired moralising moments. Powys can lapse into this too:

This feeling of melancholy—and Solly even, though he felt it when he looked at his beans in flower, could never say why it was come to him—often grows up with beauty, blossoming when she blossoms, and gives out a deeper sadness than her loveliness can give joy. When we go into the courts of summer—courts of clear colour and fair flowers and sweet scents—a shadow will come by that is best greeted with our tears. This shadow is born with all beauty, and enters into us from the very loveliness that we are beholding, and makes us learn to welcome the rude grosser hours instead of the tantalising moments when beauty stays to sadden us. (*Innocent Birds*, chapter 14)

*Father Adam*, like the fables and the better short stories, escapes this because of its very

freshness and simplicity; poetry is everything in the success of the direct kind of allegory, and the book abounds in it. *The Market Bell* and *Mr Weston* offer a much more complex and ironic art.

*The Market Bell* was written in 1924, and comes after a sequence of novels that seem mainly pessimistic in emphasis, though all Powys novels have at least one good character. The harshness and evil of life colouring *Black Bryony* (written 1919-20, published 1923), the cruelty and suffering of *Mark Only* (written 1922, published 1924), about a man born for misery, the tragic intentions in *Innocent Birds* (written 1923, published 1926), and the human frailty of 'Hester Dominy' (published 1923), are only relieved by the light comic fantasy, *Mockery Gap* (written 1923, published 1925). Now with this new novel and with the following *Mr Weston*, Powys encompasses both the vision of cruelty, violence, and suffering in the world and one of a robust goodness, in balanced and controlled allegory.

Ian Robinson observes on the dust-cover of *The Market Bell*<sup>7</sup> that Powys's "originality is shown by the difficulty of describing the form of fiction he developed: not quite allegory, or parable, but a prose art meditative, religious, shocking, and with a rich vein of humour for which he is not always given credit." Charles Lock, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of the Brynmill publication, comments more bluntly that Powys's novels seldom possess a unified narrative structure, and succeed by virtue of each chapter's strength as a short story.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, chapters taken from especially *The Market Bell*<sup>9</sup> and *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, and also from some of the earlier books—even *Innocent Birds*—may read as short stories, but the more crucial ones, when understood in their true context, are found to be part of a cumulative art form. The dramatic symbolism depends on poetry, echoes and subtle modifications, and produces distinct and changing rhythms within one book. *Kindness in a Corner*, in contrast, is much more a series of short

stories placed together (though with a definite thesis on death), like the *Don Camillo* books.

Much already has been said on the topic of *The Market Bell* remaining so long unpublished. A moving letter (17 August 1926) of support to Powys by his friend Louis Wilkinson is quoted from in the 'Afterword' to the Brynmill edition.<sup>10</sup>

Do you really feel that you can safely go by David Garnett's advice not to publish *The Market Bell*? I did not know, before Bernie [O'Neill] told me, that you think that unpublished book your best—Very likely it is—for I can't believe that David Garnett is a better judge of your work than you are yourself. [...] considering his *Sailor's Return*, which showed in some ways very markedly the influence of your writing, I think he must be susceptible to just where are not the strongest & most distinctive qualities in you. My feeling is that he may be so bad a judge that your best work would seem to him your worst—I think I am a much better critic than this David Garnett.

However, by the end of 1927, the novel was to be laid aside. Reading it for the first time, one can understand the effect it may have had on Chatto and Windus and on influential friends such as Garnett and Sylvia Townsend Warner. The opening especially has such a dry authorial tone, with a wry lingering on the 'half Church and half trade' inherited qualities of the main character, that if I had been the publisher I would probably have stopped reading. As Professor Mitchell remarks: "Powys has done something remarkable and all but unique in his novels—he has given us a truly evil character who is also our protagonist!" This is Edward Glen, a name with very Bunyanesque allegorical associations, who is sadistic and callously selfish from an early age, and as a little boy encourages a hornet to sting his father in the mouth, which kills him. He continues on a precocious career of murder and theft, adding exploits of rape and seduction to his catalogue.

From Powys's painstaking delineation of his thoughts and feelings, we would call

Edward Glen a psychopath. Even after the evil uglinesses in *Mr Tasker's Gods*, *Mark Only*, or the late *Unclay* (1929, published 1931), and incidents of violence such as Farmer Mew's rape of Mary Gillet in "The Left Leg", the bareness of the first two chapters alone is very disconcerting. The novel goes on to exploit Glen's vicious propensities, Powys's tone with sinister irony elaborating on his pursuit of his cold-blooded plans and desires. Glen later finds a congenial accessory and accomplish in Mr Bromby, a worldly and hypocritical clergyman, who can call on the officious powers of the state. Mr Bromby, like Glen, compared with similar kinds of figures in earlier novels is more gleefully villainous and vitally evil; Mr Bugby of *Innocent Birds*, a sexual criminal who shares the same desire to discard an unwanted wife, and is killed by the Devil in the shape of a cormorant, is a relatively understated and unpointed depiction. And a third evil figure is Roger Pettis, a mere shadowy tool of Glen's, who rises in the Auctioneer's office, and is probably Powys's version of a Uriah Heep, which makes the writing completely different from Dickens—or anyone else:

Mr Pettis, out of the kindness of his heart, allowed this lady—a little funny thing, who looked with large frightened eyes at her husband when he was rude to her—to minister to his animal needs, and to control if she could, the gad-about habits of Nora the servant, who though sixty years old, considered that she could be merry upon the river bank as the best—and so to do her justice she could.

A new, poetic dimension to the novel comes in chapter three, "The Promised Land". We follow Glen on his travels to Stonebridge, sleeping out in the open on a summer-night. He feels mocked by the brightness of the glow worms, and turns to look at the stars:

The stars shone very clear and bright, with the luminous look of a summer night. He liked them better than the glow worms and he fancied that they were telling him to sleep soundly and to dream contentedly of women and love.

He slept, and was dimly aware when the morning came, that a cart had come by, stopped for a moment opposite him—he knew he heard voices—and then trundled on again.

He dreamt of that cart after it was gone and it became, as often as a sound can, incorporated in his dream.

The cart had jogged along uneasily, as if it were old and shaky. It creaked; and Glen dreamt that it fell into the river, where a girl who was thrown into the water changed into a fish whose tail was like a flower.

He was just conscious that the cart had passed him and that was all.

But someone must have been singing a song as the cart went by, for Glen had heard the singing though the cart must have turned the corner of the lane and was gone out of sight.

“And then I was married, married, married,” and again there came back to him though fainter—

“And then I had a baby, a baby, a baby.”

Glen stretched contentedly, he felt the grass by his side with his hand, it was already warmed by the morning sun.

He began to blink at the fair world as one who is just awakened.

When his eyes were quite opened he saw that something had fallen and was lying upon him. This was a flower, a few others lay near to him.

The flower is called “the purple Bell of Sodom”, and the girl who left it soon becomes one of his victims; but the poetry of the passage not only conveys the irony of parable. There is a power of vision, a dramatisation of the apprehension of the forces of evil and good in the progress of a life. Edward Glen exhibits a growing petulance in his impatience with the boredom of human affairs in the novel, but now he is not simply affected by the cynical self-interest of the majority of his waking moments. Here and in a few other places, he can be seen dabbling in a lazily mental manner with his corrupt view of the possibilities in the choice of living. We meet this too in the chapter (given a Johnsonian title by the editor) “Mr Glen kicks a stone”:

Glen put the stone down so that the last light from the moon might shine upon it. A kind of

detached mellowness in his nature allowed him to look at the stone with interest and appreciation. He went so far as to wonder, for he wished to draw back his excitement [about possible female victims] a little, whether or no the stone hadn't taken a happier road than he. Perhaps the stone had once been a man, perhaps it would one day live as one. One the whole he believed that it had come out of the human wood, grown tired of wayward experiences, and become a wise stone. The dim light of the shining moon shone upon it, and showed how cool and beautiful a simple stone could be.

Mr Glen kicked the stone.

This aspect seems not totally remote from Dickens's study of dissipation, as with Eugene Wrayburn of *Our Mutual Friend*, with the disillusioned James Harthouse of *Hard Times*, or the callousness of Henry Gowan of *Little Dorrit*.

Edward Glen leaps into activity in his practice of evil. One of the most chillingly grotesque scenes of ironic comedy in all Powys occurs during the celebration of a baby's birth in the Lark family. Glen uses the occasion for arousing by love-play the pristinely-naive seventeen-year-old deaf-mute girl Sophy Lark. He is merely passing the time while waiting for the chance to seduce her elder sister Betty, the girl in the cart who threw him the flower. The two other characters present, one being Mr Tapper, Sophy's closest friend in a moving friendship, respond in various disturbed but inadequate ways. But besides distaste at the voyeuristic circumstances, the reader also feels compassion:

Mr Glen's wiser nature, that is so often alas! but the cold wickedness of the pretty snake, now came to his aid. He lit a cigarette, watched the sobbing figure of Sophy hiding her head against Mr Tapper, and waited apparently amused by his surroundings, for Betty.

The detached attitude of Mr Tapper, who had but mended his boot while Mr Glen was taking his pleasure, was only equalled in reasonable compliance in affairs that must be, by Mr Cobby's behaviour now that the candle was lit. Mr Cobby couldn't believe

that any harm could be meant, by a gentleman who had tasted one of his bottles, to a young maiden already rendered deaf and silent by a touch of the Almighty's hand. And so he merely concluded, though he did not go so far as to utter his 'Mr Glen', and also address himself to Mr Tapper, that the agent was trying to promote the general happiness of the evening, by kissing, a little too clingingly perhaps, the lips throat neck and bosom of the silent Sophy.

When Glen threw Sophy down upon the stool Mr Cobby became, even himself, a little excited by such kindness, and spoke in a merry manner to Mr Tapper, seemingly forgetting what he was going to say to Mr Glen. [...]

'Mr Tapper, John Tapper,' he said, 'it's very pleasant to see a gentleman so happy with us Mr Tapper, it's extremely nice for young girls to be noticed Mr Tapper. Yes the sole of your boot does want cutting, cut deep Mr Tapper cut it right off.'

Glen shortly leaves with a compliant Betty, and later in the book, having made love to Sophy, heartlessly abandons her:

Sophy had knelt before him clasping his knee, so that she might prevail upon him to stay with her, wishing as any silent and simple creature would to keep him for ever. To do justice to Mr Glen, he had at first tried to unclasp her hands gently, explaining, though he knew she never heard what he said, that he must go now but he would return the very next day.

