

“The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction”. Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys, and the Subjective Correlative

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In all the mass of commentary on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, two signal early essays, each by a key twentieth-century figure, are rarely cited: John Cowper Powys’s “James Joyce – An Appreciation”, written immediately after the publication of the first edition, and Carl Jung’s “*Ulysses*: A Monologue”, written a decade after that epochal event of 1922.

Neglecting these two essays, as scholars have done, has perpetuated a slight but significant distortion in our academic view of Joyce and the cultural shift his work has been taken to define. The distortion overlaps with a related misreading -- equally small but no less significant -- of T. S. Eliot’s influential essay of 1923, “*Ulysses*, Order and Myth”.

This would be a small matter indeed but for the astonishing claim of Eliot’s essay: that *Ulysses* “is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art”. But are we sure we understand what Eliot meant by his claim? Equally pertinent, what do we think of it? Those questions get called to attention by the Powys and Jung essays. Returning to these three works, I want to open an argument for rethinking the history of twentieth-century fiction. Fully elaborated, which is beyond the scope of this essay, the exposition would throw into prominence a number of writers: most notably, Powys himself and Laura Riding, who will figure prominently here, but also Gertrude

Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves, and Edward Upward – whose positions in the history of the period remain underread to this day.

I.

Briefly, Jung and Powys argue that Joyce's work should be read as subjective and intensely personal. When Jung identifies "Joyce's Ithaca" as a "new cosmic . . . detachment of consciousness, [a] depersonalization of the personality", we can easily mistake what he means to say. Everything in *Ulysses* comes to us, in Jung's view, *sub specie somnium*, with the egos of all the characters – their realist props and stays – dissolved "as in a collective dream that begins nowhere and ends nowhere". "For that very reason", he goes on to observe, "all and everything, even the missing punctuation of the final chapter, is Joyce himself."

His detached contemplative consciousness, dispassionately embracing in one glance the timeless simultaneity of the happenings of the sixteenth day of June, 1904, must say of all these appearances: *tat tvam asi*, "That art thou" – "thou" in a higher sense, not the ego but the self. For the self alone embraces the ego and the non-ego, the infernal regions, the viscera, the *imagines et lares*, and the heavens. (Benstock, 21).

Powys sees Joyce's work the same way. *Ulysses* "is *not* – for all its realistic savagery – an objective book at all. It is entirely subjective. It reveals only one soul in the world, the soul of James Joyce" (11) fighting for its life. Commenting on a passage in "Circe", Powys thus says:

In a sense, in a very deep sense, the thing. . . is a world-maddened hoax of a deep imagination, turning and rending the plaster-cast mock-heroic attitudes of the “cover-it-up” puppet show. It is James Joyce himself dancing a furious malice-dance on the dinner-table of the Best People while the ghost of King Edward (and all other reputable rulers of the world) “levitate over heaps of slain, with white jujubes on their phosphorescent faces”. (17)

One of our best Powys scholars, Charles Lock, dismisses this way of reading *Ulysses* as “so wide of the mark that we can be confident that Powys had no knowledge of Joyce’s personality” (30). But Powys’s reading, like Jung’s, is not talking about personalities. Indeed, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, even Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* are all, for Powys, defining works of the age because all, in their different fantastic subjectivities, broke with the mythologies of realism. The escape did not entail the disappearance or debunking of myth – what Powys calls “life illusions” – but the ability to take one’s illusions seriously *as they are* illusions, beliefs, ideologies.

Let us look again at Eliot’s celebrated essay. Like Powys and Jung, Eliot explicitly sees in Joyce’s book the end of “the novel” as a vital artistic form. (Not of course the end of prose fiction, but the end of the novel.) So he writes of Joyce’s “mythic method” in *Ulysses* as the fateful “step” toward a cultural deliverance. The method involves drawing “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity”. Preserving that continuity – dealing with culture’s “dissociation of sensibility” -- is what Eliot, like his precursor Matthew Arnold, calls the mission of the classical ethos (or

mythos). Unlike Arnold, however, Eliot marks out a signal difference between Joyce's mythic method and, say, Tennyson's or Swinburne's. Simply, Joyce's parallel is drawn arbitrarily. Eliot underscores this cardinal point with a pair of telling examples: "It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats" – Eliot must be thinking specifically of Yeats's *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1817) – and "It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious".

