A Modern Outside Modernism: J. C. Powys.

By Larson Powell

How long
Do works last? (...)
As long as they continue to cause us trouble
They do not decay. (Brecht)[1]

I. The Edge of Madness

The wildness of John Cowper Powys' writing may drive one to distraction and despair once one has yielded to initial fascination. To make the criticism that he did not reread or edit or polish, that he lacked Latinity, the sense of the work as object independent of his own untamed imagination, appears almost irrelevant before one's astonishment at his sheer brazen candor. He is able to write out stirrings or impulses so far below any control by the ego that one feels cowardly beside him. Near the end of *Wolf Solent*, as the hero confronts the loss of his "life-illusion" or "mythology," he meets up with one of the book's minor, sinister Gothic figures of lower-class village misery, tending the grave of his own (Solent's) predecessor.

> He must have been at the cellar-floor of misery when he licked with his mental tongue the filthy toenails of Mr Monk.[2]

Complete abjection; the undoing of art. The disgust evoked here would link Powys rather with Bataille or Jelinek. How could this be contained in any finished form? Not that of Breton's *Nadja,* with which *Solent* was roughly contemporary. Comparisons to Continental modernism would be easy: the beginning of *Solent* closely resembles that of Gottfried Benn's *Rönne Novellas* of 1916: a man in a train, aged circa thirty, beginning a new segment of his life. If Rönne comes eventually to fail in his profession, incapable of maintaining his public role, Solent has already done so at the beginning of his novel,

[1] „Über die Bauart langandauernder Werke," *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1967), v.8, p. 387.
[2] *Wolf Solent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 626.

having "danced his 'malice-dance' – that is how he himself expressed it" (14) in the middle of teaching. At the end of the novel, it is as if Solent were being *replaced* in the narrative by Lord Carfax, who will repeat all of Solent's actions with which the book began (611); so too, Benn's Rönne "sat one morning at his breakfast table and was moved; he felt so deeply that the head doctor would leave, a replacement would come, get out of bed at this hour and take his breakfast roll"[3] – namely he himself, suspended in the subjunctive, conditional tense, in what Musil would call "sense for possibility" (*Möglichkeitssinn*). Individuality is, in both cases, subsumed under a mythic, conditional role playable by anyone.

Powys may appear in some sense less radical than Continental modernists like Breton, Benn, or Proust; the difference lies in his obstinate empiricism: "No system at all! Only to dissolve into thin, fluctuating vapour..." (374). Like Jean Paul, Powys suspects Idealist systems, and his mysticism cohabits with an odd loyalty to particular sensation; he will not *construct*, will not *créér un poncif* (Baudelaire). The course of *Solent* is thus *not* Proust's triumph over Time, or Dedalus' invocation of the "old artificer" as patron saint, but the destruction of Solent's "life-illusion" or "mythology," also the *fons et origo* of art. The narrative is therefore not one of the work's triumph over the world, but the reverse: how to survive defeat, to live, in part, after art has lost its claims to totality. This is precisely what gives Powys his acuteness today, after the apparent end of all *isms*. Because *Solent*'s main character is enclosed in a primitive, childish abundance of imagination and meaning, nothing can happen to him except comical incongruity and Quixotic mishap, which he must nonetheless *see as necessary*, as inseparable from his infinite interiority. (The constant fear one has lost one's integrity, one's wholeness of experience, which runs throughout the book, is characteristically adolescent.) Solent is as hopelessly stuck in childishness, as dependent on women, as the heroes of early Wenders (Philip Winter in *Alice in the Cities,* Wilhelm in *Wrong Move,* or Friedrich Munro in *The State of Things,* for whom no stories can ever end except in death.) This state is figured in the texture of the novel's writing. In its wild roughness of style – its unexpected italics, purpled adjectives and exclamation marks – and the surprising, unpredictable

[3] Benn, "Gehirne," *Die Erzählungen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt 1970), p. 13.

quality of its narrative, *Solent* resembles nothing so much as Kafka's early "Description of a Struggle." It is Expressionism in English, full of primordial father-son conflicts wherein the son loses, or prefers a Kafka-like evasive sidestep into perversion and the status of the Holy Fool to overt victory.

Thus as astonishing as the abjection of Monk's filthy toenails is the misery of Solent's sexual failure at the climactic moment of the book, when he is left alone with the child-wife Christie and cannot possess her, suddenly frozen in impotence with a vision of an unhappy man's face from a London crowd he had seen earlier in the narrative. This Face has been repeated throughout the book, perhaps (by about 447) excessively, but not always with the same meaning; at one point Solent believes that it "*gave* you your happiness" (153). The result is however no return to any conventional morality, not even the heterodox Christianity of Dostoyevsky (whom Powys admired, and to whom this vision of misery is close). For no such confrontation with the abject real can ever be conclusive. The literary form of near-madness is an open one. *Solent* has thus to remain open-ended, punctuated, despite its frequent Victorianisms of prose, with strange Gothic narrative tricks, real *arcana*. They result from the combinatory, associative procedure of the book, the way in which it juxtaposes external events and objects with purely subjective states and figures. There are passages here which can only be compared with what Adorno called "Knoten" (nodal points) in musical structures.[4] One such passage is Solent's visit to the tomb of King Aethelwolf with Selena Gault (chapter 14, 318), in clear parallelism to his own father's grave, and yet the puzzle is left uninterpreted. The course of the narrative is regulated, as in poetry, by compulsive repetitions, magical correspondences and superstitious, ritualized aversions. Another nodal passage is the confrontation between Solent's mother Ann and his young wife Gerda at Redfern's grave (ch. 18, 381), where Solent's mother quotes from "The Pot of Basil" and Solent then from *Hamlet.* The suffocating accumulation of signification becomes such that Solent loses all control of himself and bursts out in an incomprehensible rage, turned precisely against his one friend Darnley Otter, who is holding his arm as they walk through a country fair:

4 "Form in der neuen Musik," *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997) *16:* 620.