These appeals were wasted upon Miss Sophy, who heard them not, and who clung the more firmly.

Such a situation in an open field, where there might be, and indeed was, another person, was as Glen knew, one he must put an end to as soon as possible.

He struggled to free himself, but she wouldn't let him go.

Mr Glen struck Sophy with his fist.

He struck her face. She released him with a low moan, the first sound that she had made since she had moaned in Mr Tapper's cottage.

Mr Glen climbed the style without looking at her again, and was soon walking quickly upon the river bank. When he opened the sideboard cupboard at home he noticed that there was blood upon his hands.

Indeed he has blood on his hands, for immediately afterwards Sophy stabs herself to the heart with Tapper's knife. The unforced pathos and unadorned poetry in this scene combine with the irony to make a most unconventional drama, perhaps too unorthodox and terrible for the time.

However, the book is in fact a fable of good triumphing over a self-destructive evil, with a central image of the market bell ringing out. Powys counterbalances the starkness of the novel's realisation of evil with the moral strength in its face of the many good figures, such as Mr William Ellis, the retired auctioneer with his daughter Grace, Mr Bollam, the bailiff, Mr Crocker, the rate-collector, Mr Pardy, an eccentric grocer, Mr Cobby, who sells home-made ginger-beer, and Mr Tapper, a melancholy farm-labourer who has a delicate understanding of the deaf-mute Sophy. *The Market Bell* has also female characters who are outside Powys's pastoral mode of village-girls seeking sex from simple biological needs. The chief of these is Fanny Bond, a spirited and amoral lady's maid, who in a bald scene of violence is raped by Glen when following his growing criminal compulsion. Mr Ellis finally resumes his profession to perform a last dramatic auction, for his 'most distinguished client', God. A lot is finally knocked down to Mr Edward Glen, his son-in-law. It is one of 'Death and Hell'—nobody bidding earlier for 'a mansion in heaven', 'new wine' of 'everlasting life', or 'the peace that passeth understanding'. At the moment before the hammer comes down, Fanny Bond shoots Glen stone dead. Shortly after, Mr Bromby is run down in an extraordinarily vivid passage:

"An accident has happened," the chauffeur explained, "in the Market field."

"Drive there at once," said Dr Burrell.

The car started, not fast at first, for Mr Harper was a careful as well as expert driver.

The headlights glared. Suddenly they went out, the car raced. Something struck the bonnet, was carried upon it for a little way and then thrown heavily against the wall.

“What was it?” asked the Doctor, and stepped out.

Under the wall lay Mr Bromby.

After the destruction of evil, Powys ends with the stoic Christian death of Mr Cobby, a curiously resilient effect after the negative opening of the novel.

There are signs that *Mr Weston's Good Wine* was the climax of strands in Powys's previous work. We have had the strong idea of wine and death, and the life of a good ginger-beer merchant, in *The Market Bell*; and in *Innocent Birds* there was a chapter about a cross of doom in the sky. Now God comes to Folly Down as a wine-merchant. After the many savagely direct scenes too disturbing for his publishers in the previous novel, Powys goes on to suggest the evil potentiality in man, as well as the good, with sinners like Mrs Vosper and the Mumby brothers, in a less obviously abrasive manner. And in a less provocative way Powys still can depict a thoughtless peasant cruelty towards ordinary things.

Powys's art contrasts with many modern attempts to allegory-in-fantasy; the 'motto' of the story of the monastery bell which always rang for danger, which Powys once copied out from Donne's *Devotions for Emergent Occasions*, is behind the poetry of *The Market Bell*. At once one has to think of Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* with its characteristic blend of 'gothic' sensation and disconnected theory, and how unsatisfactory (unlike Powys) it is to take the novel as anything more than a lurid entertainment. Or one can compare Powys's inward religious treatment of good and evil with Golding's *Darkness Visible*, which to me seems aridly mental and often manufactured and pretentious. Or one can take often-praised works like Peter Carey's Booker Prize-winning 'historical fantasy' *Oscar and Lucinda*—and I care neither to talk about Ted Hughes, nor 'magic realism'. For the sheer ability to create depth and concentration out of a natural simplicity of idiom, we have to return to Powys.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Testimony* (London: 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Charles Lahr, 18 April 1929. Lahr was a London bookseller and publisher who championed and published Powys, and also helped to distribute *Lady Chatterley*.

<sup>3</sup> "... He felt himself to be a beggar before so much that was not his own. A mighty wish and desire rose in his heart; he longed to enter in and possess this good land.

In the far distance a fox barked. The wild beast's voice echoed in Mr Mew. In thought he followed the doings of this creature of the night. To the fox those silent barns would be dangerous. It would enter stealthily into the whiteness between those guarded shadows.

Farmer Mew found himself crouching as a fox before the door of a well-shut fowl-roost.

He would slink away and cross the wide rick-yard before the dogs were awake. Would he espy a strange chick, forgotten by the hen-wife and perched outside? He would tear it down and fly silently under the rick shadows." ("The Left Leg", 1923).

It seems possible that Powys had read the early 1918 magazine version of "The Fox". Lawrence also in his emphasis on the smallness and noisiness of Industrial modern England, is not dissimilar from Powys's sense (at times expressed in his work) of a frantic modern present overwhelming the past.

<sup>4</sup> Did Powys have Hawthorne's railroad travel chapter in *The House of the Seven Gables* at the back of his mind?

<sup>5</sup> By Ian Robinson, ed. (Denton, Norfolk: Brynmill Press).

<sup>6</sup> Not related to the song in *Comus*, "sweet queen of parley, daughter of the sphere".

<sup>7</sup> Much as he does in the one for *Father Adam*.

<sup>8</sup> See *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 September 1992, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ignoring questions of its final order and length.

<sup>10</sup> See page 281. "Manuscripts and Dating" by J. Lawrence Mitchell.

---

# Victor Golightly

---

## Gwyn Thomas's 'duality'

---

In a biographical essay on the Rhondda-born writer Gwyn Thomas, Belinda Humfrey has drawn attention to "the duality of Thomas's nature and his style". This duality and Gwyn Thomas's awareness of it are "indicated in a letter that he dictated in the hospital some two months before his death" in 1981:<sup>1</sup>

For an essay on myself I believe that the thing of great importance is a study of the elements that make up the ring of jet-black darkness around my central vision of life... I am mystified by the perverse miracle which has transformed a congenital gift for laughter into so many propositions of despair.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas's duality ran him through. This was shown interestingly in his political outlook, as far as that can be established from his writing. The writing is the proper place to look for his politics, in any case, because he believed that his fiction was the most suitable political work he could do. In his biography of Gwyn Thomas, *Laughter from the Dark* (1988), Michael Parnell has shown that Thomas carried no membership cards. His political *curriculum vitae* is brief: as a student at Oxford from 1931 to 1934 he sympathised with the Communist Party whilst Leon Trotsky was denouncing it as ultra-left. He was an admirer of the Left Book Club, a political project run by Victor Gollancz from 1936. He involved himself in practical, but non-military, support for Republican Spain. He canvassed for Labour in 1945, but he didn't care for the practice.

Gwyn Thomas preached human brotherhood in a discourse of vivid, virtuoso scorn. Here is a sample from *Sorrow For Thy Sons*, a novel written in 1936 but not published until 1986:

'You're too touchy. It's those people you knock about with. They make you like that. Bank clerks and managers and typists. Pansies and half-wits, the lot of them. I've often thought if there was some way of letting off a bomb under that tennis pavillion, it would be a damn good way of celebrating May Day.'<sup>3</sup>

He was always a man of the left, even if he drifted towards the centre as his life progressed, as Parnell has suggested: "In practice" he began "to mellow".<sup>4</sup> As a young man in the thirties his temper was as uncompromisingly radical as that of his Communist friends Lewis Jones<sup>5</sup> and Will Paynter. But his attachment to socialist ideas was always more disturbed and contradictory than theirs: "My bardic name was ambivalence", he admitted.<sup>6</sup> This political "ambivalence" is evident in the writing of his novel *All Things Betray Thee* (1949), even though Gwyn Thomas regarded this book in particular as a work of direct and successful revolutionary commitment. It was praised as such by Howard Fast: "Armed with great talent and a lyric intensity of language, he set for himself the problem of using these qualities in terms of a mature dialectical-materialist world-outlook'. *All Things Betray Thee* was "one of the best achievements in socialist realism that we know in modern Western literature".<sup>7</sup> Fast even cited Thomas's novel as an inspiration for his own novel *Spartacus* (1952), which became a well-known film. Fast's own status in those days was unambivalent: he was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1953; he later repudiated the Communist Party, and described the pressures that had been placed upon him to adhere to Stalinist orthodoxy,<sup>8</sup> but he

remained a socialist. Gwyn Thomas naturally welcomed Fast's praise; he also endorsed Fast's straightforward political interpretation of his wayward texts and intentions.

In 1948, the year in which "writing like a maniac"<sup>9</sup> he completed *All Things Betray Thee*, Gwyn Thomas was a Grammar School Master, still far from wealthy, and thirty-six. While that is no great age, he was no longer the same young man as the skint and underfed student at Oxford, or the skinny, unwell and unemployed author of his first novel *Sorrow For Thy Sons*, written for and rejected by Gollancz in 1936. In *A Few Selected Exits* (1968), he wrote that "after thirty, we are cooling fools. . . Beliefs that had attained a tentative firmness liquefy and are lost".<sup>10</sup> And again: "take a glittering working-class son of a left-wing militant parent, and after twenty years of high fulfilment he will be emulating and admiring all the people his father loathed".<sup>11</sup> The comic exaggeration, self-mockery and self-accusation are all, one should say, in character. Moreover, the significance has still to be examined of the choice of subject for the last novel penned by this putative socialist realist: *The Love Man* (1958) was based on the career of Don Juan.

The narrator of *All Things Betray Thee*, Alan Leigh, a.k.a. "the harpist", is explicitly wary of commitment. He is avowedly pre-industrial; as he puts it, "foundry work's a pen for the idiot and the lifesick. Some men put on a coat of dirt and servility too quickly for my taste. When a man accepts a master's hand or a rented hovel he's fit for the boneyard".<sup>12</sup> He flaunts his folksiness, "I'm a legate from the goats" (57). But that status is asserted with all the cultivated insolence of Thomas's own urban working-class youth: "'You're a bright lot of sods', I said" (36). There is rarely any distance between Thomas and his narrators; here the voice fits closely to that in the piece from *Sorrow For Thy Sons* quoted above: "Pansies and half-wits, the lot of them". Gwyn Thomas was a kind man, but his tongue was often this rough.

