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A Glastonbury Romance — Bert's Cauldron

NO WORD in literature, unless perhaps 'ballad' or 'legend', can have more power to evoke the magical and the marvellous than 'romance'. Under the roofs of Powys's Glastonbury and under the craniums of its extraordinary inhabitants marvels occur as everyday happenings.

St. George's church, Evenley Northants

In John Cowper Powys's letter to Frances Gregg in 1931[1] he writes of his intention to invent the characters of his book "in Vacuo out of life and experience"—a phrase which, in his case, must imply a very broad imaginative scope indeed.

Mr Geard—'Bloody Johnny'—the holy magician of the story, was laughingly compared by Canon William Crow to Rabelais's "Frère Jean des Entommeures", "Friar John of the Funnels"[2]. Geard describes himself as a conduit—receiving, channelling and knowing vicariously the feelings and sensations of those in the world around him and drawing on forces and powers from beyond the visible world. He is a medium. Geard's creator, John Cowper Powys, is a medium of a very different kind—the funnel and conduit of his own unfettered imagination, free to dictate and shape *A Glastonbury Romance*. The result is a poetic and extremely complex book which almost defies overall cohesive study.

Glastonbury is itself a character of the romance. The life of the town is dreamlike, vivid to the senses and contained in its own reality. It is affected by the consciousnesses of those who have been there, by personified forces (or gods)—particularly Chance—and by the dual malice and goodness of a 'First Cause' interacting with the goodness and malice in all other identities. This reciprocal duality is something quite other than the alignment with, and of, good and evil which was part of Wolf Solent's 'life-illusion'[3] and which is part of most English understanding of the Arthurian legend.

[1] *Powys Jack and Frances*, The Love Letters of John Cowper Powys and Frances Gregg, Oliver and Christopher Wilkinson, editors, London: Cecil Woolf, 1996, vol. II, p.5

[2] *A Glastonbury Romance*, Macdonald, 1955, p. 446, [(461) in the Simon and Schuster edition]

[3] J.C. Powys, *Wolf Solent*, Macdonald & Co, 1929

In another letter to Frances Gregg, Powys posits the idea of

> ... every living human being having 'The Christ' (whatever that is) down at the bottom somewhere of their being, itself in touch—so it seems—or *might* almost seem—with what William James once well described as '*Something of the Same Sort*' behind the visible world and behind all we know or *can* know.

He goes on to write of

> ... the problem of what connection is between this 'Christ'-in-all-souls-and-this-'Something-else'-of-a-similar-kind-behind-the-world—*taken together—and* the *First Cause,* who is, from all the evidence we can see, *as Evil* or, strictly speaking and not to be malicious, *nearly* as Evil as *he is good*. Well! perhaps not *nearly as* evil; but very *very* evil!.....[4]

From this it is clear that the question of duality was central to Powys's thought at the time of writing *A Glastonbury Romance*. It continued to be so, possibly throughout his life.

Dualism is everywhere in Glastonbury's history—inside the Church in Cathar legend, outside the Church both in philosophical 'paganism' inheriting Mithraic and Druidic ideas to be found in the Grail romances (not yet Christianized) and in older magical cult religions.

Powys's Welshman, Owen Evans, teases out the Welsh origins of contemporary happenings in Glastonbury. Powys's narrator touches on them a great deal more lightly. Mabinogian echoes in a story told by an old man to a group of children on the Somerset marsh could pass almost unnoticed. Images—a small dead fish in a vicarage aquarium, a live blood-streaked fish in a grail goblet, a silver bowl in a house named Camelot—all have mythic reference, yet all appear fresh out of their author's imagination to be used as his totally original Romance demands and invite no interpretative meaning beyond themselves.