> "Avoid! Avoid!" he suddenly flung out; and with the same spasmodic impulse, as he uttered this strange cry, he tore his arm free. "It's a trick! It's a trick! It's a trick!" He let his voice quiver without restraint, as he hissed out these words, though he knew perfectly well that the ugly contraction of the muscles of his mouth, as much as the word itself, must have been very agitating to his companion. But for this, just then, he cared nothing. If he could have made himself clear to that anxious face, that now gazed at him so concernedly, what he really felt at that moment, it would have resolved itself into something like this: His mother and Gerda had lost their separate identities. They had become the prodding shaft of yellow light that was at the same time the point of Darnley's trim beard! This shaft was now pushing him towards another misery, which took the form of a taste in his mouth, a taste that he especially loathed, though he could only have defined it, even to himself, as the taste of salad and vinegar! But, whatever it was, *this taste was Miss Gault*. (...) Between these two things – the blighting light and the corrosive taste – he felt and actual indrawn knot of impotence tying itself together within him... (392-3)

In these nodal moments, the writing pulls together and condenses its motifs in metaphors suggesting a prose poem.[5] Solent has nothing of Stephen Dedalus' "silence and cunning:" he cannot defend himself at all. The same capacity for pantheistic dissolution in the landscape proves here his enemy, as he is overwhelmed by prehistoric matriarchal demons. The tendency of the narrative to simile, at other times kept within the confines of characterization (as at the first encounter with Selena Gault, who is compared to tree-fungi and a crafty draft horse on pp. 27-29), here overwhelms any outer world. This is why Solent's mythology is Gnostic at bottom.

> The sun was so low now that could look straight into its great red circle suspended above the roofs of the town. It resembled, as he looked at it, a vast fiery tunnel, the mouth of some colossal piece of artillery directed full against him. (264)

> Ernst Bloch saw something similar in "The House of the Day:"
> The morning has no house, when one goes on further in it, but it can become a fearful one, *if one runs into its radical beginning.* In the primal dawn, which has still much in it, not only a polished surface, and least of all that macrocosmic space of breath, for which Faust longs at his desk... the *reverse* twilight came on,

[5] There are similar moments in the novels of Alfred Döblin (see their discussion in my book, *The Technological Unconscious in Modern German Literature,* Rochester: Camden House, 2008, p. 154); as in Döblin, the condensation of meaning acquires here a near-paranoid intensity.

> which was uncanny to earlier times, the embryonic narrowness of the day right before the cock's crowing. (...) To the left stood Jupiter, the only star on the milky skin. Jupiter rising; a strong eye, which seemed near precisely through its strength. And at the same time it was palpable that *the landscape was in agreement with this look;* indeed, Jupiter had first provoked this incomprehensible ensemble, as a guest in the space or as the lord holding the reins among his creatures. The star ruled so powerfully that it even tore the viewer down from his contemplative terrace, right into the thick of the scene, where there were no longer any eyes or distances for any standing outside or above. (...) The witness felt himself as in the inside of an animal body, a world-animal-body with Jupiter as its inner eye.[6]

It is the Landscape of the Uncanny, one where any difference between inside and out has dissolved. In Bloch's passage as in many in Powys, one feels as if one has, impossibly, gone inside the sun itself. Solent's weapon against this terrifying, Panic sense is comedy and obscenity:

> He became, in fact, a living human head, emerging from a monstrous agglomeration of all repulsiveness. And this gross mass was not only foul and excremental, it was in some mysterious way *comic*.(289)

The typical Modernist shock is here muted, since the idea remains an idea. In a later book, *Owen Glendower,* a character's string of invectives is decently cut off:

> "God griddle his –" And the Scab ended with one of the foulest oaths our traveller had ever heard. (I: 18)

Powys' friend Henry Miller would have included that foul oath.

*S*hortly after his Gnostic epiphany as excremental head, Solent "felt lighter, freer, liberated from the malice of matter" (289). This does not last, though. He must finally destroy the very illusion on which his storytelling depends. That illusion seems to reach its hallucinatory, insane culmination in the last chapter. Solent is again near his father's grave, this time with Lord Carfax, who plays an almost *deus ex machina* role in concluding an inherently infinite narrative (he is the new element who must be added to the story as if from outside to close it off, although he has been obliquely involved from the beginning). Solent decides not to show Carfax the grave, and is telling him how to

6 "Das Haus des Tags," *Spuren* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1979), 163-4 (my translation); see also "The Back of Things" on p. 172ff..

get back to his hotel, and he realizes he is "*surprised* at having seen nothing of Miss Gault" with whom he first saw the grave. That surprise becomes a literal hallucination.