Alan is converted to the workers' cause

—but just for a moment. He has a vision on top of a mountain, and the scene is as contrived and portentous as that implies, with "all those boys marshalled like a million sons of Moses upon this Sinai" (101). This generalised rapture, by the way, is as specific a statement of Thomas's political vision as any he made:

In the hearts and minds of the folk who had been gathered in from their quiet fields to labour in other ways between those hills there had been a ripeness that I had not felt. But it was I in my tiny acre of pride and sufficiency who was coming to flower, very slowly, testing, suspecting, even hating the petals that would grow ruthlessly into the pattern of a more merciful, more exacting, more hazardous understanding (176).

If such language sounds more like that of Howard Fast than Gwyn Thomas, it should be held in mind that it was written as a transatlantic postal friendship between the two writers was in full swing.<sup>13</sup> Yet the nature of commitment is described in unusual terms, and these, what is more, propose a profound scepticism rather than revolutionary optimism: a "more exacting, more hazardous understanding". There in the thesis of the need to join the mass struggle is its antithesis, a call to a professional, searching and lonely obsession with the text, of "testing", "suspecting". That mode of understanding "grows ruthlessly", but, as bookish persons may recognize with gratitude, it is also "more merciful" than that of the activist.

The feeling in the passage, the sensation of conversion, is strong, with all of what the word conversion conveys of the Chapel being brought to bear by Thomas. The phrase "gathered in from their quiet fields" brings its associations of the harvest festival: the words "all is safely gathered in" arrive at his summons, tacitly annotating the text. Gwyn Thomas resented Welsh Nonconformity, and part of the motive force of this feeling was his sense that he and others like him were shaped intricately, and most intimately, by the Chapel and its culture,

language, values, and paradigms of popular organization. Even the soup-kitchen that the proud Thomas family found themselves obliged to attend in 1926, a founding memory of his political passions, was housed in the local Chapel. For all the contrivance of the setting, up there on the mountain, there is no synthesised emotion in Thomas's rendering of the narrator's conversion or of his vision of the struggle. One is convinced of its origins in experience.

Mass demonstrations were a feature of Thomas's Wales in the thirties. He recalled in 1964 that:

The world's brow was hot and we were out to fan it with banners. We suggested a possible definition of Wales as a non-stop protest with mutating consonants. Navels distended by resting banner-poles became one of the region's major stigmata. During the demonstrations against the Means Test and other bits of crass social legislation that put Britain in deep-freeze during the Baldwin period, we marched almost as a way of life.<sup>14</sup>

For Thomas there was a clear parallel with the first momentous stirrings of the labour movement which were the theme of his novel. The narrator sees from the mountain:

five great veins of redness pressed to the surface of the night. The legions were coming up from the south, men bearing torches in their ranks, making for the foot of the mountain on which I stood. I looked fascinated at the broad streams of brightness that came closer, clearer . . . [It was] as if all the lovely loving gentleness of man on earth had been gathered up into one symbol and presented to me for the first time . . . For two hours the men and torches poured in flickering waves on to the plateau. The district leaders, strong-voiced incisive men had their movements well prepared and the mass fell without hesitation or disorder into place.<sup>15</sup>

He refers cagily to the huge march against the Means Test in *A Welsh Eye* (1964); his wife Lyn, who married him in 1938, had been a Means Test clerk:

In 1935 some climax of disgust brought the entire valley population on to the streets. As one watched the huge streams of protesters pouring up and down the gulches on their way to Tonypany, one could have sworn the very blood of the place was on the boil.<sup>16</sup>

He recorded in 1971 that he "had served as committee-man and refulgent orator" in "the anti-means test campaign".<sup>17</sup> His first novel, *Sorrow For Thy Sons*, drew upon this experience.

While he didn't explain or chart the changes in Gwyn Thomas's thinking after 1935, Michael Parnell did hint in his biography at the basis of any such account, the duality of his nature to which Belinda Humfrey has referred. By the end of 1949, the year in which *All Things Betray Thee* was published:

Gwyn felt under great stress, a good deal of it perhaps attributable to an internal dichotomy which can be perceived only with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>18</sup>

Internally was being waged . . . [a] battle . . . between his politically left-wing disposition and his developing artistry.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that Thomas's writing turned increasingly to comedy, but this was not entirely a happy development, even if that was what his publisher preferred. His best writing was in the short fiction written for his own pleasure in the thirties and early forties, and published in 1946 or after: stories like "My Fist upon the Stone", and "Oscar", which have been made available again in recent years. It should be remarked that Michael Parnell preferred to think of Gwyn Thomas as a comedian and a fifties writer, a complement to Kingsley Amis at Gollancz. Parnell was less comfortable with Gwyn's "extreme left" radicalism.

Gwyn Thomas is bothered in *All Things Betray Thee* by his growing sense of the ordinary person's need to evade commitment. Just as strongly felt as the moment of conversion on the mountain, and as forcefully expressed, is Alan Leigh's shrinking back:

'The feel of other men's lives is rough as sandstone on my face. I dodge away from it, that's the great aim of all my breathing.' (190)

When a meeting of the workers' leaders takes place, the narrator is only in attendance because he is persuaded that his friend, who has become their main leader, needs him; he is not rallying to the cause:

'He wants you to be present at the meeting. He thinks you may be able to help.'

'I? He should know me better than that.'

'John Simon is a sick and lonely man, harpist. In the coming days he will not grow less sick or less lonely. If you are his friend he will never need you more than he does now.' (201)

The feeling of conversion has been updated:

I was haunted more and more by the feeling that I was being contributed, slipped like a tiny coin through the tricky fingers of creative events to an offertory whose sum total I would not have the satisfaction of knowing, even if I should have the wish (207).

The image of the offertory suggests an evangelical intensity to such politics, a quality which made Gwyn Thomas uncomfortable even as he subscribed to the cause.

Thomas's political indecision was not necessarily a weakness. One should consider what he believed was on offer to him. Dissident left views on the struggle to save the Spanish Republic from Franco and his Axis allies seem not to have had much of an airing in the South Wales coalfield. Gwyn Thomas was at home and jobless after Oxford, and given to chatting at the labour exchange with no less a figure than Will Paynter, soon to be a political commissar in Spain.<sup>20</sup>

Trotskyist or Anarchist movements in Spain were known locally by reputation as agents of the Fascists. Even Orwell, an ILP member wounded in action against the Fascists, was given short shrift, according to the historian Hywel Francis: "There was no known support, even among members of the ILP, for George Orwell's contention in

*Homage to Catalonia* that the most important feature of the war in Spain was the existence of a growing socialist revolution up to May 1937".<sup>21</sup>

Hywel Francis was making the point that there was no mass support for Anarchists or Trotskyists in Wales; but the Popular Front, in Britain as in Spain, provided the Stalinists with a means of policing and censoring the left. This passage from a letter by Victor Gollancz (in 1937) in *Left Book News* suggests something of the atmosphere:

There is room in the list of publications of the Club for every Left point of view, and for any book which will help in the fight against Fascism, but there is no room whatsoever for a book which, while appearing to the Left, sets out to help the enemy, or a book which fights on the side of Fascism. A Trotskyite book falls as obviously outside the scope of the Club's publications as does a Nazi book or a Fascist book.<sup>22</sup>

George Orwell's was published by Gollancz, but, as he wrote when *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) was underway, he was "having to change" his publisher:

at least for this book. Gollancz is of course part of the Communism-racket, and as soon as he heard I had been associated with the P.O.U.M. and Anarchists and had seen the inside of the May riots in Barcelona, he said he did not think he would be able to publish my book, though not a word of it was written yet.<sup>23</sup>

We should credit Gwyn Thomas with an independence of thought or feeling that kept him from ever offering up his work to the Communist Party in the Stalinist era: he dedicated *All Things Betray Thee* to his people and his valley. Yet the novel is packed with clues of a distaste for any settled opinion. Near the story's close, the harpist encounters "a popular orator" with "a vast trumpeting voice" that he had learned to use "in a way profoundly enjoyable to himself... The man's ideas were thick, fleshy, meet to be flipped neatly over

the oaken counter of his solid convictions" (312).

Thomas's independence of thought might unkindly be called vacillation; at best it was a matter of temperament rather than an intellectual position. The contrast with John Cowper Powys's understanding of the Spanish situation is revealing. It is, unfortunately, a common-place that Gwyn Thomas was a clear-headed Marxist and, likewise, that Powys was merely an eccentric with "bizarre" political ideas. David Goodway has shown in *The Powys Review* (Number 15) that Powys was an ardent supporter of the Bolsheviks for twenty years after they took power, and that he was capable of writing a political manifesto of classic militancy (as Gwyn Thomas never did), including a proposal for "the nationalization of land, mines, water, electricity, railways, and above all of BANKS".<sup>24</sup>

Powys was well informed of events in Spain through his correspondence with the American anarchist Emma Goldman (1869-1940), who initiated him into "a standpoint from which almost all outsiders were excluded".<sup>25</sup> He adapted his political allegiance in the light of his new information (an ability which many activists of left and right find culpable when they see it):

In 1942 Powys objected to Louis Wilkinson's pro-Soviet arguments: 'O why haven't I old Emma at my side to *put you wise* on Stalin & the Communist Party! I tell you, with Emma's help for 2 years I got every week, in English, the Anarchist Bulletin from Catalonia...' (He then called himself 'a parlour-pupil of old Emma's Anarchism'.)<sup>26</sup>

*All Things Betray Thee* ends as Thomas's narrator leaves Moonlea, a town based loosely on historical Merthyr, and the scene of action based just as loosely on the Merthyr Rising of 1831. His friend has been publicly hung to show the consequences of insubordination and riot:

Night had fallen completely when I began the climb to Arthur's Crown, walking up the same path as I had descended on my way into

Moonlea. On its summit I looked down. There below me was the house of Penbury, big, smiling, and living with light. I turned, walking away from Moonlea, yet eternally towards Moonlea, full of a strong, ripening, unanswerable bitterness, feeling in my fingers the promise of a new enormous music (318).

