

***Owen Glendower* or time in abeyance**

HOW IS IT possible to evoke, in a few lines, the magic which permeates John Cowper Powys's novel *Owen Glendower*? To put this work in the category of the historical novel is at the same time unavoidable and deeply restrictive. For Powys seems to respect the rules of the genre only in order to better make them implode later on. The very first page of the novel, in which he introduces one of the main characters, shows the hand of a virtuoso playing the codes of the romance novels:

Don Quixote might well have recognised in the gaunt piebald horse that carried young Rhisiart down that winding track towards the river Dee a true cousin of Rosinante's.¹

So that the long and dark silhouette loaded down with antique weapons, stumbling along the way, immediately calls to mind the image of an anti-hero, himself set under the patronage of the most famous upholder of lost causes. And Powys adds: "Like Rosinante he was as much of a personality as his master".

It is therefore a couple which is introduced here, of which the two members are explicitly put on an equal footing and whom we will be following throughout the novel. Within a few lines, it has already become difficult to go on believing in an ordinary fiction. *Owen Glendower* is, in fact, a deflected historical novel, Protean, enormous and baroque.

Not only the main characters are much more than conventional heroes, but even the most obvious hierarchy, that which turns animals into shadows fleetingly passing through and through men's history, does not apply here. For Powys has no respect for rules. His creative powers are such that it would be impossible for him to resort to clichés in describing his characters. He enriches the tale of the many idiosyncrasies, judgments, fears and manias of the protagonists, with a precise description of their subservience, as unconscious as it is involuntary, to the influence of the constellations. In this way, they provide the flickering mirror in which the vagaries of stars are reflected.

So John Cowper Powys is not content to merely re-create in his novels a world teeming with men and beasts, anchored in an omnipresent landscape, but he has no reluctance in incorporating planets into it. The novel becomes a universe, a cosmology, and thus attains a new dimension. We get to know a perpetually moving universe, where places, plants and trees, but also planets, unite their strength or contend in never-ending combats. All these entities gifted each with their own will, own a fragment of divinity and never cease to act on the humours of men.

The material disappearance of the comet by the end of March could hardly be called a complete departure. ... Something of itself remained, a weight upon the atmosphere, a pressure upon human souls, a quickening

¹ *Owen Glendower*, "The Castle", Picador, 1978, p. 3

of human pulses, queer crisscross currents in the psychic air.²

In such a universe, time cannot be conceived in a linear mode, but must be separated on the contrary into eras auspicious, or inauspicious, to men. And occasionally it may be tamed by some extraordinary beings.

Owen Glendower is one of these masters of time, experiencing its laws himself. For he indulges in some short escapes, some absences which although not perceived by others are not missed by Rhisiart, the young Don Quixote of the beginning of the novel. These spells out of time are felt by Owen to be a sign of the sharpness of his senses, a singular ravishment. It even seems that this practice, along the years, has become an integral part of his personality. He allows himself these bouts of absence and has control over them, but at the same time he considers them as a kind of personal religious ritual. Rhisiart describes the symptoms:

...it seemed to him that this intermittent paralysis — just as if the man's soul had left his body altogether — descended so palpably that he found himself making an instinctive movement forward as if the chieftain might suddenly reel and stagger.³

The portrait of Owen is that of some kind of shaman, endowed with magnetic powers, whose soul, strangely apt to wander between worlds, would thus be able to escape the tyranny of reality, while preserving an extraordinary clear-mindedness...

His face was blurred to his hearers in that dim light, but he felt as if his features were melting, and as if his whole torso were melting and turning into a dissolving tower of mist.⁴

Perspectives, far from being fixed, on the contrary seem here to be subjected to no laws whatsoever.

He felt as if he had sat on that spot on his grey horse for a thousand years, while the rains and the dews and the days and the nights passed over him, telling to all who came what was the secret of the place.⁵

For Powys, the soul is a free entity, able to pass through space and to blend time, place and duration. When all conditions are met within an auspicious and sacred site, permanence and a flash of time may be superimposed. This rare conjunction between a place, a moment and a soul gives birth to precious moments of grace.

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² *ibid.*, “Love and Shame”, p.480

³ *Owen Glendower*, “Glyndyfrdwy”, p.121

⁴ *ibid.*, “Mathrafal”, p.414

⁵ *ibid.*, “Mathrafal”, p.414