Powys explains in his letter to Frances Gregg why she should feel uneasy in Somerset:

> Norfolk & Suffolk are *Danish*—hardy, independent, resolute, simple, clear-cut—whereas Somerset is the very heart of that shifty wavering undulating fluctuating country full of phantoms and fancies and extreme fictions and fictionings & feignings & weak, crafty, yielding, bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you ineffectualities & a poetized, Evangelical Christianity like they have in Wales which is neither Catholic nor Protestant nor Nonconformist nor Anglican but a sort of emotional mystical religion of their own of which all the main feelings—above all *vicarious redemption* and *salvation* thro' emotion and without using will or effort [...]—softened subtilized fictionized [...] the simple-Simon Saxons & their naive king Alfred. No wonder very curious feelings come over you in Somerset. I tell you it is *by far* the most *enchanted* ground in England...[5]

Philip Crow is, by this measure, wholly of Norfolk, Geard is of Somerset. The

[4] *Powys Jack and Frances,* p.80

[5] Ibid., p.11

protean John Crow is somewhere between. The tale begins in Norfolk where the cousins, John and Mary, escape the family funeral reunion and turn their faces, with sensuous relish, into the East wind of the Fens.

Three or four characters create a tension between that which is Norfolk and that which is Glastonbury. Foremost among these is John through whom the sense of a link is intensified by his going on foot from East to West, arriving with a raw heel, little in his stomach and less in his pocket, at Stonehenge where he meets Wales in the form of the ancient stones and the person of Owen Evans.

In a talk to the Powys Society, at Sherborne, in the nineteen seventies, Gerard Casey warned readers of John Cowper Powys not to mistake the views of 'Powys heroes' with those of John himself. No less than four of *A Glastonbury Romance*'s main characters resemble their creator in some way; but setting the novel apart from the two which came before it is the presence of an authoritative narrative voice whose sometimes Biblical certainty replaces the 'It was as if...' often preceding the musings of Rook Ashover[6] and Wolf Solent[7]. There is that about the tone of this voice's pronouncements which makes extraordinary events seem less exceptional—though no less remarkable, in a book where everything is exceptional.

So we learn of John and Mary's double prayer starting on its flight driven forward "beyond the whole astronomical world [...] till it reached the primal Cause of all life." There is danger of its being intercepted by the evil will of this "vast Janus-faced Force":

> Down through the abysses of ether, away from the central nucleus of this dualistic Being, descend through the darkness that is beyond the world two parallel streams of magnetic force, one good and one evil...[8]

Their prayer loses itself "not in ultimate good, but in ultimate evil". A less uncompromising account of the 'First Cause' is to be found at the end of *In Defence of Sensuality*, published one year earlier:

> This dualistic First Cause, with whose ambiguous personality it [the ichthyosaurus ego] keeps up its dialogue of alternate gratitude and defiance, may in reality be only a weak intermediary Demiurge, and the real "Emperor of the Universe" be so remote, so far away, that no prophet, priest, or magician has ever so much as snatched a hint of His nature.[9]

It is perhaps not surprising that Powys should have allowed his more moderate speculation of that time to give way a little to the dramatic demands of *A Glastonbury Romance* and this passage would suggest that the narrative voice is not necessarily more objective nor more closely in agreement with John Cowper Powys's views than were the voices of earlier heroes.

In the course of the story a woman with cancer is miraculously cured, a dead child is brought to life. The presence of the crucified Christ above the roofs

[6] J.C. Powys, *Ducdame*, Doubleday, Page & Co, 1925

[7] J.C. Powys, *Wolf Solent*, Macdonald & Co, 1929

[8] *A Glastonbury Romance*, 'The River', pp.77-78 (61)

[9] J.C. Powys, *In Defence of Sensuality*, Gollancz, 1930, p.287

of the town is described by the narrator before Sam himself sees the vision in the night sky. Later, as Sam struggles with his conscience in the church, Jesus enters, unknown to him. We are not told in what form, only that He would have liked to save Sam from his well-intentioned, self-inflicted torment, but could not[10]. Such wonders belong, by their very nature, to romance. Cause and effect would reduce them to that "totally distinct and inferior kind of Poetry—Allegory and Fable"[11]. Yet, though no moral is ever pointed, this is a deeply moral book. Sam Dekker, who decides to devote his life to practical saintliness, is described by Powys as one of the two noblest spirits in the town.