In finishing his novel by leaving his narrator alone "on the brink of the unbearable" (318), Gwyn Thomas creates an ending that, it has been remarked, is "bleakly ambivalent".<sup>27</sup> This ending is more affecting than the revolutionary, upbeat conclusions of more consistently satisfying and accomplished writers. Take the close of Sean O'Casey's play, *The Star Turns Red* (1940) (the text in square brackets is O'Casey's own stage direction):

The Soliders are joining the workers! Listen —listen Jim! [In the far distance great cheering is heard, mingling with the singing of 'The Internationale']

JIM (to the silently crying Julia)

He's not too far away to hear what's happening. You'll nurse, now, a far greater thing than a darling dead man. Up, young woman, and join in the glowing hour your lover died to fashion. He fought for life, for life is all, and death is nothing!

[Julia stands with her right fist clenched. The playing and singing of 'The Internationale' grow louder]<sup>28</sup>

Gwyn Thomas was never able to write from a personal experience of unequivocal triumph, whether political or literary. Terrible as the pre-war years had been in Wales, those years seemed to him to be full of a commensurate promise, crammed with opportunities for progressive social change. But these dreams, as he put it, "had turned swiftly to mud"<sup>29</sup> after 1939. If his politics mellowed, it was because the atmosphere that fed his incandescence had evaporated.

His family, who had endured the same circumstances, always found his political nostrums inexplicable, even perverse: Parnell put their side of the story rather well. One might add that Gwyn Thomas had a private sense of betrayal by life, and that

he suggested that this was the foundation of his outlook, including his political views. His mother:

was in her early forties when she died, a woman of vast creative potential, and this is what of course has created one of the cornerstones of my philosophy: Humanity has been far too prodigal in reproducing itself. Waste is the thing which I detest, the waste of human gifts, the waste of human promise that you have in this vast, ugly proliferation of people in the great slums of the world. . . I was the twelfth child, a totally unwanted child, and yet, you know, she had this faith in the world and the wind and the sky, and she would look at me, and she would almost forgive me, at times, for being there. Almost forgive me. And this is something I will never forget for as long as I live, these terrible moments when this lovely woman with this marvellous voice. . . was telling me in some inimitably bitter way of her own plight.<sup>30</sup>

This is disturbing reading. The grief is compact, sharp, bewildered: "Almost forgive me. And this is something I will never forget for as long as I live". Around it is a tumescent prose packed with an unstable, churning dialectic of compassion and disdain.

Gwyn Thomas's strong political beliefs provoked strong and incapacitating doubts to match. Like the harpist who narrates *All Things Betray Thee*, he was saved from any act of self-sacrifice by "a cosy web of consoling counter-suggestion" (254). Gwyn was held back by ill-health from a life of action in which he might have vigorously seized his own rewards, but his temperament furnished a more secure barrier against success. With his hastily written manuscript unrevised, unable to linger over or return to his writing, he abandoned *All Things Betray Thee* to the publisher's editors, who hacked and shaped ruthlessly to prepare it for publication. Gwyn Thomas's writing was, it seems to me, an urgent assertion of self-hood by a man who was haunted by the feeling that he had no right to exist; to go back over the words that spilled out of him,

to re-write, would have been to destroy the illusion of a central, single self who authorised the story.

For whatever reason, Gwyn Thomas always neglected to revise his work: his duality disrupted and disfigured his writing. He devoted himself to being a writer, and eventually made writing his livelihood. Yet he always regarded what came from his pen as finished, and would move on at once to new work, only to be dismayed by the lack of form to his unadulterated inspiration. Readers, too, have been dismayed by the unkempt bagginess of his novels, and the corruption and miscasting of sentences and images: Thomas often wrote badly.

Gwyn Thomas is a very rewarding writer to quote from, for choice, magnificent phrases press themselves to illuminate and linger in the mind. Apart from considerations of space, it is only natural for writers on Gwyn Thomas to wish to reproduce those and to forget about a sentence such as this, which survived the publisher's onslaught on *All Things Betray Thee*:

She, I was sure from what I had seen of her that morning, would have been the sort who, had she known I was there at all, would have come right out into the hallway, glad to be framed against its whole enchanting contrivance of gleaming beauty in glass, wood and colour, and she would have told me in tones so clear an idiot ten miles away could have followed them, how small a total of significance my bones and my limbs, my desires and my music, made (55).

The conclusion of *All Things Betray Thee* shows that the disturbing power of his habitual duality could be brought into his writing, to affect and disturb the reader with a sense of ghastly enormity, yet he was unable to make this power an integrated part of his writing. Readers of Gwyn Thomas are left in two minds about him: he can neither be praised nor damned without pause and reservation. What he achieved is unique, unsettling, and often unforgettable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Belinda Humfrey, "Gwyn Thomas", in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 15, *British Novelists, 1930-1949*, part 2: M-Z, ed. Bernard Olsey (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1983), pp. 514-9; p. 514-5.

<sup>2</sup>Gwyn Thomas, quoted in Belinda Humfrey, "Gwyn Thomas".

<sup>3</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *Sorrow For Thy Sons*, prepared for publication and with an introduction by Dai Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p. 57.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Parnell, *Laughter from the Dark* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 102.

<sup>5</sup>Lewis Jones (1897-1939): Communist Councillor, author of *Cwmardy* (1937), *We Live* (1939).

<sup>6</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *A Few Selected Exits: An Autobiography of Sorts* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 168.

<sup>7</sup>Howard Fast, *Literature and Reality* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), p. 67. Pages 67-71 of Chapter 13 are devoted to Gwyn Thomas.

<sup>8</sup>In Howard Fast, *The Naked God: the writer and the Communist Party* (London: Bodley Head, 1958).

<sup>9</sup>Michael Parnell, *Laughter from the Dark*, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *A Few Selected Exits*, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup>*A Few Selected Exits*, p. 206.

<sup>12</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *All Things Betray Thee* (London: Michael Joseph, 1949; Lawrence and Wishart, 1986, with an introduction by Raymond Williams), p. 13. My subsequent references to pages in my text refer to this volume.

<sup>13</sup>Fast was facing a prison sentence for membership of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. Thomas allowed Fast to publish his strong letters of support in left-wing journals. This led to the blacklisting of Thomas's work in America.

<sup>14</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *A Welsh Eye* (London: Hutchinson, 1964; Hutchinson Paperback, 1984), pp. 18-21.

<sup>15</sup>*All Things Betray Thee*, pp. 175-6.

<sup>16</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *A Welsh Eye*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Gwyn Thomas, autobiographical essay in Meic Stephens, ed., *Artists in Wales* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1971), p. 71.

<sup>18</sup>Michael Parnell, *Laughter from the Dark*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup>*Laughter from the Dark*, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup>Despite being unemployed, Paynter studied at the Lenin School in Moscow, and was elected to the South Wales Miners' Federation Executive in 1936. He was both President of the SWMF and General Secretary of the NUM from 1959-69.

<sup>21</sup>Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), p. 211.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Saul Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain 1924-38* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), pp. 219-20.

<sup>23</sup>George Orwell, letter to Rayner Heppenstall, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 312.

<sup>24</sup>John Cowper Powys's views on post-war reconstruction appeared in Donald Brook, *Writers' Gallery: Biographical Sketches of Britain's Greatest Writers, and their views on Reconstruction* (London: Rockliff Publishing Corporation, 1944); quoted in David Goodway, "The Politics of John Cowper Powys", *The Powys Review*, 15, 1984/1985, pp. 42-52, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup>David Goodway, "The Politics of John Cowper Powys", p. 46.

<sup>26</sup>David Goodway, "The Politics of John Cowper Powys", p. 46, quoting from *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-1956* (1958).

<sup>27</sup>James A. Davies, "Kinds of Relating: Gwyn Thomas (Jack Jones, Lewis Jones, Gwyn Jones) and the Welsh Industrial Experience", *Anglo-Welsh Review*, Number 86, 1987, pp. 72-86, p. 77. The novel's 'open-ended' closure is examined in this essay.

<sup>28</sup>Sean O'Casey, *The Star Turns Red* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p. 184.

<sup>29</sup>Gwyn Thomas, *A Few Selected Exits*, p. 162.

<sup>30</sup>"Private Lives", Gwyn Thomas talking with Denis Mitchell, Granada TV, 1975, quoted in *Laughter in the Dark*, p. 10.

---

# Robert Mighall

## Arcadian Perspectives: Llewelyn Powys and George Orwell

---

My theme is memory, that winged host that soared above me one morning of war-time.

These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me.

(Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*)

The subject of this essay is a selection of writings by Llewelyn Powys from the last years of his life. These are: *Dorset Essays* (1935), *Somerset Essays* (1937), *A Baker's Dozen* (posthumously in 1941), and *Love and Death* (1939). These works will be discussed by comparing them with George Orwell's novel *Coming Up for Air* (1939), a text which has much in common, at least in terms of focus, with the work of Powys from this period. The first part of this essay considers these similarities, using Orwell's novel to establish a context into which Powys's writings can be placed. The latter part will concentrate on how Powys's writings can be seen to depart from this context. It establishes the difference in perspective presented by these writers. This difference resides in how they approach what I shall term the 'Arcadian dilemma', and how this finds its fullest representation in Powys's *Love and Death*, published in the same year as Orwell's novel. It is to Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* that I shall now turn.

*Coming Up for Air* opens on the present of 1938, and represents the thoughts, fears and recollections of the first-person narrator George Bowling, a fat, middle-aged insurance salesman who lives in a newly-built suburb of London. The tone of the first chapter is bleak and pessimistic. It is winter, "a beastly January morning, with a dirty yellowish-grey sky".<sup>1</sup> Both the present ("Fear! We Swim in it. It's our element" (19)) and

the future (war, and worse, the aftermath: "The bombs, the food queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen." (224)) terrify Bowling, and occupy his thoughts throughout most of the narrative. These thoughts provoke him into adopting the role of prophetic malcontent in a world full of the acquiescent. The malaise from which he suffers is identified as modernity. Bowling sees the modern world of ersatz milk-bars and endless suburban sprawl as symptomatic of a loss of traditional values:

Wherever we're going, we're going downwards. Into the grave, into the cesspool—no knowing . . . There's something that's gone out of us in these twenty years since the war. It's a kind of vital juice that we've squirted away until there's nothing left . . . Nerves worn all to bits, empty places in our bones where the marrow ought to be (168).