> His mind, now preoccupied with Miss Gault, became now most vividly conscious of the slaughterhouse. The slaughterhouse looked especially harmless at the moment; but he regarded it with sick aversion.
> "These deeds must not be thought about after these ways; so, it will make us mad."
>
> Of course, even while he saw her standing there, he knew he was imagining it, and that she had no palpable reality. This phenomenon, this visualizing of a bodily image that was *known* by his reason to be unreal, was one that he had suffered from before.
> "You'll find her," he was speaking of the sedate lady in the hotel-office, "very stiff but very polite." But while he was uttering these words, he saw Miss Gault's figure quite palpably before him. He saw her bony shoulders turned to him, black in the roadway. And there was her arm, with clenched hand, lifted up in prophetic malediction!
> "They're killing something in there," he thought. And then, for the infinitesimal part of a second, there arose within him an awareness of blinding pain, followed by thick darkness smeared with out-rushing blood. As this sank away, there ensued a murky dizziness in his brain, accompanied by a shocking sense that both his father's skull and this woman's arm were appealing to him to do something that he lacked the courage to do. His legs has turned into immovable lead, as happens in nightmares.
> "Very stiff... very polite," he repeated mechanically, perfectly conscious that he was smiling into the man's face with a forced repulsive smile.
> But Carfax had suddenly become an alert, compact man of action.(...)
> "Off with you, lad!" he said in a pleasant voice. (614-615)

The key to this passage is the metonymic parallel between the slaughterhouse and Solent's father's grave, which then becomes delusional reality. As Solent realizes – informed telepathically by Selena Gault – that an animal is being killed nearby, he enters into the animal's death and relives it himself; the implication is also that his father had been killed as helplessly as at a slaughterhouse. What he "lacked the courage to do" is to kill Lord Carfax, his father's and Miss Gault's enemy, and the ally of his omnipotent mother, the Whale (137) in which he as Jonah is repeatedly swallowed (cf. also the scene on 302). (Carfax, moreover, clearly embodies that English class system Powys himself hated and fled for the wilds of America and later Wales, a system inseparable from a certain kind of Mother-and-nanny-driven *propriety*.) Thus when Carfax denounces

Solent's erstwhile patron Urquhart for his paranoid delusions, his self-accusations, regarding the death of Redfern, Solent recognizes his own mythology as the object of this. Yet he can still recognize that, as he stands again by his father's grave, "He had told himself a story in that brief while!" In this little fable, he tells his counterpart, the nameless Man of the Waterloo Steps,

> You needn't suffer. I let you off. *You are allowed to forget.* It doesn't matter what your secret life is. I've told you what mine is; and now I tell you that it can be borne. (617)

Ego absolvo te. *Asperges me hyssopo, et mundabor*. And thus: "He said grimly to himself, 'No gestures now!'" (626) No more eternal remembering of the undead. For the first time, Solent appears to gain something almost like a will, a body. He is now armed with a magical formula, yet it is one he can practice: *forget and endure*. "'I must have the courage of my cowardice,' he thought." (631) What does this mean? On one level, it might resemble Kierkegaard's familiar willing to be oneself (*The Sickness Unto Death*), and yet this is already too moral. The courage of cowardice is paradoxical, certainly, as well as tautological, but it is a paradox exposing something like the irrational nature beneath all will, all ego or I.

Anti-System

Due to his inability or unwillingness to systematize, Powys' novels do not fully break through into that modernist Beyond of Proust, Joyce, Kafka or Musil. Rather they appear to contain a very modern thematics of death, perversion, liminal experience and self-dissolution, within a nineteenth-century narrative.[7] This gives his next three novels, *A Glastonbury Romance, Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle* an odd instability: an ultimately metaphysical thematic is awkwardly staged in a series of episodic vignettes, where a still rather nineteenth-century detailing of milieu and character sits uncomfortably with what becomes – cut off from the concretion of aesthetic method and substantivized – a weird private religion. In his very last works, this private religion will

7 So Glen Cavaliero on *Solent:"*a nineteenth-century medium stretched almost beyond its capacity to bear a twentieth-century subject matter" (*John Cowper Powys: Novelist,* Oxford, Clarendon 1973, p. 49).

cut free of Art altogether and be stated in the naked form of a parable. (Powys is not alone in this: Alfred Döblin, who had converted to Catholicism in the dark days of World War Two in California, would write similar fables such as "Fairy Tale of Materialism" in his last years.) It is this that has given Powys the less than fully justified title of "philosopher," and that has contributed also to his continuing marginality, even to a certain cult-like quality of his followers and interpreters. (As we will see, though, there is an aspect of Powys' claim to the philosophical that must be taken seriously, and that is his belief – a nineteenth-century inheritance – that literature must serve life, and not seal itself off in any posture of *l'art pour l'art*.) His correspondent Louis Wilkinson was a Crowley adept; a book from the 1980s argues quite seriously that *Porius* is only comprehensible as a *roman à clef* about – alchemy.[8] This cultic aspect might remind one of Hesse, whose Harry Haller (in *Steppenwolf*) has more than a little similarity to his contemporary Wolf Solent. One should beware of dismissing any scent of the cultic out of hand: cult is often the earliest form of public renown. Wagner's Bayreuth has always had something of the cult about it; a recent unsympathetic commentator called Adorno and followers "a Bayreuth for philosophers of history after the capsizing of big ideas."[9] This is no argument against Adorno, though, for any real thought must be polemical, if it is to do more than collaborate with conformity. A figure like Lacan, too, retains something of the cult in his following, yet this is only an index of the University's continuing inability to assimilate him into its normal routines. Such eccentricity is central to Powys.

