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John Cowper Powys: A Master of Nuances and Variations

While musing on these lines, I went out into the garden for a breath of air. My eyes fell on the pink old roses growing wildly on the roof of the earth cellar. The air was fresh and invigorating after some recent showers. A swallow was soaring in the sky, closely followed by the hurried eastbound flight of a passing tern, a visitor from the nearby sea in the west. A gentle easterly wind was carrying with it a vague scent of newly manured fields. Yes, the apples were slowly ripening - messengers announcing the approaching season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.

Now that my thesis work is over, I look back in order to define, to put into words what it is in John Cowper Powys's oeuvre that captured my attention from the very beginning. Our first meeting - *Wolf Solent* - took place in the early 1990s. Spontaneously, my thoughts go to Powys's unique and captivating awareness of subtle phenomena such as atmospheric or elemental changes, suddenly occurring or gradually approaching; his beautiful descriptions of different shades of light and colour succeeding one another at the transitional moments between evening and night, night and morning, the hour before Nyx finally surrenders to Eos. Like nobody else, he listens to the the whispering wind in the summer grass, observes the flight of a butterfly, the distant cry of a sea-gull finding its way through an open window. Sense impressions, minute details, all the small things that Powys, child of the elements, so masterly renders in all their beauty. He inspires and admonishes us to sharpen our senses, to cultivate a soothing and strengthening power of observation, to respond to Nature in all its variety:

. . . to observe in early afternoon, a certain yellowish light upon a brick wall; to note a certain dark-blue wave of colour, as it sinks down upon the roofs of a city after sunset; to catch the ink-black silhouettes of bare branches against a November sky . . . (In Defence of Sensuality, p. 41)

Lines like these met with my immediate sympathy; they responded to something within, something of which I was only dimly or occasionally aware; they filled me with feelings of affinity and recognition. Powys's language is often poetic; not seldom is it picturesque in a literal sense. With skilfully delicate strokes of the pen the author creates lyrical landscapes in such a vivid way that the reader/beholder imagines him/herself to be somewhere within the word-painting . . .

When strolling around in John Cowper Powys's rich and extensive multiverse, we experience, among many other things, meetings with unique personalities; on other occasions, we find ourselves among teeming crowds. We detect meandering paths; we chance upon byroads - "real" or imaginary sanctuaries - where we, in the company of the protagonists can find that peaceful seclusion and distance, so sorely needed when humanity and her creations - from social conventions to technical innovations - feel far too demanding, or even irrelevant. Powys, a pronounced individualist, reacted against what he termed the antheap mentality of commercialized, industrial society. He fully realized how this kind of society alienates man from the important things in life; how it threatens to make us incapable of enjoying existence, of appreciating the small things and beautiful details in everyday life and in nature. He envisaged a new and ideal form of social organization: he wanted to see societies governed by "a wiser set of values", societies, in which contemplation, not action, would be regarded as the leading ideal (*In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 167). John Cowper's own wayfaring finally led him to a land of majestic scenery and rich mythological heritage, to his beloved Wales.

In various ways, Powys's work presents a display of life, Life in all its dimensions. In the Powysian multiverse, the narrators soar above the earth, they rise into interstellar regions;

spiralling downwards through the cosmos, they reach the human sphere; from here they continue their downward movement to the realms of vegetation and small creatures: to the world of glow-worms, slow-worms, snails, and newts. Nothing is too small to be included. In a double sense, the multifaceted Cowperverse contains many layers . . . Towards the end of the singular night between December 10 and 11, the reader swirls in the "invisible air-dance" of the "thaumaturgic" west wind together with

*its tiny moss-spores, its infinitesimal lichen-scales, its fungus-odours,
its oak-apple dust, its sterile bracken-pollen, its wisps of fluff from the
bellies of Sedgemoor wild-fowl, its feathery husks from the rushes of
Mark Moor, its salt-weed pungencies from the Bay of Bridgwater. (A
Glastonbury Romance, chapter 24, "Nature Seems Dead", p. 780)*

In different verbal guises, the four elements - air, fire, earth, and water - keep recurring in novel after novel, from the dualistic *Wood and Stone* (1915) to the late *Porius* (1951). In the former, earth is represented by stone; in a negative sense, its hardness is personified by the power-obsessed Mortimer Romer. In *Weymouth Sands* (1934), earth is synecdochically represented by the "murderous" stone Jobber Skald carries in his pocket; fortunately, he finally manages to get rid of this troublesome burden. In *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), stone is a cult object - an object of worship to which the earthbound John Crow directs his prayers. In the *Romance*, stone is only one aspect of the protean grail notion; it is also part of the chronicler's evasive "Mystery of Glastonbury". As he emphasizes, the ubiquitous Mystery has many names; grail is only one appellation. One of the most neutral lexical shapes the Mystery assumes is that of a "fleeting nameless essence".