It is by recalling the world that he knew before the Great War, the scene of his childhood in a small rural village, that Bowling attempts to establish just what has been lost in this passage of time. Bowling is transported by his memories:

The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time . . . Some chance sight or sound or smell . . . sets you going, and the past doesn't merely come back to you, you're actually *in* the past.

. . . I was back in the parish church at Lower Binfield, and it was thirty-eight years ago. To outward appearances, I suppose, I was still walking down the Strand, fat and forty-five . . . but inside me I was Georgie Bowling, aged seven . . . And it was Sunday

morning, and I could smell the church. How I could smell it! (30-31)

The reality of the present, characterised by incessant change, imminent war and wintery discontent, serves as a foil for the past, a time of peace, contentment and stability: “Vicky’s at Windsor, God’s in Heaven, Christ’s on the cross. . . Is it gone forever, I’m not certain. But I can tell you, it was a good world to live in. I belong to it. So do you” (34). Bowling’s childhood in Lower Binfield (a fictitious village in the Thames Valley near Reading) serves as a repository for all the values he regrets in the modern world. Whilst 1938 is represented by the machinery of war, Bowling’s childhood in Lower Binfield is associated with such timeless Arcadian pursuits as fishing. As he observes:

As soon as you think of fishing you think of things that don’t belong to the modern world. . . There’s a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. . . The people who made them up hadn’t heard of machine guns, they didn’t live in terror of the sack or spend their time eating aspirins, going to the pictures, and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp (74).

Thus a particular time and place are held in the narrator’s memory as a haven from “real life” which is for him synonymous with “unpleasantness” (91). Lower Binfield at the turn of the century is Bowling’s Arcadia.

It is, however, in the nature of Arcadias to be lost, for Golden Ages to be replaced by those of iron: “My God! 1913! The stillness, the green water, the rushing of the weir! It’ll never come again! . . . I mean the feeling inside you, the feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened” (104). This sense of loss is even more acutely felt when Bowling re-visits in person the scenes of his childhood, and finds it disfigured almost beyond recognition. The village and the fields surrounding it have been developed upon and populated by strangers. And even the war, in the shape of an R.A.F. bomber

plane which accidentally drops its load on the village whilst on an exercise, rudely intrudes upon this supposed haven from contemporary troubles. This is the final outrage. It sends Bowling back to suburbia and the inevitability of what was to follow:

All those years Lower Binfield had been tucked away somewhere or other in my mind, a sort of quiet corner that I could step back into when I felt like it, and finally I’d stepped back into it and found that it didn’t exist. I’d chucked a pine-apple into my dreams, and lest there should be any mistake the Royal Air Force had followed up with five hundred pounds of T.N.T. (223).

A similar world and, at times, a similar sense of loss is evoked in many of the writings of Llewelyn Powys published in the last years of his life. Scattered throughout these works are glimpses of a past age, a time associated with a specific locale: the villages and landmarks of Dorset and Somerset, places reminiscent of the author’s childhood. Despite obvious generic differences, there is much to encourage a comparison between Orwell’s and Powys’s texts. As with Bowling’s narrative, these writings constantly glance backwards towards that which has passed away. “A Montacute Field”, one of the essays collected in *A Baker’s Dozen* (1941), opens thus:

The minds of Banished Men will often revert to their distant homes. A dozen times a day they will be haunting in reveries the fields, lanes, hills, and woodland banks of their childhood memories. I know it is constantly so with me. Often I may appear to be studiously contemplating the sun-lit snow of the Alps, when all the while through the swift agency of the inward eye, I am in reality revisiting in my imagination familiar country spots in the neighbourhood of the village of Montacute.<sup>2</sup>

Again the situation of the present (the author’s retirement to a sanitarium in Switzerland for his tuberculosis) is felt in poignant contrast with an earlier happier time from which the narrator is ‘banished’. The Arcadian sentiment which characterises

Orwell's text is clearly articulated in the following extract taken from *Dorset Essays* (1935) entitled "The Sea! The Sea! The Sea!"

In those days my attention was always so passionately occupied with its childish interests that I seldom took pleasure in the passing of the seasons, and yet it appears to me that never since those mornings have I tasted the golden wine of April in so pure an essence. . . . [those] fugitive hours belong, so it seems in the magical mirror of retrospective memory, not only to the importunate actuality of the moment, but to an antiquity lightly confederate with the eternal.<sup>3</sup>

This passage, true to form, equates the experience of childhood with a golden time, a time both ancient and eternal, eternal because captured in memory, yet the loss of it in reality is keenly felt.

This elegiac note is struck often in Powys's writings of this period. As with Bowling, Powys's elegy is also for a way of life, a social order that is associated with childhood, yet its loss cannot be wholly attributed to sentimentality. Both writers appeal to external evidence. Change and the march of modernity is registered in many of Powys's writings, and often in terms analogous to Orwell's. Thus in an essay entitled "Childhood Memories" from *A Baker's Dozen*, Powys remarks upon a bath chair attendant he met at Weymouth, Mr Hill, who, "with his decorous bearing and independent character, unmistakably belonged to the same great age [as the Victorian bath chair], and as we talked together I soon discovered that he and I had a deal more in common than general memories of an enviable historic period so fast fading into a remote distance" (48). With hindsight, and reflected in the "magical mirror of retrospective memory" (Powys, *Dorset Essays*, 50), the recent past appears to be timeless, part of an established way of life.<sup>4</sup> The supposed sense of stability enjoyed in this period is envied by both Bowling and Powys, whilst its passing is keenly regretted. As Bowling reflects:

Mother never lived to know that the life she'd been brought up to, the life of a decent God-fearing shopkeeper's daughter and a decent God-fearing shopkeeper's wife in the reign of good Queen Vic, was finished for ever . . . The old English order of life couldn't change. . . . But at least they never lived to know that everything they'd believed in was just so much junk. They lived at the end of an epoch, when everything was dissolving into a sort of ghastly flux, and they didn't know it. They thought it was eternity. You couldn't blame them. That was what it felt like (Orwell, 108-9).

*Love and Death*, Powys's 'imaginary autobiography' published in the same year as Orwell's text, expresses a similar sentiment when the 'Llewelyn' of the narratorial present recaptures a moment in 1907, when he sat with his mother in their Montacute home, whilst "the wings of time were brushing across that sheltered parlour of the Victorian age".<sup>5</sup> As he reflects:

It was difficult to understand that the firm family life of Montacute Vicarage was settled upon an uncertain reef of quick sand, in the midst of abrading time currents. I had known nothing but this notable island of domesticity. We had dwelt upon it all our lives: and yet I have lived to see the house in the hands of strangers, lived to come upon the old family three-wheeled perambulator derelict amongst the fir trees (175).

As this passage suggests, the re-visitation of a specific locality which is associated with happier times can serve to mark the passing of the years, or of a way of life, in poignant and very concrete terms. Time can be measured by the degree of change that this locality has undergone. For Bowling the most acutely felt indicator of modernity is represented by the case of a secret pool. This pool was sequestered in an overgrown part of an old estate and full of enormous fish; he had discovered it as a boy and had one day intended to return. When he does return in 1938 the pool has been drained and filled with old tin cans, serving as a rubbish dump for a new housing development. This, as

Bowling suggests, is an appropriate comment on the age to which he has been “banished”:<sup>6</sup>

doesn't it make you puke sometimes to see what they're doing to England, with their bird-baths and their plaster gnomes, and their pixies and tin cans, where the beechwoods used to be?

... What's the good of trying to revisit the scenes of your boyhood? They don't exist. Coming up for air! But there isn't any air. The dustbin that we're in reaches up to the stratosphere (Orwell, 215-6).

In one of Powys's *Somerset Essays* he also revisits a pool where he used to fish, one which has undergone a transformation in many ways comparable to Bowling's.<sup>7</sup> However, his clearest articulation of this indignation with change is found in an essay entitled “Jordan Hill” from *Dorset Essays*. This essay is interesting for, amongst other things, the way Powys tries to be objective about such matters. It represents a site of conflict between his regard for social necessity and a heart-felt sense of loss and concern for conservation. The passage opens in a philosophical mode:

There is always a danger for people who are attached to a particular locality of showing unreason in the matter of change. Human beings are naturally conservative and existing conditions are never altered without offence. Perhaps the knowledge that our sojourn upon the earth is in its very nature fugitive renders us all the more obstinate in resisting when it is in our power to do so this underlying law of the Universe (*Dorset Essays*, 45).

These philosophical musings are occasioned by an attempt to stifle the “captious resentment” Powys feels as a consequence of the “development for building purposes” of Jordan Hill, a landscape immortalised in oil by Constable. Against these feelings of resentment Powys struggles valiantly.

I discipline myself to remember that wherever human beings live poetry exists—I remind myself continually of the social gain to be derived from the activities of speculators in

real-estate. I try my utmost to take pleasure in the standardised gardens of the spick villas, and yet my spirit continues wilfully to regret the calm of this green hill before its exploitation (45).

Even without the final qualifying clause, with its reference to “exploitation”, it is evident where his true sympathies lie. The Americanised “real estate” sets an appropriately ironic tone. The greatest outrage in this case is, as Powys explains, in the change of the hill's name from Jordan to ‘Bowleaze’. This, as with Bowling's pool, is regarded as indicative of modernity:

It will be a thousand pities if Bowleaze eventually became the official address of this modern suburb whose foundations are set upon ground out of which both Romans and Britons have in their time dug pot clay.

... It was ill-chance that there should have been at hand a word... that so explicitly evokes the modern notion of leisure wherein mechanical transportation, short drinks, and the wireless take the place of country walks, reading, and a simple attitude of piety towards every manifestation of life (46).

Thus between George Orwell's *Coming Up For Air* and the various autobiographical and topographical writings of Llewelyn Powys under consideration, certain points of comparison can be made. Both Powys's writings and Orwell's novel evoke a past age, an age associated with childhood and with specific localities. These locations are regarded as representative of a social order that has vanished or is rapidly vanishing. By re-visiting these locations the degree of change is measured and regretted. However, as Powys observes, there is a danger involved in these conservational attachments, the danger that re-visitation will cause acute resentment and hopeless disappointment. The different ways in which these writers approach this danger, a danger that could be termed the ‘Arcadian dilemma’, will now be discussed. Out of this discussion an awareness of the distinctive nature of Llewelyn Powys's project in these writings will emerge.