Of these middle novels, *Glastonbury* is the weakest, in part because one cannot shake the suspicion that it is what Adorno called "an estranged masterpiece" (*verfremdetes Hauptwerk*), which tries too hard for monumentality, and cannot escape appearing a diffuse imitation *of Ulysses*. (At moments one wonders whether the caricature of Philip Crow the capitalist is not also simultaneously one of Joycean modernism, as when Crow bursts out in an odd parody of associational stream-of-

8 Morine Krisdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (London: Macdonald, 1980).

9 Tobias Plebuch, "Musikhören nach Adorno," *Merkur,* no. 640 (August 2002), p. 680.

consciousness with technological imagery.)[10] There are still fine moments, such as John Geard's nocturnal Gnostic visions (453f.), or Sam Dekker's revelation of "a Christ in matter that is nearer the Grail than the Christ of the Church" (943). Powys is still struggling with the old Romantic problem of the Inexpressible, the horizon beyond language, and "the issue of the struggle that went on tonight between the Enemies of the Legend and its Lovers would evade all but supernatural narration, however one might struggle to body it forth" (747). Even as a failure, this is still more interesting than a minor success.

Powys' refusal to systematize his art is linked to his un-modern suspicion of natural science, perhaps one of his less interesting aspects, since often stated in the form of curmudgeonly negation. Yet he overcomes this in part in his portrait of Dr. Daniel Brush in *Weymouth Sands*, a figure who anticipates the anti-psychiatry movement (R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz) after 1945. Precisely in his depersonalization, Brush is the complement to the madman Sylvanus Cobbold, who has made a ritual method out of his delusions, an esoteric art drawing on Taoist sexual practices. (One can only imagine the high moralizing dudgeon and censure that would today be directed at Powys for daring to present Cobbold the perverse child-lover in so sympathetic a light: an index of how ambiguous our current vogue for individual "rights" may be. Powys was nothing if not the sworn enemy of stolid, secure middle-class propriety.) Cobbold's weird private rituals have elements of Freud's Rat-Man or even Schreber; like the latter, he has a *Grundsprache* (fundamental language), central to which is the incantation *Caput-Anus* (Bataille's *L'Anus solaire*). This is complemented by ritual use of garden tools, addressed with "a kind of Homeric litany:"

> "The Pick," he repeated in a droning liturgical intonation. "The Pick, the Spade, the Fork, the Rake, the Hoe." And then he added, peering into a portion of the great barn where a substantial wheelbarrow – in a tone exactly as if this last object's dim identity exacted more propitiation than the rest – "and the *very good* wheelbarrow!"[11]

10 *A Glastonbury Romance* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1996), p. 51.
11 *Weymouth Sands* (Woodstock: Overlook Press 1999), p. 390.

> A rope in the shed, emblematic of the terror of suicide, is even given a name, Trivia, and begged to have mercy on its owner.
> "Trivia, Trivia, Trivia, Trivia, Trivia," he repeated, as if pleading for remission of sins.(396)

Cobbold has just been abandoned by the girl Marret, his partner in esoteric sexual mysticism, and is trying via apotropaic and incantatory magic to fight off despair.

> "Caput-anus," he mumbled; and having this in the numbness of his loss jumbled his two words together, he repeated this curious expression several times over with that deep craving to be comforted by symbolic gibberish that attracts children to certain ancient nursery rhymes.(405-406)

This "symbolic gibberish" plays a role in many of Powys' novels. The "Tup's Fold" chapter of *Weymouth Sands* is one of Powys' great dramatic confrontations, as those between Solent and his mother, Solent and Christie, Solent and Jason Otter or Mr Urquhart. The ultimate predecessor for this would be Dostoyevsky: not only the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, but also the astonishing dramatic meetings of Rogozhin, Nastasya Philippovna and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. Dr. Brush confesses to Cobbold that "nothing would give me more pleasure than if you were to pick up that poker and knock my brains out." For a moment, Cobbold sinks down into the same projective or hallucinatory delusions as Solent. It is the Temptation of St. Anthony.

> As Sylvanus gazed at the Doctor and pondered upon this startling remark, there came upon him a very curious sensation. He suddenly found himself seized with a queer feeling, as if the Doctor, stretched out there before him, was really a *woman!* (...)
> "Caput-Anus!" he cried in his heart, "what in the devil's name is happening to me? Am I going mad? Is it with this that it begins? Are you really flapping over there in that chair, you little fool? Are you really wanting me to 'tart' you? *If not,* why do I feel -- " (536-7)

Cobbold grasps at this moment something like a hidden *femininity of Science* itself, kin to the other *Magnae Matres* of Modernity, namely Capital and the Law, and of which Dr. Brush is only a drone-servant, just as the Boys of Business are to Money.

> "You poor devil!" thought Sylvanus. "What I feel now as I look at you is quite reason enough for your being unhappy. We need an opposite sex, just as plants need water."

