

Fabulous Powys

John Cowper Powys *La Fosse aux chiens*¹

IMAGINE an outstanding writer who, at the age of eighty, gives, and announces that he is giving, free rein to the “pure” phantasms which have been the foundations of his fiction for almost forty years: what Powys gives in 1952 with *The Inmates* is no other than his own vision of “hell”, revisited twenty years after *Morwyn*. This time he comments:

I instinctively discovered as I went along that three things were essential if I were to get the required atmosphere: first a simplicity of narrative to compete with the macabre frivolity of the subject, secondly a shameless exploitation wherever possible of my own personal manias, and thirdly a savage avoidance of all the modern psychoanalytical catchwords...

In *Morwyn* (1932), he had described traditional hell in a striking manner, imagining an underground area peopled with monsters and historical or mythical characters: Sade and Torquemada were opposed to Taliesin and Rabelais. But here, Powys offers himself the luxury of only shackling the novelist to his sole obsessions. I was on the point of adding: with no amendment; oh yes, there is one—but so minimal! This is the book of transparency.

The hero, John Hush (a lovely name, this John ‘Quiet’, which recalls, like all the *personæ* of this tale, many previous heroes: a game for Powysians) is to spend the spring in the asylum, “half an expensive school and half a luxurious hospital”, where the odious Doctor Echetus (called in Homeric Greek “Maimer of Men”) carries out mad vivisection experiments on dogs (hence the French title). Now, the characters at Glint Hall (a lovely name, hard and malevolent like a black polished stone), whether they be “patients” or nurses, are there to embody the author’s obsessions. But ‘embody’ is saying too much: indeed, they are to be on stage, but such theatre is hardly more than shadows projected on scenery by the author’s psyche.

And first, the hero, whose obsession consists in cutting a lock of hair from the heads of girls he desires, and the heroin, the wraith-like Antenna Sheer (Antenna ‘Pure’!) who *suffers* from violent hate for the Father. They immediately and very Powysianly fall in love: see the beautiful scene of ‘cerebral love’ in Chapt. VI.

In fact nobody here is insane, just possibly perverse; all the inmates, by many a nebulous declaration, are introduced into the set of characters, as are the philosophical perverts and the fetichist sex heroes; there is for instance the usual Powysian confrontation between a Catholic priest and a Protestant clergyman, who are both superseded by a *deus ex machina* arriving from Tibet (the Celtic New Wales—is it not, Kenneth White?) just in time to resolve tensions in a

¹ *La Fosse aux chiens* (*The Inmates*), tr. Daniel Mauroc, Le Seuil, 1976. Courtesy Maurice Nadeau for this republication of the above Review from *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 16 July 1976. My thanks to Jean-Pierre De Waegenare who drew my attention to it.

multiverse rather than in the universe. There are also inoffensive characters delirious with mysticism, nihilism, sensualism...

Happily the heroes flee, in an ending which the author, with superb indifference that will freeze the smile on the lips of the most sceptical readers, wrote in a fashion even more improbable than the rest of the story. Obviously the important point does not reside here, but precisely in the way he manages to make his characters perfectly transparent. Among the last avatars (Powys had yet to write another half-dozen books) from a formerly exuberant fictional world (see *Glastonbury*), there nevertheless appear here *those spirits which haunt the very locus of literary creation*: where the confrontation of the author's *personæ* with a privileged space takes place:

So high did the up-sloping distance rise above their prison wall that the summit of the eastern ridge which he had seen from the window of that passage as a background to Tena's head showed itself to him now through a wavering transparency of white mist, like a vision of magical escape, with its prehistoric camp and its two Scotch firs.

The temptations of Saint Powys may not be of the greatest Powys, but they are authentic Powys, remarkably well-served by a translation both scrupulous and felicitous. In all respects, this book is thus a delight for amateurs.

Michel Gresset

Michel Gresset was Professor Emeritus in the University of Paris VII up to his death in 2005 and had also been editor of the complete works of William Faulkner in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition. He published articles and essays on John Cowper Powys and later on William Faulkner and other Southern writers, and translated their works. He had visited John Cowper Powys in the summer of 1962.