For lack of money, John Crow has to set out for Glastonbury on foot. Like the "pilgrims" in our days - this motley crowd of people gathering in thousands at Stonehenge at summer solstice in order to see the first sunbeams of midsummer morning fall upon the mighty monument - John, the stone worshipper, has made up his mind to make a detour to the Stone Circle, bravely defying his aching heel. He supports himself on a walking-stick - a modern variant of the pilgrim's staff. When he arrives at Stonehenge, a monolith standing by itself immediately catches his attention. He presses his face three times against the stone, and prays in silence for his cousin Mary: "Stone of England, guard Mary Crow and make her happy" (chapter 3, "Stonehenge", p. 99). John, the vagabond, seeks permanence. To him, the tremendous stones are "real", "This is my England", whereas he considers Glastonbury to be nothing but a dead ruin. The enthusiast Owen Evans informs John that he has chosen the Hêl Stone - the Sun Stone - for his worship. According to Evans, Stonehenge was "the greatest Temple of the Druids" (p. 101). It is England versus Wales.

Like his cousin and future wife, Mary Crow, the sceptical atheist John regards both the Grail mystery and the Arthurian legends as superstitious nonsense. During his work for the revivalist John Geard he repeatedly longs for "cleansing" water to invade Glastonbury and wash away all "superstition". Water is of course the predominant element in this novel which culminates in a flood of gigantic proportions: The Glastonbury area is immersed in masses of water. Geard is drowned, probably deliberately, thus committing an "inspired" suicide.

The chronicler characterizes both John and Mary as realists. They experience some kind of change, however, during their stay in the legend-loaded area. When the couple are finally able to return to their native Norfolk, some near-elegiac notes are heard in the chronicler's tentative speculations:

*Why was it then, that they both felt a curious and irresistible sadness
as they thought of their return? Had they been captured in spite of*

themselves, by the terrible magic of this spot? Was John's clinging to his strange master a sign that something would be gone forever . . . Did Mary recall the dawn of St. John's Day? (chapter 29, "The Iron Bar", p. 1062)

In the quotation above, the chronicler refers to the sudden peace of mind Mary experienced last Midsummer when she had something of a grail vision, at least partly connected to stone - or, more precisely, to the interplay between light and stone - a detail which further emphasizes the affinity between the cousins.

Mary wakes up in the hour before dawn with a sense of anxiety. She props herself up and looks out through the window facing west. She watches the ever-recurrent atmospheric metamorphosis, during which the shadows of dawn gradually turn to daylight. In this hour of half-light, the tops of the elm trees behind the ruined tower arch of the Abbey Church appear ghostly to her. The tower arch emphasizes itself against the dawning sky: Mary sees its forms and details; it is as if the tower were unaffected by the lights and shades surrounding it. In this way the chronicler indicates that the ruined tower will play an important part in what is soon to happen.

The description of the very first light of dawn conveys a quiet sense of gloom, verging on the sinister; it thus emphasizes Mary's present mood. She dreads to think what may happen this day, the day of Mayor Geard's Pageant and Passion Play. She worries about everything, from how the weather will turn out to potential riots, caused by the ongoing labour dispute in Philip Crow's enterprise. She even fears that her John will be arrested and taken away. Her dismal thoughts are suddenly interrupted when she notices a singular light phenomenon, created by the breaking through of the first rays of the morning sun: "It was with a shock of real amazement, as *something* that *seemed* more blood-red than sunlight hit the left-hand column of the great broken arch, that the girl lifted her head now" (chapter 19, "The Pageant", p. 555; emphasis added). The chronicler verbalizes the amazement that the unusual light produces in Mary. At the same time he characteristically mystifies her sense impression by using the unspecific "something" and the tentative "seemed". This vagueness harmonizes well with his own tentative description of the Mystery of Glastonbury (see chapter 4, "Hic Jacet"), and with Geard's unspecific terms when trying to put into words his recently acquired "insights" concerning the nature, origin, and influence of the Grail: "It is *something* that has been dropped upon our planet, . . . dropped *from Somewhere Else*" (chapter 15, "Mark's Court", p. 456; emphasis added).

