

Elementalism, according to John Cowper Powys

READERS OF John Cowper Powys have already assimilated, perhaps unknowingly, a notion which is very personal to him, that of “elementalism” but upon closer examination, it is not easy to give a precise definition of a concept which is however deeply embedded in his philosophy throughout all his work, be it allusively.

This word does not exist in French. French dictionaries only give the definition of “elements”, the totality of natural forces, or of “the four elements”, ultimate components of reality. According to the Shorter OED, “Elementalism” is the “worship of the elementary powers of nature”. The great Powysian critic G. Wilson Knight offers a more satisfactory definition with respect to its use by Powys:

What he [Powys] counsels directly and indirectly in both his fiction and his teaching is what he sometimes calls “elementalism”. He urges us to cultivate the Wordsworthian power of feeling into the inanimate; to enjoy all nature, and especially its less obviously living manifestations, such as earth, stone, wind and sea, not haphazardly but by an act of will.¹

It seems that for Powys “elementalism” may be substituted for religion. Water, stone, wind, matter, animated or inanimate, all pertaining to an unfathomable mystery, Powys, his will acting on his imagination, transmutes them all in order to reach the level of a liberated being. It is important to follow the evolution of this fundamental notion from childhood onwards.

His preoccupation with nature and the elements appears very early in his life. At the very beginning of *Autobiography* he tells us how one of his oldest memories is the image of Mount Cloud, — a grassy hill — which revealed to him *the ecstasy of the unbounded*, and which he tried to reproduce in the garden with “damp earth-mould covered over with moss.” Then came the desire to become a Magician, for the imaginative and solitary child had the feeling that there was a secret, a mystery... to be captured and mastered. In fact, it will take many years before he begins to perceive his true self. This indeed is shown by the first two novels, by *Confessions of Two Brothers*, which describe a tortured, anxious and almost Byronic John Cowper who sees himself as “insane” and for whom detachment, both mental and sensual, has the form of an “*impasse*”², and by the letters he sends Llewelyn from America, at least until he meets Phyllis. Nevertheless the idea of a possible and beneficent transformation makes its way in his mind, like a rivulet under rocks, and begins to emerge in *The Complex Vision* (1920), while in the prologue Powys explains:

The main purpose of the book reveals, however, the only escape from all the pain and misery of life which is worthy of the soul of man. And this is

¹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, The Harvester Press, 1964, p.20

² *Confessions of Two Brothers*, Sinclair Browne, 1982, p.25

not so much an escape from life as a transfiguring of the nature of life by means of a newly born attitude toward it.³

Slowly we witness in Powys a wish to get rid of all superfluous matter, to deliberately link his vision of the world only to primordial elements, “stark reality”, stone, stars, wind. The ichthyosaurus which appears in *In Defence of Sensuality* is connected to the elemental, as well as his practice of viewing himself as an ambulatory skeleton (something which he may have found in Tibetan philosophy) or his worship of the wind. His deepest wish is to make a clean sweep of that which is non-essential:

If I have learnt anything from my life in America it is a certain lonely and perhaps rather desperate stoicism, a certain stark endurance of one's fate in the presence of air and water and fire and the basic rock-structures of this earth.⁴

Wordsworth exerted a great influence over Powys, especially through the gift the old poet possessed “of thinking with his senses” as Shelley had remarked, and to make us feel the greatness of human life through ordinary moments, far from all romanticism. Wordsworth, like Thomas Hardy, is conscious of the tragic quality of life, but he draws from his observations of nature, at its most austere and rugged, a feeling of wild independence, a sort of exaltation. He knows the price of every happy moment in the simple act of living — Powys will make his the famous: “The pleasure which there is in life itself” — and, long before Proust, Wordsworth tries to delineate those extraordinary moments when one feels, even briefly, an ecstasy provoked by a sensation bringing back to the surface of our memory an involuntary souvenir of some incident which had seemingly been forgotten, and which strikes one as a cosmic shock:

(...) And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round oceans and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.⁵

Powys had found in Wordsworth two essential keys to help him in his mental development. The first is the necessity to be detached, egoistical, and to show a *sacred stupidity* according to Powys, so as to focalise on the most important and to be able to capture, as a perfect magician, the essence of life, reduced to its main components. As for the second key, Wordsworth thought it necessary to call forth the intercession of very young girls, who provide a bond with nature in

³ *The Complex Vision*, Village Press, 1975

⁴ *Autobiography*, Colgate University Press, 1968, p.496. All references are to this edition.