Notice the joke in that auspicious horoscope, which targets a central point in Eliot's essay. Einstein and science are referenced not in order to set scientific method as a model for what a modern artist should do. For Eliot, every possible method – modern science, astrology, Yeats's quasi-mystical ideas that will culminate in the preposterous and suggestive *A Vision*, and now Joyce's "mythic method" – constructs a human order for "the immense panorama" of human experience. The "futility and anarchy of contemporary history" can be so extreme, however, that art's ability "to see life steadily and see it whole", as Arnold put the matter, may appear imperiled. What "the mythic method" of *Ulysses* shows is that any mythology, religious or enlightened, may serve an artistic function. People used to believe in astrology and they now believe in science. Humans cannot live without beliefs and "life illusions". But neither can they live without an art capable of plucking, even from an anarchic culture, a form of order. The "method" of *Ulysses* argues, according to Eliot, that even the "futility and anarchy of contemporary history" conceals unplumbed possibilities of order.

So "the horoscope is auspicious" because it can serve art as a form of order as much as quantum theory, the liturgical calendar, fractal geometry, number series' like Fibonacci, the story of Odysseus or Tiresias. Deployed as catalytic agents, these

impersonal devices could be transformed from ideologies or personal beliefs into “objective correlatives” of what Eliot would call the “central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation”.

So far as an ordering mechanism for art is concerned, then, Eliot might well have said that “In my father’s house are many mansions”. For Eliot, however, “many” but not just *any* mansions. Certain forms of order seemed intolerable – for example, the highly idiosyncratic procedures of Gertrude Stein, which repelled him:

her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one’s mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested.

(Eliot, “Charleston, Hey! Hey!” 595)

But given Eliot’s argument in his Joyce essay, why would he draw this line? Why would Yeats’s *A Vision* or, later, Graves’s *The White Goddess* positively attract him but not *Geography and Plays* (1922), *The Making of Americans* (1925), and *Composition as Explanation* (1926)? Eliot’s difficulty seems to lie with Stein’s commitment to an endless and self-renewing innocence. The essay “Charleston, Hey! Hey!” is a review of John Rodker’s *The Future of Futurism*, and Eliot clearly locates Stein in that movement. Stein is no Futurist, of course, but her various procedures for writing in and as a continuing present have Futurist analogues, as Marjorie Perloff has shown.

Eliot's "mythic method", it appears, is limited by its neo-classicist ethos. The writer – the "individual talent" -- is free to make an arbitrary choice of ordering forms so long as the forms are drawn from "tradition", even if the traditions are fairly recent ones, like the tradition of modern science. The individual talent and his artistic work function, as he argued, as a catalytic agent – important not so much in himself or itself but rather as a vehicle or device: in this case, as an agent bringing a form of order to an immense panorama of futility. For a writer like Eliot, Stein's work does not bring order to that panorama, it exhibits the panorama. Stein's texts occupy what she called a "continuing present", extruding themselves out of themselves. The focus in Stein is not on some conceptual or thematic result of the writing but on the act of writing itself, and hence – as Jung and Powys remark of Joyce – on the individual, the self, as a writing agent. If the text represents an "objective correlative", its correlative for Stein would be the text itself as it generates itself. The Stein text would be what Roy Wagner has called "a symbol that stands for itself".

Powys and Jung thus read Joyce black where Eliot read him white. For them, the order that *Ulysses* sets in play is not Eliot's formal or structural order, it is rhetorical. When Powys and Jung read Joyce they emphasize the book's subjectivity, reading the writing as a kind of monodrama. In this respect the precursors of *Ulysses* would be Byron's *Manfred*, almost any of Poe's stories, Tennyson's *Maud*. The writing is a play being staged by Joyce in which (or so that) readers can discover their parts. The analogue with Brecht seems clear. The novelty of *Ulysses* is how it exposes the work of fiction not as a text or a document but as a field of discourse in which the reader – all and any reader – is an assumed presence: the "hero" of the writing, as Bakhtin would say. An

adequate response to the book is thus emblemized in Jung's "Monologue" or Powys's nakedly personal reading. In this view, Eliot's reading would itself be seen as completely idiosyncratic, the rhetorical performance of a neo-classicist trying to keep his feet and point of balance, like Dr. Johnson in another, equally volatile age.

II.

Two writers less alike than Laura Riding and John Cowper Powys are hardly imaginable. Riding's work -- poetry as well as prose, fiction and non-fiction -- is so obsessed with ideas of clarity and precision of thought that the writing often takes weird, quirky turns into a kind of private language. Powys's writing, by contrast, is loose and flagrant, a lavish rhetorical style that glories in a Romantic inheritance stretching back through Scott to Sterne, Browne, and Rabelais.

In each case the stance and procedure are taken with great deliberateness. Riding writes under the banner of a fierce intellectual quest for what she called Truth. Powys, on the other hand, is willfully irregular, glorying in the follies and contradictions of his work and embracing as a badge of honor the worst charges that his enemies bring against him, like literary "buffoon" and "charlatan". As he remarks toward the end of his *Autobiography*, his work is bound to "a quite definite philosophy of life", pledging allegiance to Blake's famous proverb "The road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom" (A 641).