"Mysteries" are by definition, indefinable. In order to stay esoteric or mysterious, they require a certain measure of opacity. The Grail legends belong to this category. Archetypal mysteries as well as some "inexplicable" events cannot be explained - are not meant to be explained - in distinct, unambiguous, and/or rational terms. Consequently, things and incidents of "mysterious" nature are often termed in clichéd words and expressions.

Sudden insights, unexpected and intense sense impressions, short moments of ecstatic happiness - frequently occurring in Powys's oeuvre - are other events that are hard to verbalize. Tongue-in-cheek, John Cowper avoids current clichés by parodically alluding to them. On other occasions, he develops them in his highly personal voice.

Let us, however, return to Mary and St John's Day! When the first rays of the sun illuminate the ruined tower arch of the Abbey Church, she experiences a kind of ecstasy. A quickly passing intense sense of happiness permeates her whole being; it results in a wholesome peace of mind. The description of her ecstasy is short, followed by a narratorial summary. The episode contains five vague words or expressions, conveying nothing but their own vagueness: "*unnatural*"; "*indescribable*" (twice); "*Whatever it was*"; and the neutral "*It*" (with the letter "I" in the upper case, signalling that this "It" is of great significance, that it is

something unique). In the following sentence, it is Mary who finds the light "unnatural". Within dashes, the chronicler intrudes with a slightly pedantic comment concerning its particular shade: "... for she became aware that the sight of this *unnatural* light - *in reality* it was a wine-coloured red, touched with a *quite indescribable* nuance of purple - was giving her a spasm of irrational happiness" (p. 556; emphasis added). In this quotation, the chronicler pretends to explain Mary's "unnatural" with something "real". What he "in reality" claims is that in the morning sun, the tower of the Abbey Church appears wine-coloured with an additional nuance of purple. This nuance is not only "indescribable"; it is even "quite indescribable". In other words, it seems to be a kind of colour that cannot take on lexical shape, that language (or the language of the chronicler and Mary) lacks the appropriate words for. In this way, the magical impact of the vision is made to remain. The sight of this "indescribable" nuance and the light that appears to have projected it has an obvious and positive effect on Mary's nerves:

Her soul had come back with a violent spasm, like a rush of blood to her head, and her whole nature seemed to pour itself out towards the reddish light [another unspecific term] on that tall column. Her pulse of happiness was intense. What she experienced was like a quivering love-ecstasy that had no human object. She could actually feel the small round breasts under her night-gown shiver and distend. . . . Her lips parted, and a smile that was a smile of indescribable peace flickered over her face. (p. 556)

As the above quotation shows, Mary's experience is both spiritual and pronouncedly physical, even sensual. The voyeuristic chronicler sees the smiling woman - John Crow's future bride - as the perfect model for a painting, a "passionately concentrated vision" of cunning Zeus's erotic conquest of Danae. Then he rapidly changes tone, thereby emphasizing the short duration of the experience: "Whatever it was that stirred her so, the effect of it soon passed; . . . The invisible Watchers . . . noted well this event. 'She has been allowed to see It,' they said to one another. 'Will she be the only one among all these people?'" (p. 556). Whether the "It" of the spirits refers to the nuance of purple that Mary's cousin, the profit-hunting industrialist Philip Crow sees in his grail dream a good hundred pages further on in the narrative, the reader will never know. In his parodic grail dream - each grail dream is related to the personality of the dreamer - Philip sees drops of blood oozing from a cauldron that Mr Geard holds in his hands. (Geard's cauldron suggests the cauldron of Cerridwen, the Welsh fertility goddess.) Philip immediately envisions a new and profitable field of investment, and murmurs: "The lost purple dye! . . . and it will be called the Glastonbury Purple!" (chapter 21, "Tin", p. 674).

As mentioned above, Mary's "epiphany" can be interpreted as a grail vision. It is only one among many lexical manifestations of the multifaceted, fluctuating, and pervasive "Mystery of Glastonbury". The *Romance* clearly indicates that none of these notions can be covered by one sole, clear-cut definition. The open-ended, polyphonic text offers a plethora of possible explanations to the questions it gives birth to. Here is the challenge, here is the joy! In a cornucopian way, the narrative flows forward in rich streams, streams resounding with the voices of a choir singing variations on Glastonbury and its legendary heritage.

John Cowper Powys was a masterful writer. With his subtle descriptions of nature, consciousness, emotions, and nuances, he constantly spoke to the senses of his readers. Give Brother John the time, attention, and reflection he deserves, and you will be abundantly rewarded!

Eivor Lindstedt

John Cowper Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1930.
---, *A Glastonbury Romance* [1932], Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1987.