Neither Sylvanus nor Powys are homosexual, close as they may brush up to homoeroticism. Brush breaks the spell the same way as did Lord Carfax at the end of *Solent,* namely with a mocking bluff and a smile. It is Lacan's prisoner's dilemma: one man must pretend to be a man, for fear the others will not think him one. Manhood rests every bit as much on public masquerade, on being-for-other, as does womanhood. At Brush's smile, Sylvanus reacts with anger; the clock on the mantel rings.

> With the dying away of the last reverberations of the clock a thirst for Marret came over Sylvanus that made him howl like a famished wolf. He did actually give vent to a cry that seemed hardly human.(540)
>
> He rushed weeping from the Doctor's study (...) uttering, qute without any intention of doing such a thing, one of those childish jingles of his.
>
> But after doing so, he turns to the Doctor:
> "Damn your soul!" he cried savagely. "You are not a man!"

The person who *is* a man is George Protty, a "demented ornothologist" who thinks he is a Phoenix, but can nonetheless muster up the civility to bid Cobbold good night "in a tone full of respectful consideration." Being a man, in Powys, means being able to act, and act with others, as Dr. Brush cannot, locked off in a position of morbid contemplation of life as he is. Action can also mean recognizing the necessity of social convention as well (as even Porius will do). The chapter ends with Cobbold returning the greeting with the same conventional English civility as Solent's final "cup of tea." His wolf's-howl was in fact a paradoxical return to heterosexual desire, taking the form of animality, of a forsaken creatureliness that must provoke tears as its complement (the capacity to desire and that for sadness and fear being inseparable).

Maiden Castle, too, despite the weakness of many of its characters, centers on a similar grandiose confrontation, in this case between Dud No-Man and his father Enoch (Urien) Quirm. It is always child against parent in Powys (a moment linking him to the Oedipal battles of the Expressionists), but never more so than here, where the Father has absorbed the Mother into himself, being nothing other than the Horde-Father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Thus Dud's denying assertion (Freud's *Verleugnung*) that

> *I'm* not one of your women – I'm *not* your daughter.

This is related to Cobbold's perception of Dr. Brush as a woman. To Dud's denial, Urien responds uncannily with a strange, hollow noise in his throat:

> …as he watched him he made sort of wind-in-the-telegraph-wire sound in his throat, a humming and drumming noise…[12]

This eerie sound is metonymically related to the train-whistles Dud then hears with such relief a page later (227), and its spell is only broken when the two men reach the gate and Urien speaks to him in a normal voice, of which the "effect… was to drive out of him every intimation of the supernatural" (229). Since Urien is as if a part of Dud, his own hallucination, "it was still impossible for him to utter the syllables 'Father'"(232); Urien can only be "his mother's man" (231). Urien, as if in answer, tells his son that he, the Father, changed his name after his son's birth (234): thereby almost making the son into his father's father. Dud continues to resist this way out, though:

> for the whole business of discovering a local habitation and a name for his solitary spirit went against the grain of his life-illusion. (234)

As Dud "stiffens" and hardens into bony opposition to his father, the latter is "heaving and laboring" as if giving birth, as if he were Pauline Nature itself "groaning for redemption" (*Romans* 8:18-23). Yet Urien is in fact trying rather to "break the bonds of life's natural law" (239). In this he has stolen his son's fire in advance. Dud is briefly able to call him "Father," thereby breaking the charm binding them and allowing his father mortality (237).[13] At the end, though, he realizes his hatred of his father is due to a desire *not to be born at all*, to remain unrealized in every sense, sexually and metaphysically (244). The entire passage is centered on ritual, exorcistic magic. As in *Solent,* it is an abysmal confrontation with the abject.

III. From History to Myth

[12] *Maiden Castle* (Woodstock: Overlook, 2001), 225.

[13] "Pompeii only begins to decay once it has been unearthed," as Freud had it ("Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose," *Gesammelte Werke* [Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999] VIII, 400).

That "supernatural narration" evoked, but not yet realized, by *A Glastonbury Romance* is finally worked out by *Porius*, after a historical prelude in the form of *Owen Glendower,* an uncharacteristically "objective"[14] if still interesting work. *Glendower* is Powys' *Götz von Berlichingen*; like Goethe's *Sturm und Drang* play, or the American Western, it dramatizes the tension between impersonal law and charismatic chivalry. In *Glendower*, the overwhelming paranoid signification that elsewhere only holds up narration with timeless, epiphanic excurses is actually built into the storytelling (as for instance when the Lollard Walter Brut "walked up to" a girl and "deliberately tearing a page out of his precious Gospels and folding it up very carefully... thrust it into her hand," or when the narrator Rhisiart's erotic feelings for the girl Luned "seemed to grow more and more *general*" and "abstract").[15] Near the end, though, Rhisiart too has his "childish gibberish," when he cries out: "In his excitement he had outrageously and harshly mixed together the musical syllables of Catherine's and Tegolin's names!" (928). Watching from a distance the blaze of Glendower's funeral pyre, Rhisiart wonders:

> Why did Owen call himself *Prince of Annwn?* And Rhisiart suddenly thought of Modry, and how she would talk sometimes of what she called "the harrowing of Annwn" by King Arthur. While Owen lived, there had always been something about him that for a narrow legal skull was hard to understand; but this dull thrumming of the strings and this fading glow in the sky were like a simple childish hand copying the Commentary of some planetary Pascentius! (934)