More important than this shared willfulness, however, both see their work as an antithesis of High Modernism, an effort to escape or dismantle the art that made High Modernism and its world possible.

Let me begin with Riding, whose position on these matters is better known. Between 1928 and 1938 she laid out a critical analysis of Modernism that would culminate years later in *The Telling* (1973). Her focus is on “poetry” as the emblematic form of a cultural “professionalism” pledged to an ideal of perfect expression (*le mot juste*). In this commitment to virtuosity and “poetic success in words”, “failure is scared away” from the act of writing. For Riding, this is a fundamental mistake, evading what is most human about the way we use language – that’s to say, in “the common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word”. Facing and dealing with that risk in our shared human intercourse is Riding’s chief object.

The critique of Modernism via a critique of a mistaken idea about poetry involves installing a rhetorical view of language in place of the prevalent structural or formal views. Riding’s “Preface” to her 1982 edition of *Progress of Stories* is very clear. Modernist ideas (like those in Eliot’s essay on *Ulysses*) view imaginative writing as an art, and pre-eminently an art of making – “Make it new”, “il miglior fabbro”. Her different view is that writing should be what she came to call “a telling”. “The initiating impulses from which [my] stories issued were not impulses of art, not impulses to construct stories but to tell stories” (xxi-xxii).

This move means to escape “the ineradicable fault of the wisdom-professions”, all of which set up a division between a priesthood and a laity, the one knowing and articulate, the other “silent”. In a rhetorical condition of that kind, “the silent laity is *given* its universal speech”. For Riding, however, everyone – writers as well as readers – share the obligation to build up “the one story that tells all there is to tell”, the story “kept”, as she says, “in companionship”. For Riding or any individual talent, then, one

speaks/writes out of a subjectivity conscious of its risk of failure, on one hand , and on the other of its obligation to “the dignity of truth-telling”.

I testify that my story of there being essentially and ultimately but one story is my utter own. Let it not be equated with anything else! This would compromise its worth as an offering to that possibility of companionship—to the prospect. . .of its being a story of a one story we have all to tell. Whatever distance remains. . .let it be true distance, distance between ourselves, in their thought as theirs and myself in my thought as mine. This being so, nothing is lost, I think, should our approaches seem to come to nought: fate, I think, is honorable with us in the true difficulties, allowing us rebeginnings where they halt us. (*The Telling* 176-177)

In Riding, this anti-aesthetic culminates in what Harry Mathews called the Queen Stories. These include far more than the explicit “stories” in *Progress of Stories*, or the long fictions like *Lives of Wives*. *The Telling* is itself a “story” in Riding’s sense, a fact that she makes very clear as early as *Anarchism is not enough* (1928). In vehicular appearance a collection separate essays, *Anarchism* turns that formal apparatus into an unfolding intellectual autobiography staged *in medias res*. The organization is not at first apparent because the story it tells is not structured chronologically. The organization is *literal*, very much in a Steinian mode -- a fact that becomes clear when one reads the book seriatim. *Anarchism* tells the story of its own writing. It has much in common with Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*, on one hand, and with Edward Upward’s *The Spiral Ascent*

(1961-1977) on the other. (Upward's neglected *chef d'oeuvre* is an all but explicit reprisal of Dante's autobiography.)

III.

Writing to his brother as he nears the completion of his masterpiece *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys stakes out his own anti-aesthetic: "I am anyway no artist; but rather a Stonehenge Bard of Interminable Prose-Narrative [who] relegates Art to the minor place in his life" (*Letters to Llewelyn* 126). This theme of "How little of an *artist* I am" (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson* 194) runs through all his letters and the *Autobiography*, the latter being nothing more (or less) than a long *apologia pro vita sua*.

"To the devil with 'art'!" he writes. But what kind of writing is possible when, very much like Riding, Powys dismisses "duty to art" as mere "aesthetic tyranny" (*Autobiography* 539, 641). The question is less insistent in Riding's case because her work parades its care and deliberateness. Her attack on false aesthetic pretenses comes only to uphold what she calls "the dignity of truth" against the false promise of aesthetic perfection. But for Powys, dignity of every kind stands like a dragon in the gate. Powys therefore develops his theory of the artist as fool, mountebank, charlatan, zany.