⁵ W. Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*

its wild and irreducible character. Powys agrees:

From Heraclitus to Wordsworth there have been great soothsayers who have implicitly recognised the truth that it is really by a sort of diffused “lust” that the lonely soul ravishes the fleeting essence of Life in all its multiple incarnations.⁶

“Lust” is a strong word. In the OED it is defined as “libidinous desire, degrading animal passion”, but Powys attenuates its force by adding “diffused”. Like “Jacob’s ladders”, young girls will be used to reach an almost metaphysical level of ecstasy. In his novels, one meets these young girls who enable the “hero” to accede to another world: Gerda in *Wolf Solent* for instance, but also Christie in the same book, who exists more through her spirit than her body... One is also reminded of Sylvanus Cobbold in *Weymouth Sands*, holding young Marret in his arms:

And as he now held this slender young being in his arms, who even in her sleep, made little natural movements of confiding contentment, he began using her young warmth, even as the aged King David did that of the youthful Abishag, to strengthen his colloquy with the mystery of the cosmos.(...) What tormented him now (...) was the difficulty of explaining the atrocious suffering in the world under the hypothesis of the kind of Absolute he had hitherto imagined.⁷

Powys never varied in the search for his feminine ideal. From the little cut-out figures in the magazine for youngsters *Ally Sloper* to the drawings found in old editions of *Punch*, his favourite type of woman always remained the same and is found again in the delicate figure of Phyllis Playter:

(...) certain oval-faced, delicate-limbed sylphs that the early Victorian artists used to amuse themselves by tossing with a certain elfin mischief into their marginal spaces. This sylphid type of feminine loveliness, evasive, aerial, characterless as flowing water soon came to be the type that appealed most to my intense, if sterile desire. I have always had a tenderness for those shadowy beings known in the history of magic as elementals; and have invariably preferred the society of an Undine to that of a Thais. (p.123)

In *Autobiography* Powys is very clear as to the particular nature of his erotic requirements. He abhors “normal” sexuality, such as it is preached and lived by Llewelyn. Any triumphant, accomplished femininity is distasteful to him.

What I would say of myself is that I have a morbid fastidiousness, a super-refined, almost *maidenly* detestation of the grosser aspects of normal sexuality. It seems quite simple to me. In my non-human cult for impossibly slender sylphs I resolve myself — like all true contemplative ecstasies — *into the element I contemplate*. (p.275)

His taste is for suggested, slim, androgynous figures. His curious sexuality is most impersonal, as he says himself, and in no way connected to a traditional conception of love.”Love” is a word he does not like and for which, in another

⁶ *In Defence of Sensuality*, Gollancz, 1930, p.274

⁷ *Weymouth Sands*, Rivers Press, 1973, p.380



Frances Gregg, early 1900 (photo courtesy Chris Wilkinson)

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?

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! (Feb. 1912). *Jack and Frances, The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg*, ed. by Oliver Wilkinson, Cecil Woolf, London, 1994

Toi, mon démon, ma chatte de mer solitaire et folle, pourquoi m'as-tu infecté de ta vile aversion pour la bonne humanité chaleureuse, aimable, bien intentionnée, accomplie?

En vérité comme j'aimerais me laver ma mémoire maculée de chacune des émotions sexuelles que j'ai jamais éprouvées — exception faite de toi; (et que je sois damné si ce mot décrit ce qu'à aucun moment nous ressentons) comme toi tu laverai ma bouche, mes yeux, ma gorge et chaque pore de ma peau avec un mordant savon saturnien!

context, he prefers to substitute the Greek “agapè”, compassion. As he candidly tells us in *Autobiography*, “although happily married”, what the young husband enjoys contemplating most of all are the legs and ankles of young women on Brighton beach. This enjoyment is purely visual and satisfies his “lust”, he is by no means pining for physical intercourse.

Schools of girls... shoals of girls... flocks and flurries of girls (...) It conveyed to my mind a sort of fleeting, floating, fluttering fantasy of feminity, a kind of Platonic essence of sylph-hood, not exactly virginal sylphid-ness, but the state of being-a-Sylph carried to such a limit of tenuity as almost to cease to have any of the ordinary feminine attributes. (...) When I saw a real girl I saw a feminine person, almost a feminine man; but these “girls” of my imagination, or rather I ought to say of my desire, could all have stood, thousands of them together, like those jeered-at angels of scholasticism on the narrow apex of my winnowed, purged, and three-times-over-refined fastidiousness. (p.205-6)

But in 1911 malicious Destiny was to put in John Cowper’s way a girl who had all “the ordinary feminine attributes” but who also held all the characteristics he had been vainly seeking, up to their encounter.