"Pascentius" sends one to the encyclopedia, where one finds that the name might refer to Pascent, third son of Vortigern, mentioned in the *Historia Brittonum* and in Geoffrey of Monmouth; but this Pascent is a dynastic rival and warlord, and can hardly have written Commentaries; who might have is the bishop Pascentius, whose successor attended the Synod of Orange in 441 (is this the Pascentius, Bishop of Poitiers, whose life was written by Fortunatus and is mentioned in Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, 4:18?). One knows Powys was fond of Pelagius, thus not of Augustine, whose work was tempered at precisely this Synod. More important is the Celticizing of the Harrowing of

[14] Cavaliero, *op. cit.,* p. 109.
[15] *Owen Glendower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), pp. 224, 305-6.

Hell (Annwn in the *Mabinogion*) or *nekyia.* This is a central motif in most of Powys' narratives.

In the case of *Porius*, it is sometimes difficult to take the book's "message" – of an impending Golden Age, at times embarrassingly apostrophized as "Aquarian"[16] – seriously, much less dignify it as philosophical. The obsession with blood and race here are more than merely unfortunate, especially given the time of the book's composition (during World War Two). Admittedly, if Powys' fondness for Jung can be embarrassing, it is one shared by many more canonical writers as well (the Surrealists, Mann in the Joseph novels, even Bachmann's *Malina* as "anima"). The book perches just on the edge of "fantasy" literature, or science fiction (an edge Powys will then proceed to cross in his last decade, and had indeed already crossed in *Morwyn).*[17] Astonishingly enough, Powys appears to have re-created not only the lost and unknown Dark Ages in all their eclectic, syncretistic oddity, but also something like a Late Antique anthropology: not dual, but tripartite: "It was neither his mind nor his body that was hit by what he'd seen: it was his soul" (146). Indeed, this independence of *pneuma* from *nous* was typical of Late Platonism, of Philo Judaeus, perhaps of some early Church Fathers as well.

The idea of "preexistence" - even of reincarnation – which is so central to the book is not Powys' peculiarity alone; Hugo von Hofmannsthal was interested in it in his early work, and there are poems of Verlaine's devoted to the notion: "ce sera comme quand on a déjà vécu" ("Kaléidoscope," 1873), or "Les Déjàs sont les Encores!" ("Réversibilités," ca. 1887). What is particular to Powys is not only the massive historical armature in which this is encased – for one can find this in Joyce or Mann or Döblin as well – but the odd hesitation about formulating it. This is made clear in one passage of *Porius* where Brochvael experiences it.

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[16] *Porius* (New York, Woodstock, London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), p. 450.

[17] As Michael Ballin aptly notes , "*Porius* is arguably not a Roman chronicle, nor an Arthurian romance, nor a political tragedy" ("*Porius* and the Comedy of the Grotesque," *Powys Notes* 10: 1 (Fall-Winter 1995), p. 14). Ballin suggests terming the book "a Gothic-historical romance," with "Gothic" referring to "a kind of medieval comic grotesque."

> And the "lledyf unben" or "disinherited chieftain" suddenly felt that long ago and far away this knob under his hand had been part of the balustrade of a flight of steps leading to an enchanted embarkation!
> The cloud of gnats had also been a part of it. So had the startled seagull. But what part of it had that white profile propped on those thin arms? And into what waters did those steps lead? To Brochvael's aeternum exilium? "Eternal exile" was a paradoxical name for the exultant thrill of homesickness swallowed up in a sensation of home-coming too delicious for words.
> *Curse it!* He'd begun to question, to analyze, begun to reason upon what that magical pine-knob, cut, carried and carved by himself, a bit of wood among other bits of wood, but a veritable Hermes' wand for stealing secrets from the gods, was actually conveying to him through his hand, and down his arm, across which hung his old woodman's cloak! And with this accurst questioning the whole mystery began to fade. Anxiously he tried to cling to its departing essence, which, unlike his now somewhat too obtrusive cloak, was vanishing moment by moment. "Oh, Divine Water!" he prayed in his heart. "Whither do those stairs lead? What does this happiness mean?" (304)

Compare Sylvanus Cobbold's incantatory invocation of rope and wheelbarrow in *Weymouth Sands.* Here we have it: the problem of Powys' stubborn empirical distrust of system. Why should questioning and analysis have to destroy the sensation? What else is the poet's business but this reflective and critical work? Powys' recourse to the gesture of prayer, complete with pseudo-archaic language ("whither") is a confession of failure. Yet the failure may well be deliberate, bound up with a refusal of art's autonomy. This passage is followed by a characteristically detailed natural description, and then a rather flat brooding on the differences between reflections and shadows (304-5).