A ninny I fancy is a person who feels and looks like an undignified fool, while a zany is one who carries this peculiar cult into *behavior* and even makes an art of it. Cannot you see that there is a deep and subtle *irony* in all this, and a perfect awareness of how it strikes the "daughters of Saul," when I gird my loins and dance before the Ark, like

David or Dan Leno. . . . None of your controversial Archdeacons would dare to give themselves away to this tune. (A 538)

The “art” is a knowing comedy, “deep and subtle” because the comedian puts himself at center stage, his own performance – lecturing, writing -- being the measure of what Powys called, invoking his favorite Nietzschean idea, the “Human, All Too Human”,

For Powys, “This ninny-ism of mine. . .protests against the shallow rationalism of the hour. . .in defense of the inexplicable” (A 539). And so he turns to his beloved brother Llewelyn and asks if this shameless “liberty” “to feel what I like to feel and express it as best I can” is permissible “in your pagan kingdom”?

Not allowed! Very well. Where then does your kingdom differ from this kingdom of this world? In being more beautiful, you say. So be it. Yours is an aesthetic tyranny, theirs a moral one; but the sweet bitch, “Fay que ce Vouldray” – if I get the old Rabelaisian French correctly – must to kennel under both yours whips. (A 539)

Parodying Jesus’s famous remark “My kingdom is not of this world”, Powys issues his “plague on both your houses”. It is a secular – what he would call a “polytheistic” – parody.

Powys’s touchstone for this charlatan’s art is Rabelais, where “the inexplicable” unfolds through every feature and scale of Rabelais’s writing: the free discursive style, the astonishing *parole en liberté*, the narrative episodes licensed to extravagance. But this literary reference, though useful, exposes less about Powys’s writing than the key

event of his *Autobiography*: Chapter 10, “America”, where Powys recalls his road show lecturing adventures under the stage management (these are all Powys’s framing terms) of G. Arnold Shaw. Powys tells the story as a kind of magical event brought about by “the intervention of the gods” (A 440). “I was the clown of our circus, and Arnold was the ringmaster. . . . How roguishly he would crack his whip when his poor Cagliostro was dispatched on a tour across half the Continent!” (A 447).

The purpose of the lectures, both men understood, was not cultural uplift but “public entertainment”:

We were both more than a little anti-human, more than a little malicious to the solemnities and respectabilities of the academic and even of the pseudo-academic world. . . . Even more than moral pomposity we disliked a certain type of patronizing intellectualism. Our grand advertising always was: “If our circus is not *enthralling*--- to the Devil with it!” (A 448)

“Malice” is a code word for Powys, recurring everywhere. Detecting the “malice” in *Ulysses*, Powys reads the “Circe” episode as a comic satire on the hypocrite illusions of “the Best People”. In the case of his own writing, Powys cultivates a kind of shamelessness so that the comic inflection will be registered by the audience. But this Powysian greeting is double-edged, as liable to disturb as it is to disarm. So of his lecturing circus Powys observes that “it was not very long before the eccentricities in our show began to have very disconcerting effects”. Persons “preoccupied with the idea of helping the cultural interests of the community” – “the type who organized our various

provincial lectures” – would often grow suspicious and unhappy at “the humorous detachment with which this mountebank and his manager regarded the whole business of lecturing. . . , my inspired ‘grotesqueries’ and my wild prophetic incantations”. The reactions of the audience, on the other hand, was only increased enthusiasm, “with the people. . . turn[ing] up in their biggest crowds just after the worst kind of misunderstanding” with the local organizers.

I indulged in constant violences to good taste. I yielded to outbursts of intoxicated malice and infernal spleen. I worked myself up into such ecstasies of anger against the whole well-constituted and well-order half of society, that I babbled, burbled, bubbled, blurted my very soul out. . . . I was as one possessed. (A 449)

The event became for Powys “*a great new art*”, a deliberated contrivance staged for the ludic deliverance of both artist and artist’s audience from the “aesthetic tyranny” of Baudelaire’s *hypocrite lecteur*, still regnant in the rules of culture:

By getting rid of all “highbrow solemnity”. . . under the Rabelaisian encouragement of my unique circus-manager, I succeeded in eventually *hollowing myself out*, like an elder-stalk with the sap removed, so that my whole personality, every least movement I made, and every least sound I made, and every flicker, wrinkle, and quiver of my face, became expressive of the particular subject I was interpreting. . . . [and] the fact that both Arnold and I had the same schoolboy contempt for every sort of pretentiousness made me in the

end of sort of deboshed John the Baptist. . .the kind of Jokanaan that a Salome might really have loved before she cut off his head. (A 449)

The passage exhibits its own argument. Powys's subjective reading of *Ulysses* joins hands with this ludic reading of Wilde's *Salome*, which is a kind of gloss on Beardsley's graphical reading, where Wilde's impish and comical play received its first exposure. . . Because most artists, even Wilde, hesitate to debosh their own work, they necessarily reinstall an ideal – or a tyranny -- of the aesthetic. This last aesthetic resort is precisely what Powys wants to overcome. He seeks a form of writing where failure stalks in every word.