On the whole this feeling of resentment is more a feature of *Coming Up For Air*. It is the dominant tone of the latter part of the text as one by one the idealised memories of certain localities are measured against the reality of their present usage or occupation. It was a mistake for Bowling to re-visit Lower Binfield, for by so doing even his “dreams” are exploded by grim historical reality. From the start Bowling’s narrative establishes an opposition between “reality” (the reality of the present time) and the imaginary, a realm governed by memory. Reality, which in this text is synonymous with modernity, is empirically and disfavouredly perceived. In the first part of the text when Bowling visits a streamlined chromium-plated milk bar and bites into an Ersatz Frankfurter which tastes of fish he describes the experience in the following terms: “It gave me the feeling that I’d bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was *really made of*” (Orwell, 27, emphasis added). Reality is measured by actual experience. Similarly in a passage quoted above, he is forced to recognise this same reality when his resentful re-visitations are given the *coup de grace* of “five-hundred pounds of T.N.T.” (223). Between these two stark actualities Bowling attempts to recapture the golden sanctuary of childhood recollections. As he states: “Before the war, and especially before the Boer War, it was summer all year round. I’m quite aware that that’s a delusion. I’m merely trying to tell you how things come back to me” (37). Bowling’s account is thus filtered through the lens of childhood, distorted by its delusory, yet alchemical, power. However, it is upon such delusions that Arcadias are founded; whilst to subject delusion to empirical method, as he learns to his cost, is to lose even this imaginary sanctuary from “reality”. Bowling’s narrative in fact traces this process, the dispelling of the delusory by means of empirical actuality. His fatal mistake, and the turning point in the narrative, is the decision to re-visit Lower Binfield in the hope of finding relief from the disquiet that has been plaguing him.

This problematic of re-visitation illustrates what I have termed the ‘Arcadian dilemma’. For Bowling this dilemma is resolved unfavourably. As has been seen this re-visitation *in person* means the loss of his dreams. By the end of the text “reality” and “modernity” are all that remain. The opposition between the delusory realm governed by memory, and an actuality subject to empirical laws, collapses until the latter is all that remains. Orwell’s text ends pessimistically, as the prison house of reality conclusively closes upon George Bowling.

This Arcadian dilemma is negotiated and resolved by Llewelyn Powys, principally in his “imaginary autobiography” *Love and Death*. The fundamental difference between Powys’s and Orwell’s texts, at least for the purposes of this essay, rests upon a difference of approach to this opposition between the actual and the delusory as outlined above. Like *Coming Up For Air* the narrative of Powys’s *Love and Death* presents a number of chronological shifts. The events that feature in the narrative take place in three separate periods. The text opens on what can be taken to be the ‘present’, represented as 1933 in East Chaldon, the time when the author suffered an enormous haemorrhage, and subsequently took up the project of this imaginary autobiography.<sup>8</sup> It moves from this time (without ever quite allowing an awareness of the present to escape the reader’s attention) back to a specific year, the narrator’s twenty-third year which can be identified (by the text’s internal time) as 1907. It is in this year that the ‘Llewelyn’ of the narrative enjoys a blessed summer romance with Dittany Stone, his “first experience of intense love” (31). The narrative also represents events from the narrator’s childhood at Montacute. As with Orwell’s text the present is represented negatively, and stands in strict contradiction with the Arcadian nature of the past as it is recollected in the memory of the narrator. In Powys’s text, however, it is not the ‘strange disease of modern life’ which afflicts the narrator so much as the acute

physical pain, the suffocation and blood-spitting resultant of a critical tuberculosis. It is this pain, referred to as a “clamping reality” (114), which sends the narrator off into his reveries of childhood and early manhood, these memories having the virtue of an anodyne. This process of memory is a conscious strategy on the part of the narrator, as he explains: “I knew that I would have to revive in my memory many days of that far-off summer [of 1907] if my body was to be released from its distress” (59). However, despite his reference to his present plight—the pain of near-death—as “reality”, it is (paradoxically and contra Bowling) such reality or “actuality” which redeems both the past and the present and resolves the ‘Arcadian dilemma’. This requires some explanation. A clue to how this operates within the narrative is given in the following passage.

My mind had so completely flown away that it came back to consciousness of my predicament on Chaldon Down listlessly almost with indifference. . . . In truth so much refreshment had my mind won from its recollections, from its knowledge of such stored-away harvests of past happiness, that it was now easy to regard death with more philosophy (59-60).

In *Coming Up For Air* the golden nature of the past life (as filtered through the delusory lens of memory) merely served to heighten the unpleasantness of present reality, thus provoking Bowling’s disastrous attempt at re-admittance to this realm. For the ‘Llewelyn’ of *Love and Death*, however, it has the opposite effect. Indeed the reality of the pain of his present plight becomes less real than the “actuality” of his recollections. As he explains:

If . . . I could go over in my mind the happiest walks I had had with Dittany, our happiest meetings, I found that I could put myself under so powerful a glamour that I would forget where I was and what was happening to me, could, in fact, make believe the distant summer to be more real than the present one (60).

The golden time in the past becomes the reality, the pain of the present the delusion. Because no attempt is made to re-visit *in person* the location, the spell, the “glamour”, thus remains unbroken. This exclusion of empiricism even extends to the use of textual evidence, for a man on his death-bed the near equivalent of actual re-visitation. As he explains:

If I tried to re-capture what happened *in too exact a sequence*, as indeed I could have done if I had sent someone to fetch my private diary for that year, then I became confused and troubled and very soon I would lose my enfranchisement and begin once more worrying about the issue of the illness, or even about some temporary sensation in my lungs that might presage fresh misery (60-1 emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of facts would have broken the spell, and brought attention back to the “reality” of the present.

However this only half explains the difference in approach to the real and the delusory that distinguishes Powys’s text from Orwell’s. Through the “magical mirror of retrospective memory”, the narrator is able to be not only more “philosophical” about the present, but also more philosophical about the past, by infusing his memories with the “reality” that Bowling attempts to banish from it.<sup>10</sup> The mature philosophy of the dying man both motivates and “redeems” the golden realm reflected in memory. The Arcadian dilemma is resolved by Powys due to a difference in perspective. This difference can be illustrated by analogy to the world of fine art. By establishing an opposition between a golden and an iron age, between a happy delusion and a disconsolate reality, the narrator in *Coming Up for Air* laments the loss of the former as it is superseded by the latter. The terms, and therefore the loss, are absolute. Bowling’s lament is “Et in Arcadia Ego” —I too have dwelt in Arcadia. This sentiment is illustrated in Poussin’s famous painting *Les Bergers d’Arcadie*. Powys’s theme is also “Et in Arcadia Ego”; however, his text

could be illustrated by Guercino's painting, which depicts a skull in a Sylvan setting inscribed with the Latin phrase, meaning even in Arcadia death is present. A difference in perspective; for the narrator of *Love and Death* prostrate on his death-bed, the nearness of death and the knowledge of its finality serves to transform a lament into an affirmation, into a celebration of life in all its manifestations. The "glamour" that memory casts is that facilitated by the knowledge of death. As he observes:

Wheresoever a man dwell he shall be sure to have a thorn-bush by his door. Good and evil are as integral a part of life as are light and darkness. . . . The black threads of suffering and death are inextricably woven into life's arras, and they can only be accepted with sense and sanity if outnumbered by the gilded threads of joy (17-8).

These same black threads are interwoven into *Love and Death* throughout, even through those golden patches of memory which serve as an anodyne to the suffering of the dying narrator. These memories are always filtered through the consciousness of the mature man; not vice versa, as was the case with Bowling's recollections which were reflected through the ideal eyes of childhood. Thus he describes one particular morning when he went to meet Dittany in the following terms:

It seemed as though the early sunshine had utterly redeemed those Somerset meadows. They were light as the paddocks of Arcady. They quivered, danced, and laughed, and at the same time they retained their *solid actuality*, thick bespattered with cow-pats loose and emerald green (119, emphasis added).

The groves of Arcadia are not usually strewn with such sub-lunary furnishings, and especially not when summoned by memory. And yet this is the point. Similarly death is always present in 'Powys's' garden. At the happiest of moments, those which should appear to transcend the temporal and the earthly, the reality of death, of its

absolute finality, is still firmly established. Thus later on that same day with Dittany as they reach Ilchester, the narrator recalls:

Between the house and us the sun-motes danced their airy jigs above the dusty turnpike. In just such a way the atmosphere must have quivered before the eyes of other generations. In Ilchester churchyard lovers such as we lay dead. Skull by skull (131).

This thought provokes the dying narrator into propounding a version of the philosophy which colours his memories throughout:

How is it that those who are alive can never realise their chance beyond all chances, how is it that even the wisest of us are such fools that we take our own hour of exemption from nothingness for granted (131-3).

Whether the historical Llewelyn Powys aged twenty three did seize the day is doubtful, and, in a sense, immaterial. Facts are not the issue here. Before the reader is an 'imaginary autobiography', a re-writing, a re-invention and a redemption of the past in terms of the present. It is not a lament for a lost Arcadia measured against the grim reality of the present, but a wholesale affirmation of life in its actuality, life that is made real by the finality of death. Powys's philosophy excludes any question of the transcendental and the metaphysical. This is established on the first page of *Love and Death* when it is stated,

To imagine that the universe is subject to any kind of surveillance has for many years seemed to me a gross delusion. Unless rendered stupid by a sprinkling of holy water a single hour of anybody's experience of life should be enough to do away with such a notion. . . . Closely to observe the common happenings on a single acre of land raises innumerable obstacles to so easy a hypothesis (1-2).

This knowledge, however, is also significantly attributed by the mature narrator to his childhood self. This is represented in a passage which describes an incident with

distinct Wordsworthian overtones and significance. The passage in question describes a childhood incident in which the narrator leaves his family one winter's night and encounters a tree which seems to hold some message for him. This experience is described as having an influence on "the direction of [his] whole life, deeply fixing the memory of this tree in [his] mind as a kind of outward sign-post of an intellectual training" (189). As he recalls:

Scarcely aware of what I was doing I had thrown my arms about its red rough tangible girth and with my young eyes fixed upon the moon had striven to awake myself for ever out of the 'dull soul swoon' of *common day*, awake myself to an alert and lively apprehension of the accident of finding myself a free and cognizant being upon so conjured a planet. It had not been to him who died 'on the tree' that I had called but rather to him who lives 'in the tree', as I stood alone in the tremulous eagerness of youth in this cold gleaming corner of the astral cosmos (189-90, emphasis added).