What I call my heart was hit as it has not been often hit. (...) It is by no means what you would call a passionate heart. But whatever kind of heart it may be it was certainly pierced through and through by one of the arrows in *that* quiver! (...) The feelings that this beautiful girl in boy’s clothes excited in me rose like flames that were as many-coloured in their flashing sword-points as those angels I had prayed to in the London Hospital. (p.406)

Frances Gregg is the “boy-girl” of the Venetian episode told in *Autobiography*. The encounter, or rather collision, of these two exceptionnal beings will provide a terrible shock and will later have serious consequences on John Cowper’s mental health. As he is already married, he hits on the incredible idea of making Frances marry his great friend Louis Wilkinson, a monstrous error. Their mutual attachment will go through many difficult phases. The marvellous and strange creature becomes a mother and therefore loses her status of “sylphid”. However Frances, ten years before Phyllis, provided an earthly replica of the sylphids of his youth.

Phyllis the T.T. (which means the “tiny thin”) will be very often evoked in his Diaries as his “little elemental”:

(...) Whereas the Elemental with whom I live excites my amorous propensities & wickedness & rouses my romantic interest. In fact I am like the Scholar-Gipsy who lives with a real Gipsy.

and he adds, a few days later:

Thus I have, with growth of a more refined taste, & also — above *all* be it noted — having found my Little Ballad Girl who satisfies all my abnormal Wickedness — completely re-created myself & by degrees, in my worship of the Chtonian Demeter of the British Museum & my life with

the T.T., I am changing my Life-Illusion into something quieter, more earthly, more patient, more primeval, more simple.⁸

The great secret John-the-Magician has gradually discovered is that man has the possibility to use his free will and his imagination to break down “the bars of his human prison” so that he may try and reach these other worlds he feels exist, because, according to Powys, “true reality is entirely of the spirit”.

There is, indeed, an incredible feeling of liberation when one realises one’s lonely identity in the midst of rocks and stones and trees and the great silent motions of the constellations; not to speak of planetary spirits and all the invisible organisms that fill the gulfs of space!⁹

He tried to practise this cult of all forces, alive and non-alive, through various techniques which he will divulge towards the end of *Autobiography*. Powys strongly believed in the idea that our mind, if we apply enough strength to it, is able to move, like these cohorts of angels he sent on missions to help people who are suffering, and these thoughts therefore become “elementals” too.

I do not know much about Paracelsus, (...) but one idea of his (...) has sunk deep into my mind. This is the idea that our intensely-concentrated thoughts can become “elementals”, faintly-living entities, that is to say, whose dimly-vitalized shapes, once projected from the creative energy of a person’s imaginative will, can go on existing and acting in some etheric dimension of that psychic plane in which all so-called “matter” floats. (p.631)

In his Diaries which he started in 1929, we witness the beginning of the increasing peace he felt, especially when he left New York for Phudd Bottom. It is there, in the midst of uncultivated wilderness, that he lives a contented life, and what he describes shows that his life is at last in harmony with his deepest aspirations. Moreover he reveals in *Autobiography* that from the time he lived in upstate N.Y. he quite got rid of his vicious tendencies, of his pornographic readings:

Had the great god Eros himself done this? Was it the work of an Elemental? Nature undoubtedly helped. (p.614)

This “Elementalism” which Powys had sought all his life and which he calls his “natural birthright” (p.276) is at last reached and constitutes a constructive and accomplished living entity. A spiritual marriage is consummated, linking the feminine “elemental”, who complements him and shares his life, with wild nature strictly reduced to its essential components.

But I still want to make love to what attracts me! And so, refining upon flesh-and-blood and winnowing flesh-and-blood, till it becomes purified if not beyond Nature certainly beyond normal *human* nature, I contemplate my sylph as if I were another sylph, or, if you prefer it, as if I were a salamander contemplating the ravishing limbs of an undine. (p.275-6)

Powys, through all these elements at last harmonised, can from then on

⁸ *Petrushka & The Dancer*, Carcanet, 1995, 6 and 12 March, 1932

⁹ *In Defence of Sensuality*, p.264-5

exult and share his belief that it is an absolute necessity to return to a stark, *primitive* appreciation of the world surrounding us, “The Thing in itself”. Only then can our soul “touch that primal energy of creation, of which the common inanimate and the common elements are the simplest embodiment”¹⁰ and we must immerse ourselves in it to retrieve a cosmic unity.

J. Peltier

Every woman is a sea-shell, within whose hollow curves the great ocean of life murmurs its hidden secrets; and it is this mystic realism of theirs that evokes that indescribable smile that so often crosses their faces when they listen to man — man the abstractor of essences, man the projector of theories, man the creator of ideas, man the discoverer of laws — droning on, like a great metaphysical bumble-bee, on the high shores of the many-sounding deep.

JCP, *The Art of Happiness*

¹⁰ *Pleasures of Literature*, Cassell, 1938, p.356