IV.

In Powys's view, Joyce himself would cultivate that resort all too often in both of his masterpieces. That limitation in Joyce will lead Powys to write his sympathetic critique of *Finnegans Wake* and to attempt what he saw as the “rewriting” of Joyce's last book in Powys's wartime romance *Porius*, which he regarded as his masterwork.

Powys's intentions are on full display in his extended appreciation of Dorothy Richardson's “absolutely unique. . .method” of fiction writing (*Dorothy Richardson* 35). We want to examine closely his reading of Richardson because it explains his own programmatic writing goals much more fully. As with his essay on *Ulysses*, the very peculiarity of Powys's reading defines its importance.

Once again Powys introduces us to an anti-aesthete. Like Laura Riding, Powys genders this anti-aesthetic female, an important move in Powys's argument. More than

Joyce, Richardson is Powys's "Grand Heretic of Fiction" because she displaces "the art of *the novel*" with "the old story-telling of the famous 'fabulators' of early times" (*DR* 38). Richardson's writing does not build up or reveal an ordering structure, it is rather an "evasive" art, moving "incidentally and as it were sideways" (*DR* 26, 25). "The only unity given to this chaos of impressions is the identity of the consciousness that welcomes them", so that "the only end of the pilgrimage of Miriam that one can contemplate with equanimity is Miriam's own death" (*DR* 36). Richardson's "stoic heathen way" turns the idea of death into an aesthetic talisman that, as another humane atheist famously observed, "redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man".

So in "the worst of [her] miseries" and humiliations, Richardson's Miriam "became aware of a curious buoyancy rising within her."

It was so strange that she stood still for a moment on the stair, For a second, life seemed to cease in her, and the staircase to be swept from under her feet. . . ."I'm alive" . . . "It's me, *me*; this is *me* being alive," she murmured with a feeling under her like the sudden drop of a lift. (*Backwater* 245; quoted in *DR* 37)

Reflecting on her sensation Miriam wonders "What's the use of feeling like that if it doesn't stay?" The thought immediately brings it anti-thought: "It doesn't change anything. Next time I'll make it stay." What will remain is not the specific physical sensation but a commitment of consciousness to attend carefully upon such moments: "It might whisk me right away. There's something in me that can't be touched or altered.

Me. If it comes again. If it's stronger every time. . . . Perhaps it goes on getting stronger till you die." (*Backwater* 246)

It's important to realize that this climactic event comes at the end of chapter III of a book extending to nine chapters, and of course that the book, *Backwater*, is only the second of the ten volumes that comprise *Pilgrimage*. The passage strikes deeply because it is so anticlimactic, because the reader understands what the writing is confident about: that these events *will* go on like this to the end, "getting stronger" in their resolutely "sideways" and incidental intensities.

Aware that many readers find Richardson's work "dull" and "appallingly tedious" (*DR* 43, 33), Powys argues what Riding argues. The charge of dullness locates a set of cultural conventions, gendered male, that overstress "the artist's and poet's craving for shape, for form, for a definite issue, for a desired consummation" (*DR* 31). "Think. . . of the emotional *purpose* of Hardy, of the *romantic* purpose of Conrad, of the psycho-aesthetic *purpose* of Henry James." There you have what Riding saw as the kingdom of story, waiting its redemption by the Queen and "Queen Story". Powys thinks much the same.

All these diffused underlying "purposes" give unity, glamour, interest to their books. Proust himself, with his grand cult of the creative and destructive processes of time, has his ultimate intention, the rounding off of the whole dramatic "scenario". Dorothy Richardson. . . has no such "purpose". (*DR* 35-36)

She has instead her “astonishing “verisimilitude”” (*DR* 45). Powys sets the word in quotation marks because her “realistic artfulness” is for him the furthest thing imaginable from the received traditions of realist fiction. It is “a more lyrical, a more subjective” realist style (*DR* 38). Richardson’s “verisimilitude” admits no “slurring over [of any] aspect, however trivial, however disgusting, however recalcitrant of the truth about the way things drift and flutter and peter out” (*DR* 31). To some, that kind of writing will seem dull. Not to Powys.

It is just these unweeded, unraked-over lumps of raw sod, that give to her magical wild-flowers their overpowering fragrance. Certainly she is one of the master-realists of our tongue; and if there were not so many passages that the frivolous would call “dull” this realism would work its gradual, its insidious, its saturating spell on our minds.” (*DR* 45)

Anyone who has read *Pilgrimage* would call that description far more lyrical and subjective than anything in Richardson’s realist prose. What Powys writes here (and throughout his essay) is at least as pertinent to Powys’s writing as to hers. Choose any passage you like – for instance, this from the opening chapter of *A Glastonbury Romance* when John Crow is “approach[ing] the home of his dead mother”.