This is a key passage for an understanding of Powys's text and of how it resolves the 'Arcadian dilemma'. In effect this passage attempts to reverse the dichotomy between the "vision splendid" of childhood and the "prison-house" of adulthood which operates in Wordsworth's famous 'Immortality Ode', a poem which, in many ways, serves as a sub-text to most post-romantic pastoral projects. In this Ode, childhood is represented as a blessed time, an existence cognizant of the Beatific Vision. Whilst this vision is sadly lost in adulthood, it is regained in death. The intimations of this immortality are found by glimpsing their signs in the natural world:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
 Upon the growing Boy,  
 But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
     He sees it in his joy;  
 The Youth, who daily further from the east  
 Must travel, still is Nature's priest  
 And by this vision splendid

Is on his way attended;  
 At length the Man perceives it die away,  
 And fade into the light of common day.<sup>11</sup>

Due to his rejection of the transcendental and the heavenly, the narrator of *Love and Death* finds affirmation in intimations of *mortality*. Thus he represents himself whilst a child, and prior to this 'epiphany', as existing in the "'dull soul swoon' of *common day*", the state Wordsworth attributes to the "prison house" of adulthood. Out of this state the young 'Powys' liberates himself into a heightened awareness, an awareness of the reality of mortality and the urgent need to celebrate life in the here and now. For both writers a sense of philosophical acceptance is achieved, overcoming the tendency to register a grievous sense of loss. Yet the two writers find this solution by distinctly different means, the one metaphysical the other wholly material. For Powys, as for Wordsworth, the child is bound to the man through "natural piety", thus forming out of life a philosophical whole. In Wordsworth's Ode, the adult should not the "season wrong" with vain regrets, but should allow "shadowy recollections" found in the joys of nature serve as indications that the vision will ultimately be re-captured. For Powys the adult as well as the child can serve as "Nature's priest" on "so conjured a planet". The nearness of death once more casts its "glamour".

Through his Epicurean philosophy, the Powys of *Love and Death* is able to escape the Arcadian dilemma which is represented in George Orwell's novel. This philosophy allows the mature man to project a consistent awareness of the nature of existence into his narrative recollections. Because reality is not banished from Powys's Arcadia, but effectively installed, a coherent philosophical whole can be made of the narrator's life. There is no loss of vision, nothing to measure the 'now' unfavourably against the 'then'. At the moment of his death he can thus contemplate the "objective universe... the unplatonic universe, actual, ponderable",

a universe unchanged from when he was a child (300). For the dying man, eternity is found only in the material world, and it is on the material that his last thoughts dwell.

It had been my custom, whenever my pulse-beats were being counted, to think myself back to the quiet of our garden playhouse at Montacute. I would concentrate my mind on an imagined piece of clay far beneath the roots of the Maberlulu pear trees, a lump of clay lined and strained by an incalculable geological antiquity... Now, even now, I could see the face of that immutable layer of brindled, clotted, obdurate matter which always and always had silently, thoughtlessly been present beneath the flying feet of us children. Compared with such duration our lives were nothing at all (298).

It is with such philosophical resignation that *Love and Death* concludes.

The writings from the last years of Llewelyn Powys's life, whilst sharing numerous points of comparison, offer a distinctly different approach to certain historical and philosophical problems from that represented in George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*. Powys's philosophical emphasis means that his text escapes the concern with the historical here-and-now, which animates Bowling's narrative and characterises

Orwell's text. The play of history is largely absent from *Love and Death*. As he explains in a letter to Mona Gooden: "Literature is always cheapened by politics. The real issues of life and its deepest emotional experiences lie below all these contemporary struggles, were before them and will outlast them".<sup>12</sup> The struggles he refers to are the build up for the Second War, the specific historical events which provoke Bowling's own brand of Arcadianism and lend him his polemical eloquence. The philosophical drama that is *Love and Death* is played out solely upon a personal stage.

Both Orwell's and Powys's texts can be characterised as 'Arcadian', evoking, as they do, scenes from a golden time sadly lost and deeply regretted. However, a difference of perspective upon the relation of past to present and the actual to the ideal, allows Powys's *Love and Death* to offer an optimistic and affirmative resolution to the problematics inherent within a narrative representation of this sentiment. Powys's Epicurean Arcadianism, his application of his philosophy to his representation of events, in many ways analogous to those represented by Bowling, thus transforms a lament into an affirmation, elegy into eulogy. In *Love and Death* the Arcadian dilemma is satisfactorily resolved.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 7. All subsequent references to Orwell's text refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *A Baker's Dozen* (London: Village Press, 1974), pp. 85-6.

<sup>3</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Dorset Essays*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1935), p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>On this tendency see Raymond Williams's chapter "A Problem of Perspective" in his *The Country and the City* (St Albans: Paladin, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>Llewelyn Powys, *Love and Death* (London: The Bodley Head, 1950), pp. 172-3.

<sup>6</sup>According to John Carey, in his anatomy of twentieth-century intellectuals' discontent with mass culture, *The Intellectuals and The Masses*, tinned food serves as a cultural icon for all that is shoddy and inauthentic about the modern democracy. The tin can, for Orwell, as for others was indicative of modernity. (Carey, London: Faber & Faber, 1992, pp. 21-2).

<sup>7</sup>As with Bowling's pool the price exacted by change upon Powys's Arcadian oasis is a heavy one. "I have never visited

Pitt Pond since the Montacute estate was sold. The trees of the woods after this sad event took place were delivered into the hands of lumber-men, and the 'unprofitable' pond, no longer valued, has been allowed to relapse into its natural state... at present, I am told, there is only a muddy morass over-grown with reeds surrounding a central heap of stones." *Somerset Essays* (London: The Bodley Head, 1937), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup>Malcolm Elwin, in his biography of Llewelyn Powys refers to *Love and Death* as "fiction against a background of fact" (*Life of Llewelyn Powys*, London: The Bodley Head, 1946, p. 218). It is in similar terms that I shall consider this text, whilst concentrating on its fictional status. My concern is with the text as narrative. Therefore I shall not analyse overmuch how this 'autobiography' measures against the facts of Powys's life. As Peter Foss observes in his study of the author, "Whilst ostensibly autobiographical, [it] was really an imaginative re-creation of the significance of his past life: how it reflected the greater truth which he felt his life, in retrospect, embodied. As such, the book is to be read as an exercise in mythic truth..." (Foss, *A Study of*

*Llewelyn Powys, Lampeter*: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991, p. 224). Thus such concepts as “reality” or the “imaginary” within my discussion will principally refer to the organising principles of the narrative itself and not to any external authority.

<sup>9</sup>This passage could serve as ironic comment on the nature of this “autobiography”, or even as a reproach to those who seek to examine the “facts” too closely. As Peter Foss comments in his discussion of Powys’s art and his approach to the events of his life in *Love and Death*: “The temporary reality of one’s outward life—in this case that group of summers Llewelyn spent at Montacute before the First World War—was so flawed and incoherent as to make it, in

the throes of living it, misunderstood and therefore inaccessible to meaning” (Foss, 224-5).

<sup>10</sup>This aspect of “philosophical realism” is a characteristic which Powys himself attributes to his text. It is this quality, combined with its “unreal romanticism”, that he believed “spoiled the pie for the modern reader”, and thus accounted for its poor critical and popular reception. (Letter to Van Wyck Brooks, 1939, cited in Elwin, pp. 264-5).

<sup>11</sup>Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality through recollections of early childhood” (*Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford: O.U.P., 1984, p. 299).

<sup>12</sup>Elwin, *Life of Llewelyn Powys*, p. 255.

## Rowena Griffiths

### A Rose for the Mistress Rowena

While sorting through some books belonging to my late father, Glyn Griffiths, I was surprised to discover the following in *The Collected Letters of Llewelyn Powys* [1943, p. 296]:

331: To Glyn Griffiths

July 5, 1939

*Clavadel, Davos Platz*

Dear Mr Glyn Griffiths,—How very kind of you to send me this excellent review of *Love and Death* by Mr D. H. L. Powell—appreciations of this kind and letters like yours are a great encouragement to me. There are occasions when I feel that my kind of vision is so remote from my generation that it is not even understood. . .

I shall be very sorry if the *Welsh Review* is allowed to fail. I would have thought rich Welshmen could be found to subsidize it. It is a great shame! For it proved itself an admirable publication. What is the secret of Life? Poetry. What is the true purpose of Life? Love. When all the pride, and greed, and wickedness and madness is over—these whispers will be accepted by the happy children of a happy world!

My recovery is tardy and this is a disappointment to me. I wish to God a tight firm alliance could be signed and sealed between us and the



Llewelyn Powys at Chydyok, c.1936.

Russians and that they could be really trusted. This would be an assurance against war. Would you give this little briar rose to the Mistress Rowena. It was picked in Tumble-down, the great field about Chydyok, and arrived this morning. It is a pretty thing. This letter was the best you ever wrote me. Your clear simple use of words brought the authenticity of your feeling very straight to me... I thank you very much.

—Yours sincerely Llewelyn Powys

My mother, the 'Mistress Rowena' of this letter, still recalls the pressed flower that

accompanied the note with the Swiss postmark. Now 83, and still leading an active life in retirement in Hove, she has from time to time spoken of the various members of the Powys family with whom she and my father had occasional contact over the years while living in Swansea, my father's home town.

I suggested to her that she might write down her memories, which follow, with her permission.

Judith Robinson [nee Griffiths]

## My Memories of the Powys Family

My husband, Glyn Griffiths, had, before our marriage in 1936, discovered the Powys family! I think that the first book he read was *Earth Memories* by Llewelyn Powys, which was published in 1934. He wrote to the author telling him how much he had enjoyed it, and was delighted and surprised to have a letter in response; indeed, Llewelyn suggested Glyn should call on him if in Dorset. He continued to read anything he could get hold of by members of the Powys family, and in 1936, during our honeymoon in Bournemouth, we hired a car and visited Llewelyn at his country cottage, Chydyok, not very far from Dorchester.