The Grail is perceived, by most of the characters, if at all, as a magical or religious reality. It is for Owen Evans "a fragment of the Absolute", cancelling our notions of Time and Space in a momentary timelessness. Asked what it was his Welsh ancestors fished for in their ancient ceremonies, he replies that it was "that which exists in the moment of timeless time..."[12] As Geard cures Tittie Petherton he keeps his mind steadily upon

> ... that slit in Time through which the Timeless—known in those parts for five thousand years as a cauldron, a horn, a krater, a mwys, a well, a kernos, a platter, a cup and even a nameless stone—had broken the laws of Nature![13]

The 9th century poet Taliessin (Gwion of the Ceridwen cauldron legend[14]) appears in *Porius*. He envisages "... Time free at last from its Ghostly Accuser / Time haunted no more by a Phantom Eternal". Taliessin is able to let "his soul sink into a multiple consciousness of the material of our planet" as he looks at a fragment of

> wheat-stalk whose non-sentience was on a par with that of any fragment from his own skeleton, when once that skeleton was scattered to the winds, gave him a reason for saying "you and I" or "you and me" to this lifeless object.[15]

Powys shared this ability, absorbing and penetrating and transforming at will everything in the world around him.

Unlike his Taliessin, Powys attaches great importance to religious and erotic magic, both of which abound in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

John and Mary plunge into the mill pool "with their eyes, their minds, and their souls"—much as they might have plunged into Geard's cauldron of timelessness. Their love-making leaves them with "a sense of some strange virtue having passed into them"[16]. Cordelia, the very plain new wife of Evans, associated

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[10] *A Glastonbury Romance*, 'Omens and Oracles', pp.551-2 (572-3)

[11] William Blake, *'A Vision of the Last Judgment'*, 1810; in Blake's *Notebook,* a commentary upon one of his major paintings, now unfortunately lost.

[12] *A Glastonbury Romance*, 'The Miracle', p.740 (772)

[13] Ibid., 'The Miracle', p.708 (738)

[14] *Ceridwen*: in Welsh mythology, a witch who owns a magic cauldron (See 'The Tale of Gwion Bach')

[15] J.C. Powys, *Porius*, Colgate University Press, 1994, p. 429

[16] *A Glastonbury Romance*, 'The River', p. 41 (54)

by him with the Ceridwen legend and “the focus of two vibrations issuing from the First Cause—one creative, one destructive”, manages “by certain devices [...] abnormal, but perfectly harmless”[17] to delay Evans and so prevent his witnessing a murder. In doing this, she can be said to have saved Evans’s immortal soul. As unwitting agent of good over evil she has power, with her sexuality, to effect life-changing magic.

The Absolute, that of which the Grail is a fragment, is a Mystery—timeless, spaceless, incomprehensible and indescribable, though not wholly inaccessible to the imagination. “The answer to all things, that yet answers nothing”. *A Glastonbury Romance,* like the Grail, presents itself as a vision or series of visions or insights, the reader’s imagination called upon to open as a funnel or conduit to its wonders and contradictions. The truth is not in the myth but in the work of art.

It may be that Powys’s Glastonbury asks to be seen with the eye of the infant Bert Cole: “... none—I say none—contemplated the Dream of Life with a more concentrated gusto. [...] Bert Cole surveyed the panorama of existence with an unpossessive, grave-eyed relish that would have put Diogenes himself to shame”[18]

Cicely Hill

Cicely Hill is a haïku poet. Among her published works are poems included in two anthologies in French, *Haïku sans frontières* and *Haïku—Poésies anciennes & modernes*. A member of the Powys Society for thirty-three years and a life-long reader of John Cowper Powys, she has written for the *Powys Review* and the *Powys Journal*. She spent five years in Japan and now lives in rural West Sussex.

(The stained-glass window reproduced p.1 is the work of John Hardman Powell, who lived from 1827 to 1895. He was apprenticed to A.W.N. Pugin and after the latter’s death returned to Birmingham where he became Artistic Director of John Hardman & Co, remaining active until the end of his life.

Photographed by Mathé Shepheard, they will appear with many others in her book on John Hardman Powell’s life and work, to be published at a later date.)

[17] *A Glastonbury Romance,* ‘The Iron Bar’, p.1029 (1078)

[18] Ibid., ‘The Look of a Saint’, p. 173 (164)