Why, thinking of his mother, he felt so sad, was a strange fact beyond this man’s analysis. How could he know that mingled with their awareness of wet, green mosses, of dry, scaly lichens, of the heady-sweet odours of prickly gorse, of the cool-rooted fragility of lilac-coloured cuckoo-flowers, of the sturdy swelling of the wooly calices of early

cowslips, of the embryo lives within the miraculous blue shells of hedge-sparrows' eggs, the thoughts of the earth mother throbbed with a dull, indefinable, unappeasable jealousy of a human mother? *(Glastonbury Romance 3)*

Let me give a brief explication of what's going on here. John Crow is a man unusually attentive to the earth and her inhuman creatures. Just now, on his way to his father's funeral and a reading of his father's will, he is distracted by thoughts of his dead mother. The Earth Mother's sudden "realistic" appearance triggers the anti-climax that is a staple of Powys's writing. John's inexplicable sadness emerges *not* because of his recently dead father, not even because of his long-dead mother, now recalled. He grows sad, rather, because he registers, unbeknownst to himself, the displeasure of the Earth Mother. All the "thoughts" in this passage – the minute physical descriptions – are the Earth Mother's for her children. But just now those thoughts are crossed with jealousy because her dearest devotee is precisely *unaware* of her and her frail vegetable children. John Crowe is sad because she is sad, and she is sad and jealous and hurt because John has let human memories distract him from the present living world around him.

But now recall that initial sentence: "Why, thinking of his mother, he felt so sad, was a strange fact beyond this man's analysis." The word "analysis" signals the reader toward the psychoanalytic reading that this situation fairly begs for. That interpretive line is invoked, however, only to be explicitly set aside and replaced by Powys's strange and comic mode of magical realism. Of *course* John Crowe rarely remembers his mother, and cares little *to* remember her. Both his mother and his father have long been displaced from John's affective life. So his devotion to the Earth Mother is a fantasy, a

sublimation, and Powys wants the reader to see that. But once having seen it, Powys wants to make sure we don't find it nearly so interesting – or so human -- as the magically real Earth Mother and her upsurge of emotional pique at her favorite, John Crow; or rather, not nearly so interesting as the Powysian mode of writing that makes this kind of commitment to the “inexplicable”

To explicate in this way reveals, I hope, the absurdity of the Powysian text. The prose is at once comic and touching because its folly is an essential part of the game. The passage unfolds a subjective correlative for a sensibility willing and able to imagine and write like this in 1932. The thoughts and feelings of the Earth Mother index the commitment of a writer astonishingly, not to say wondrously, out of tune with his time.

The passage shows why the notorious opening paragraph of *A Glastonbury Romance* is a stylistic caper cut before the ark of art, danced in “perfect awareness of how it strikes the ‘daughters of Saul.’”

At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of March, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway-station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occur when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe. Something passed at that moment, a wave, a motion, a vibration, too tenuous to be called magnetic, too subliminal to be called spiritual, between the soul of a particular human being who was emerging from a third-class carriage of the twelve-nineteen train from London and the divine-diabolic soul of the First Cause of all life.

There we have Powysian malice – it is ultimately as good-natured as Sterne or Goldsmith -- on full display. Powys makes his brazen start with a kind of barbaric yawp telling the reader, at the very outset, that this is how things will be for another 1200 pages. The passage is fully deboshed prose, all the sweeter and more resonant for its flagrant and derelict parody of its immediate master, Thomas Hardy. Writing so, as Timothy Hyman observes, “The Powys novel commits suicide” (*Essays* 130), but only, as Hyman rightly goes on to say, “to gain more life”.

As with *Ulysses*, much more is involved in these kinds of Powysian texts than an arresting passage of style. If we assume a Brechtian stance, which is what Powys does with Joyce and Richardson, the “author’s” subjective agency is both indexed by the writing and folded into the writing. The “author” that survives this process will not be set apart, like a god paring his fingernails. The author will find (or lose) himself in his own work, dissolved throughout. Not at all what we professors have learned to call an “unreliable narrator”, but rather an omniscient, deboshed one. When Powys says of himself that his writer’s function is more Mediumistic than Authoritative, this is what he is describing.

V.