The key here is, that like Solent, Porius attains a hard-won forgetting by the end. "What he really felt at that moment – and what a moment to feel it! - was that in these last two days... he had broken loose from his whole past" (360). With this he acquires also his gnomic *sententiae* or formulae ("endure/enjoy till the end," 487-8). As in *Solent*, too, the most important thing is less the doctrine arrived at than the narration that gets there; so Brochvael asks himself in the Druid's lair, "Was the whole nature of human life, was its whole mysterious purpose, only to be explained as a titillatingly thrilling story?" (250) Later on, as Porius and the Henog (historian) are visiting the dying Pelagian monk Brother John (who answers their questions with a theological reference), it is said of the Henog:

> He looked as if the dying man's frivolity, in thus dragging in theological controversy when the very foundations of human civilization, that is to say the facts and fables of history, were awaiting discussion, must soon yield, if he remained quiescent, to a seriousness more proper to the occasion. (351)

This is the point of view of a servant of Clio, who had attacked Merlin's belief in the magical openness of the future early on in the novel, and yet it is in part one supported by the latter itself as a whole.[18] The novel's most remarkable passages are those where it is less proposing a new religion than rewriting older mythologies and even histories themselves. For the point of *Porius* is precisely to find a place in time where "facts and fables" are *both* parts of history – as in the legendary time of the *Mabinogion*, or Geoffrey of Monmouth. In the chapter titled "Birth and Death" there is one such rewriting, between Llwyd and Gwawl, both from the *Mabinogion:*

> And Llywd said: I will show thee friendship more perfect than this. Between me and God there is an Annwn of Illusion that is richer and easier to reach than the real one which Arawn, its ruler, shares with Pwyll. Into this second Annwn, this Annwn of Illusion, created by Math the son of Mathonwy and by Gwydion the son of Dion, there is a way that leads under land and water from Caer Dathyl. It is a way that goes by the north, leaving Dinas Arianrod to the south.

For a moment one wonders: if the "Annwn of Illusion" the realm of aesthetic imagination, the emphatic Art Stephen Dedalus seeks, the Surrealist dream of a metalanguage? But the text goes on to correct this.

> In their false Annwn of Illusion Math and Gwydion have caused chains of enchantment to be suspended from the deep sky in such a manner as to descend into the lowest chamber of Caer Sidi – for you must understand that there is now a Caer Sidi of Illusion as well as the real one. (498)

Caer Sidi is a castle in the underworld of Annwn. A few pages earlier, Porius had quoted a line from the Book of Taliessin (XIV): "Complete is my chair in Caer Sidi." Here however is the undoing of illusion, the breaking of a spell. Llywd is the enemy of Pryderi in the *Mabinogion*, a magician-bishop whose spells must be removed by Manawydan (in "Manawydan son of Llŷr"). The magician-enemies in *Porius* would be witch Nineue or even the Christian Minnawc Gorsant. Powys is ambivalent about

18 "It is part of Powys' deepest philosophy that life can be fulfilled if we tell ourselves the right stories" (Ballint, "*Porius* and the Comedy of the Grotesque," p. 15).

illusion: on the one hand, "the human imagination… should never be robbed of its power *to tell itself other stories*, and thus to create a different future" (59-60). This means a fluidity of all such stories, their never being subjected to the codifying authority of any priestly caste. That of the Henog or historian is presented in less than entirely favorable light.

> The Henog departed into the twilight with the same expression of inscrutable satisfaction as he had worn when he first ceased reading. "He's alone in space," Porius thought, "and only space has the power of reflecting his stories in such a manner that all their faults are lost and all their virtues remain. In the eternally empty space around him he sees the perfection he aimed at and gives himself the credit for having attained it; and maybe, in some cosmic ideal sense, he *has* attained it."
> And Porius' cloudy memory struggled with dim recollections of how Brother John had scolded him once for his prejudice against legendary tales. "Perhaps everybody who listens to the Henog," he thought, "is resolved into this paradigm, or perfect pattern, of an ideal myth; and, by becoming a part of it himself, is transformed into the very perfection of which in his prejudice he refused to see as much as the fragment of a shadow!" (501)

Narrative is not only *of* the supernatural, but supernatural, magical itself. It is "that Druidic *hypnotism of speech*" Powys found he "could summon up" in his lectures and attributed to John Geard in *A Glastonbury Romance.*[19] For this form of narration, the past is as open and unfinished as it was for Herder.

> Philosopher, if you would honor and be useful to the state of your century: the book of prehistory lies before you! sealed shut with seven seals; a book of miracles full of prophecies: the end of days has come upon you! read![20]

The "book of prehistory" is a paradoxical formulation, for it cannot be written in words. It can only be evoked, like Brochvael's unanalyzable experience of pre-existence. Nowhere is Powys more un-Modernist than in this: he never really questioned the representative power of fiction, for it was central to his creed.

Modernity as Exception

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19 *Autobiography*, Colgate University Press, 1994, p. 462.
20 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1990), p. 86.