It was a memorable day. I recall arriving in the small village and enquiring at the local post office the whereabouts of Chydyok. We had to walk along a country lane, and then climb a hill to the left; and thank goodness, the weather was fine. We were greeted warmly by Llewelyn's wife, Alyse Gregory, and his two sisters Philippa and Gertrude. After a chat over a cup of tea and buttered scones, Alyse led us through the back garden where a shelter had been created for Llewelyn who was seriously ill with pulmonary tuberculosis, which was quite prevalent in those days. Like most T.B. patients he had periods of "remission". He was lying on a bed with the windows wide open, and seemed quite cheerful. I remember that he had a brownish beard. He spoke very happily to us, teasing us, of

course, about our honeymoon, and wishing us well. We must have been with him for about an hour, and then we were shown the attractions of the garden and surrounding countryside by Alyse. We returned to the cottage for a further chat with Gertrude and Philippa, and viewed some of Gertrude's works of art, mainly woodcuts, some of which appeared in Llewelyn's book *Earth Memories*.

Philippa seemed to enjoy country life and its activities and was most interesting to talk to; in fact we found them all gentle, tolerant and easy to get on with.

Before leaving, they persuaded us to take one of their kittens, called "Tigger". She was rather a wild specimen, and not too easy to cope with! Anyway she was placed in a basket from which she protested without ceasing, and we returned to the Hotel in Bournemouth in fear and trembling (at least, I did!) and hurried to our bedroom hoping none of the staff would notice the suspicious sounds. Fortunately we were due to leave the next morning, and a few hours later we arrived at Cardiff Station where my parents had promised to meet us and take us to lunch. We ate at the Station Hotel; I think my dear parents had quite a shock to see us returning from honeymoon with an extra guest in a basket! While I am very fond of pussy cats I was not ready to take one at that stage. However, Tigger accompanied us to our first home in Harlech

Crescent, Swansea. It was in a brand new housing estate designed by a Mr Spragg. Ours was a detached corner house, and we had quite a big garden. I was nervous about leaving Tigger out at night; in fact, it was almost impossible not to, as she definitely had a mind of her own! Eventually a good home was found for her with a Mr and Mrs Thomas and family in Penarth, near my parents.

Glyn kept up his interest in the Powys family, and I had by now acquired a great interest too. I especially liked reading J. C. Powys and enjoyed what seemed to me his eccentricities. Glyn joined the Swansea and South Wales Bookman's Association, and I believe it was through them that he met Benson Roberts, a Powys fan who ran a grocery business in Bridgend. In May 1945, Glyn persuaded Littleton Powys, who had at an earlier period taught at Llandovery College, to address the Bookmen on the subject of his family. It was a very happy event. Littleton stayed with us when we were living in Eaton Crescent, Swansea, and his lecture took place in the Brangwyn Hall. We were fascinated by his account of his parents and eleven brothers and sisters and their family history and connections with Wales. Some time later we received a warmly autographed copy of the lecture, which I still treasure.

Later on, my husband, daughter and myself, while staying in Somerset, visited Littleton and his second wife Elizabeth Myers at their lovely home, Quarry House, Sherborne, Dorset. I remember vividly a wonderful old drooping tree outside their gateway! While there we heard Littleton reminisce about his lecture in Swansea, which he felt had been so appreciatively received and he talked of his pleasure at visiting the Gower Coast and returning to

Llandovery after so many years. Elizabeth seemed sorry to have missed it, but she had not been well enough to accompany him at the time. Writing this makes me feel I would like to read again Elizabeth's novel *A Well Full of Leaves*. I felt she had a strong spiritual dimension and was also full of humour.

We last saw Littleton in the early 1950s (after Elizabeth had died) when he was quite crippled with arthritis. He had retired to Stronghold, West Pennard, Somerset. We were staying with a friend at Cherry May Farm near Highbridge, and took the opportunity to call on Littleton. Alyse Gregory happened to be visiting him at the time and we were pleased to renew her acquaintance. She looked better than when we saw her at Chydyok. She had been to the States to try to recover after Llewelyn's death. Littleton looked frail but appeared reasonably cheerful and seemed glad to see us.

Our final contact with the Powys family was in the late 1950s. By now we had moved to London, but were back in Wales visiting my mother and aunt who had retired to Rhayader. Glyn must have been in touch with John Cowper Powys, whom he had met on occasions, and we were invited to call on him in Blaenau Ffestiniog. It was quite a pilgrimage, but we finally made it, finding John Cowper in a terraced house where he now lived with his companion Phyllis Playter. I thought him a very stimulating character with more depth and insight than most people I had met, controversial and eccentric even at his advanced age. He told us how much he still enjoyed his daily walks over "the hills of his ancestors". We set off back towards Radnorshire feeling enriched by our visit.

---

# Herbert Williams

---

## JCP on TV

---

Powys enthusiasts will need no reminding that for all the success of John Cowper and his brothers, they are not always among the most saleable literary commodities. My own experience might be of some interest for it is only now, after fourteen years of trying, that I have been able to sell the idea of a programme about John Cowper Powys to the broadcasting media.

My interest in him goes back to the late 1950s, when on the terraces of Cardiff Arms Park a friend took a letter from his pocket and told me it was from one of his heroes, a famous writer living in Blaenau Ffestiniog. All I remember of its contents is a story Powys told of encountering a lorryload of soldiers from Tonfannau Camp in Merioneth while out walking and of his delight when one of them shouted: 'Look—the old man of the hills!' The words stayed with me, and a sense of the simplicity of a man who could take such pleasure in what some much less eminent people might consider an impudent and even unpleasant remark.

I was also impressed by the fact that Powys had taken the trouble to reply at length to my friend, who had written to say how much he had enjoyed one of his novels. I was to discover in time, that Powys always replied to letters and even invited his correspondents to come and meet him, one of his many endearing characteristics. I was not allowed, however, to see any of the other letters to my friend, who was much less open about such matters than Powys himself; I counted myself lucky to have been afforded a glimpse of even one message from Olympus.

My curiosity was aroused to the extent of purchasing a copy of *A Glastonbury Romance* from Lear's bookshop in Cardiff, the hardback 1955 edition published by Macdonalds. I cannot honestly say that I read it from cover to cover at once (who can?), or even that I devoured it within the space of a few weeks. For a long time I got so far, and no further; not that I disliked it, simply that it was too much for me, and not merely in terms of length. The strangeness of the atmosphere created by Powys is unsettling, and

sometimes I find it intolerable. I was, however, hooked on the man and his works, and discovered also the essays of Llewelyn, the short stories of Theodore; I developed, in fact, a "mania" for things Powys, if I might be excused so John Cowperish a term. And yes, I did finish *A Glastonbury Romance* in time, and what an astounding work it is. I won't bore you with my feelings about JCP's other books, except to say that there are a lot of them on my shelves, and I only wish there were more.

But to return to the matter of 'selling' Powys to the media. As a freelance writer my living depends on this kind of thing, and I have had a fair amount of success: a statement I make not as a boast, but simply to put my efforts into context. I find to my astonishment that it was in 1980 that I first wrote to Belinda Humfrey about my idea for a radio programme about John Cowper Powys. She replied at once with enthusiasm, sending me a copy of *The Powys Review* and offering to help in any way she could. She mentioned, however, that she was about to be interviewed "by two people from BBC, London, for a JCP programme", which gives the clue to what happened to my original idea: someone else got there first. This meant that somebody out there was interested in JCP, and hooray for that. I then thought in terms of a TV programme, but encountered only frustration. Over the years I put forward several detailed proposals to the BBC, UK4, S4C, and ITV companies, either directly or through my agent or independent programme makers. Sometimes guarded interest was shown, but more often than not there was no response whatsoever. It is possible, of course, that the quality of the submissions was to blame, but since I continued to be given other TV commissions I find it hard to believe the fault was entirely mine. The fact is that John Cowper Powys is not a writer whom TV commissioning editors rush to embrace. Possibly they have never heard of him; or they have heard of him vaguely but don't know much about him; all in all, he is too problematic a

figure and for the sake of their careers he is best left alone.

I believe that all this is about to change and that by the dawn of the next century the self-styled zany and charlatan will be in fashion, for what he said and the sort of person he was fits in with the kind of philosophy which will be seen as essential to the survival of civilisation in the 21st century. He will be doing his manic dance on television long before this, however, for I am happy to say that success has at last come my way, with a commission to write a 60-minute

drama-documentary for HTV Cymru/Wales. The commission has come from the company's head of factual programmes, Menna Richards, so if you're in a celebratory mood raise your glasses to her. Praise, too, for the Cardiff-based independent company Llundain Lliw, which is actually making the programme for HTV. You must decide if there is any praise for me after seeing the programme, which will be screened on 12 December 1994 under the title "The Great Powys".

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

PETER G. CHRISTENSEN, a Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow in English at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has published many articles on a broad range of European writers including Dostoevsky, Rilke and Lawrence, with several on J. C. Powys.

JOHN W. DOWDING is a schoolmaster in Norfolk.

H. W. FAWKNER, Professor of English at the University of Stockholm, includes in his publications books on Dickens (1977), Fowles (1984), John Cowper Powys (1986) and three on Shakespeare, the latest being *Shakespeare's Miracle Plays* (Associated University Press, 1992).

VICTOR GOLIGHTLY completed an MPhil. thesis on Gwyn Thomas at University of Wales, Swansea in 1991 and is now engaged in research on the influence of W. B. Yeats on the work of Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins.

ROWENA GRIFFITHS lives in Hove. Her daughter, Judith Robinson, is a Personal Counsellor at the University of Sussex.

GEOFFREY GUNTHER, a lecturer in English at the University of New England, Armidale,

N.S.W., Australia, is the author of *Shakespeare as Traditional Artist* (California: A. Johannesen Whitehorn, 1994).

L. R. LEAVIS, son of two famous academics, lectures in English at the Catholic University, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

ROBERT MIGHALL, presently completing a PhD thesis on 19th century literary 'decadence' for University of Wales, Lampeter, is Junior Research Fellow, Merton College, Oxford.

JUDITH STINTON, co-ordinator for the new Writers' Gallery at Dorset County Museum, is author of five children's books, the 1994 volume entitled *Under Black Ven: Mary Anning's Story*, and of *Chaldon Herring: The Powys Circle in a Dorset Village* (Boydell, 1988).

OLIVER and CHRISTOPHER WILKINSON are the son and grandson of Frances Gregg. Oliver Wilkinson, lecturer and dramatist, is no stranger to *The Powys Review*.

HERBERT WILLIAMS, journalist, producer for BBC Radio, has published poetry, short stories, several topographical novels, and a biography of David Davies of Llandinam (1990).