Here is how Powys describes his writing procedures to his friend Louis Wilkinson. The comment comes in a letter written as Powys was in the midst of the

composition of what he considered his masterwork, *Porius*. Noticing that his letter has begun to digress, he pauses to comment:

You see, my dear, *all* (without any exception) of the talent, gift, eloquence, insight clairvoyance I possess is always *digression*. . . . But of course I do painfully, laboriously, lengthily build up (I speak of both my tracts *and* my long romances) a sort of foundation, and on top of that a sort of scaffolding, *both very simple*—including all the Main Characters & where they live, or all the main theses, propositions & contentions & here they end! *Then* I let *the chance moment* have its way—have its ways with the characters, have its way with the ideas! In both cases I am absolutely irresponsible & unscrupulous &, at the best, Mediumistic, and at the worst *both* silly and dull!

(*Letters to Louis Wilkinson* 160)

Digression in Powys signals chance intervention, which he courts by eliminating plot from the elements gathered for the initial “foundation” and “scaffolding” of his work. His writing begins with an array of characters, a socio-geographical location, and a set of ideas, and these materials unfold as Powys writes himself into that set of materials, letting them appear to dictate what they might involve. They unfold as “a host of incidents and exciting situations and intricate disquisitions on the psychology of these entangled persons”. The “Coincidents. . .help me with surprises”, Powys tells Wilkinson (ibid 371). “Plot” therefore emerges but only as “incidents” in a networks of *coincidents*, all parts of the storytelling more or less localized, all subordinated to the vast set of unpredictable possibilities latent in the materials and awaiting discovery through the ceaseless act of writing itself. One recalls Byron’s famous description of the “plan” of *Don Juan*: “I have

no plan, I had no plan – but I had or have materials” (letter to John Murray, 12 August 1819)..

Most important in such a writing schema are the creatures Powys is shameless to “marshall”: “all sorts of invisible powers and forces” (ibid 371). Making the double-natured First Cause or the Earth Mother active agents in the story-telling is the least of the matter. In his late fiction *Atlantis*, the club of Hercules, a moth, a fly, and certain pillars in the entrance hall to the palace of Odysseus are attentive and voluble characters (but not all the pillars, some are quite dull). When human tears fall to the ground in his early novel *Wood and Stone* (chapter XIII), “Two wandering ants”, happening by, pause in their work to investigate this strange event – strange because these are “Big salt tears”, a type completely beyond the experience of these particular ants, who live far inland.

Or recall the end of the first chapter of *A Glastonbury Romance*. After the will is read, the people depart and the house is left “silent and alone” (47). But not entirely alone. Escaped from its realistic human enslavement, “the now-darkened conservatory listened to the placid sub-human breathings of heliotrope and lemon verbena”. And these vegetable creatures? The conservatory can now hear – *we* can hear – “the faint catch in the drowsy susurrations” of the lemon verbena, “one of [whose] twigs was bleeding a little from the impact of the fingers of the indignant Mr. Didlington”. The text is expelling the Porlockian world of lawyers like Mr. Didlington, who presided at the reading of the will earlier in the chapter. As that world fades away, a magical, unobserved world is rising to view.

Silent and alone the broad staircase fell into that trance of romantic melancholy which was its invariable mood when the hall lamp was first lit. The oil paintings upon its walls looked out from their gilt frames with that peculiar expression of indrawn expectancy – self-centered and yet patiently waiting – of which human passers-by catch only the psychic echo or shadow or after-taste, for a single flicker of a second, as if they caught them off guard. (47-48)

The “coincidents” emerging through that passage liberate the prose completely. “Of all these rooms the one that now fell into the most intense attitude of strained expectancy was the drawing room.” The room is expectant because its space is being transacted by words “emanat[ing] from a pale insubstantial husk upon the air.” A dialogue of the dead between John Crow’s father and mother is passing through the space of the drawing room, but while the room (so to say) has the experience of this bizarre exchange, it will, like ourselves, miss the meaning. So the prose, now a full participant in the book Powys has set in motion, resorts to a series of comparisons that index the room’s “strained expectancy”. The insubstantial words were like “the cast-off skin of a snake, or the yet more fragile skin of a newt”, they were like “the creakings of chairs after people have left a room for hours”, “like the murmurs of forgotten worm-eaten boards”, and so forth. All descriptions fail, for indeed, who could ever explain what lay beneath the two bitter sentences recorded in the text. “You ought to have been older than all your brothers, woman, instead of younger,” the dead man says to his dead wife, and she replies: “A cruel coward is what you are, William Crow, and what you’ve always been; but if ever, when I am dead, you leave your money to anyone but Philip’s son I will punish you with a punishment *worse than God’s!*” (48)

This conversation – at once dreadful and ridiculous -- helps to explain John Crowe's devotion to the Earth Mother and his indifference to his human parents. But that isn't its chief function. Since the evil case feared by John's dead mother has in fact transpired, as we learned in the Porlockian world when his father's will was read, what *now*? What can she mean? Or perhaps the question is: when did she say this? Or: when *is* she saying it, and when is this strange dialogue taking place (if the question can even be posed)? The chapter draws to its end leaving readers, at least formally, in that state of "suspense" familiar to everyone who has learned to read fiction organized by rules of plot and by those Victorian material circumstances – like serial publication – that fostered the devices of plot. But John Crow's mother's threat hurled against her dead husband is preposterous in any view we might realistically imagine. The reader is thus placed in a situation utterly, ludicrously, beyond the rules of plot suspense. This is truly a novel committing suicide, and exactly in order to gain more life.