Doubts still remain. One wonders why one is unconvinced not only by much writing about Powys, but also by his own essays. Many older commentators on him took his dated critique of modern civilization too literally; attempts at "replacing" technology with myth have not aged well, though, whether in Hesse, Mann, Lawrence, Yeats or Eliot.[21] Joyce's merciless mockery of Lady Gregory's Hibernophile cult is still relevant to many a sensitive plant who longs to flee to the lost wholeness of Celtic fantasy or Magna Mater. We would do well to be slightly skeptical of this sort of regressive Utopia. In Powys, as we have seen, it never becomes a system. Powys had no Modernist gift for theoretical speculation; if there are twentieth century composers, such as Prokofiev, who had natural talent, yet little self-critical capacity, and whose work must survive on the sheer verve of wit or melodic gift, Powys was something similar in literature: a story-teller with a vivid imagination who rarely caught his breath long enough to discipline his volcanic outpourings. His long years of lecturing in the US, a strangely anachronistic trait – can one imagine Kafka or Joyce on the lecture trail? and prolonged exposure to it may not have been beneficial to the later Auden – means that his work has something peculiarly oral, not written about it; his unwillingness to revise or edit suggests the same. The oft-noted Victorianisms of tone, whether rhetorical or colloquial, and which stick out so oddly from his later historical novels, are traces of this same oratorical technique. Thus his essays feel too chatty, lacking the specific *density of the written* that, precisely, would lead one not only to pause, but also to *reread*. (In all fairness, the same may be said of many of Auden's essays, that reflect only too well the intellectual fashions of *l'homme moyen sensuel* of the New York cocktail party circa 1960.) One wishes there were filmic records of those lectures, for he must have been a remarkable performer. For the same reason, the lack of written finish of his novels, which are not quite "texts" in the now-standard academic sense, cannot help pointing toward their author, who has not

21 Nor is one is always convinced by attempts at forcing Powys into the Procrustean bed of post-structuralism; so H. P. Fawkner reads Powys as applied Derrida, obliterating the difference between literary and philosophical texts, at times with unintended humor, as when it is stated in all seriousness: "In summary, then, there is cleavage in the world" *(The Ecstatic World of JCP*, Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses 1986, 20). - Nonetheless, the careful work of Powys scholars such as Cavaliero, Ballin and Lock points the way toward a less cultic appreciation of his work.

managed to detach himself from them as did other modernists. Like Stendhal, Powys saw his writing as a lesson to himself and to others in how to live; like Stendhal, again, Powys' lesson remained a deeply lonely one, apart from any school or movement. In a strange way, Powys' "work" *was also himself*, not only his writing, as his *Autobiography* betrays.[22] In this he is, even if only faintly and distantly, kin to Artaud[23] as well as Bataille. If he is part of modernity, it is only as a perennial exception to any normative rules.[24]

Nonetheless Powys puts one in mind of Montaigne's beloved maxims from Plato:

> *Fay ton faict et te cognoy.* Chascun de ces deux membres enveloppe generallement tout nostre devoir, et semblablement enveloppe son compagnon. (*Essais* I: iii)

Do your deed and know yourself. In modernity, one only learns who one is (if at all) through "doing one's deed." Powys did; and his deed has a lesson for posterity, a lesson precisely against the academicization of modernity, most often in French form. That Powys was and is possible at all means that there is (still) another dimension to the modern than the now-exhausted and Scholastic project of self-reflexivity, or the avant-garde's sublation of art (now, in "performance art," become the worst form of cheap Bohemian entertainment, parasitically living off the very "institution of art" it claims to criticize). The apocalyptic horizon of Powys' work, which was also that of modernity as *ism*, is still with us now, but we have fewer means than before with which to respond to it. Powys liked to refer to Berdyaev's notion that modernity would lead to a new Middle

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22 Michael Ballin has seen *Porius* as a veiled autobiography ("*Porius* and the Comedy of the Grotesque," *Powys Notes* 10: 1 (Fall-Winter 1995), p. 13); Charles Lock pointed out that Powys persisted in seeing Joyce's work as more autobiographical than it was ("John Cowper Powys and James Joyce," *In The Spirit of Powys* ,ed. Denys Lane, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell 1990, p. 30) and sees this "image of Joyce as a measure of self-projection, or even identification" (31).

23 Artaud, too, Gnostically negated his own being, attempting to re-write his own parenthood ("I, Antonin Artaud, am my own father and mother"), through ritual exorcisms – especially in his late work.

24 The erstwhile avant-gardist Philippe Sollers titled a collection of his essays, after the end of the leftist *isms* of the 1960s in which he had participated, *Théorie des Exceptions* (Paris: Gallimard 1985): Powys, too, could only be theorized or historicized as a grandiose exception.

Ages, but this missed the point: the Middle Ages were in fact an emergence of rational order and civilization from something much more obscure, namely the Dark Ages that would be the subject of *Porius*. What lies ahead now is darker still; how to "faire son faict" in dark times? The shadow cast by the technological and political collapse of our times – exemplified in the troubles of America, the last laboratory experiment of Europe – falls not only on the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance before it, but also on the "nature" of the human itself, which begins to take on dark contours worthy not only of the older Freud, but also of Augustine. The renascence of religion has very real causes. The continuing interest of Powys, and of *Porius* in particular, is his insistence on the comical, his refusal to yield to the temptation to fatalism, to guilt and sin, in the face of so much darkness.[25] This emphasis on the comic links him with Joyce and Dante even more than Balzac or his beloved Dickens, since Powys' comedy is not only a human one. It is his cosmic and comic perspective, his embedding of the human within a larger natural horizon, that allows him to view the tragedy of the human with calm. His seeming eccentricity thus becomes legible as, in its own way, still authentically modern.

25 This is brought out clearly by Ballin, pp. 14-15, who sees Powys' comedy as "closer to the postmodern absurd of Beckett than the traditional modernist perspective" (17); although one might see the later fantasies as anticipating postmodernism, the present essay has tried rather to link Powys to modernism.