Again and again Powys says that this kind of story-telling is all he really cares about: "I adore the sensation of a story; of *anybody's* story—of story for its own sake [and] especially the sensation of telling oneself a story, and in the story I become any one of all the characters, male or female" (ibid 296)). Or again: "I tell myself stories then and just ramble on, losing myself & my ----- personality in those I'm writing about." (ibid 195) Powys is famous, notorious, for declaring how he covets of his "sensations". When that temperament gets harnessed to making prose fictions, "story for its own sake" and – even more crucially – "the sensation of telling oneself a story" become the subject of the writing. His fictions are all staged performances of the act of writing. Powysian story-telling is something "for me to play at" (ibid 296) in an unfolding process of

invention and discovery. Starting from a condition of intense subjectivity, the writer-as-artist gets engulfed in his own writing, which then takes on a life of its own.

Coda.

Taking adequate account of imaginative writing in the twentieth-century begs us to retrace our steps and look down some of the roads not taken by our installed academic traditions of literary history. In Gail McDonald's shrewd 1993 account, we have "learned to be modern", or to read the works of Modernism, in certain highly restricted ways. Her view has been echoed and mirrored in many academic studies since that time, as it was prefigured in the work of a few critics like George Steiner and Marjorie Perloff,

Most of these critics locate their arguments in relation to the traditions of poetry – with good reason, since the issue of "poetry" lies at the heart of the argument for culture as it was joined under the Modernist horizon. Those critics who investigate Modernism in relation to fiction usually take little account of the writers who ought to command our greatest attention: Powys and Riding, of course, but also Firbank, Richardson, Flann O'Brien, Edward Upward, Robert Graves. The late work of both Vernon Lee -- *Satan the Waster* (1920) in particular -- and of Aldous Huxley (*Eyeless in Gaza*, 1936) might as well have served the general purposes of my argument here, as would have a close study of the career of Edward Upward, with special attention to his monumental *The Spiral Ascent* and some of his late stories, like "The Scenic Railway". An essay devoted entirely to the "auspicious" formalities of *The White Goddess* would be just as useful and illuminating.

The work of writers operating beyond the tight little island of our Anglophone culture has been for some time our major resource for thinking (and writing) outside the box of that powerful, not to say *hegemonic*, cultural tradition. Most important here has been OuLiPo, whose practices gained wide dispersal *except* in England and the United States. Harry Mathews' work has reigned in its lone splendor for decades. As for contemporary English-language writing, by which I mean writing since the Vietnam War, we observe many practices that range beyond the conventions, even the *avant garde* conventions, of traditional Modernism. Negotiating those practices is difficult without an ordinance survey map of Modernism that is far more detailed and comprehensive than the ones we now possess.

Such a map will be drawn when we undertake new field work and incorporate our findings into global measurements. This work needs to recover not only the lost ground of the Modernist period, however. Equally important is a return to the period of the late Victorians, particularly the period from 1848 when the divide that opened between Clough and Arnold set an example of many roads that would be taken and not taken thereafter. Much the same could be said and shown by investigating the emergence of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which ushered in epochal changes in aesthetic practices that set the foundation for Modernism itself, when the PRB and its immediate inheritors were publicly repudiated.

Recently scholars have begun to look again at this cultural liaison, once seen as a great divide. The re-examination has been largely confined to poetry, however. In this connection, let me close by naming George Meredith. The remarkable innovation of his

verse, not least the sonnet-sequence *Modern Love*, is now widely recognized and accounted for. The so-called “nature” poetry remains behindhand, as does the closely related “nature” poetry of Meredith’s friend Swinburne. Even more unfortunate, perhaps, Meredith’s prose fiction has largely slipped from view. In this case, what we lose is the example of a radical shift in the resources of prose fiction, especially at the level of pure style. The shift is perceptible as well in Swinburne’s prose, also forgotten except in a brief late *amende* by Edmund Wilson.

What happened to English prose fiction in the twentieth-century? We can’t hope to answer that question adequately unless we get beyond those commonplace formulations we have raised up through critical ideas drawn from the work of Flaubert and James. As a man once said of Wordsworth, his will no longer *do*.

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