

## Obscure, Modern Poetry: J. C. Powys's 'The Ridge'<sup>1</sup>

### *A Glossary & Commentary*

FOUR DISCUSSIONS of this poem have been traced: G. Wilson Knight, 'John Cowper Powys's "The Ridge": An Interpretation', in *Powys Review* No.13, 1983-4, pp.44-7; Cicely Hill, "'The Ridge" and the Other', *NL* 63, March 2008, pp.27-33; Colin W. Thomas, "'The Ridge"—a Meditation', *NL* 63, pp.34-5. There was at one time a valuable online essay by John Dunn in *John Cowper Powys: Poet*, now only available as a Kindle book. [*lettre powysienne* n° 23 will include this essay.]

### Glossary

**Cronos, the angular minded (line1):** The phrase "angular minded" is puzzling, especially as the usual phrase is "crooked-counselling" (see *Porius* pp.75, 511, 613), but Powys transliterates the original Greek (which appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*, as well as Homer's *Iliad*) in *Porius*, as *Angulo-meetis* (pp.259, 750), (more correctly *agkulo-metes*: see W. J. Keith's "A *Porius* Companion", an online Powys Society resource). It therefore seems likely that "angular" is a mistranslation. In Dorothea Wender's Penguin translation it is just "crooked".

**Age of Gold; one of the Muses; Hesiod (lines 5-6):** See Hesiod 'Theogony' and 'Works and Days', which describe the defeat of Cronos by Zeus, along with the loss of the Age of Gold. The fact that the Muse that inspired Hesiod has come to Powys indicates that the loss of the Golden Age is to be the subject of this poem. Hesiod in fact indicates that the nine Muses are the source of his inspiration (*Hesiod and Theognis*, tr. Dorothea Wender: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 (1973): 'Theogony' p.23; 'Works and Days' p.59)

**Heedless Blurter of China (13):** Powys is not only inspired by the Muse, but also by the Taoist wisdom of Kwang Tze. See John Cowper Powys, 'The Philosophy of Kwang', *The Dial*, Vol. LXXV, No.5, November, 1923; reprinted in *The Powys Review*, Vol. II iii, No.7, Winter 1980, pp.45-48.

**De Profundis (14):** The opening words, in Latin, of Psalm 30.

**I carry a horror within me that few can withstand (32):** Morine Krissdottir notes: "For much of 1952 and 1953 [Powys] struggled with 'my demons ... those mad dreams of the mind'." (*Descents of Memory*, New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p.402).

**when I burst from Bedlam (36)** See line 32 and entry above. There are numerous references to madness in 'The Ridge'.

**Gold (37-8):** Presumably an allusion to Hesiod's Age of Gold.

**some world-destroying convulsion (45):** The death of God is associated with apocalyptic imagery several times.

<sup>1</sup> In *Porius* (New York: Overlook Duckworth 2007, p.369) there is a reference to "the obscure verses of this modern Pen Beirdd" [Taliessin]. In 1962 Frederick Davis was asked by Phyllis Playter to type [this poem about the Berwyn Mountains] out from the original... It was [Phyllis] who gave it the title 'The Ridge'. (See *The Diary of John Cowper Powys: 1930*, ed. Frederick Davies. London: Greymitre Books Ltd,1987, p.120). 'The Ridge' is now available at <http://www.powys-lannion.net/TheRidge.pdf> derived from the Internet Archive *granit* (1973).

**our quenchless hate for Matter and Life and God! (88); Matter engenders sex (93); Shrines for the sacred three, Matter, Life and Home (94):** These parodies of the Christian Trinity are vague and ambiguous, given the celebration of matter, or the inanimate in Powys's elemental philosophy: "... if we can acquire the art of letting our minds sink down into the inanimate we shall find peace." (*A Philosophy of Solitude*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1933, p.127). Powys may be using the word "matter" in this poem as a synonym for materialism, and the alienated relationship between people and matter that can occur especially in cities (see *A Philosophy of Solitude*, p.154).

Even more puzzling is the negative association of sex with matter, given the positive presentation of sexuality in the major novels, including *Porius*, as well as the record of Powys's personal sexual pleasure in his diaries<sup>2</sup>.

To make sense of Powys's quenchless hate for Life here, it perhaps should be seen in the context of the importance he places on Death in *Porius*. Cadawg's words in particular help to clarify Powys's ideas (p.299).<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Home, presumably Powys is thinking of home as an institution, rather than an abode, where work, gregarious family and social life, and the maternal instinct, stifle individual freedom, along with the solitary spiritual experiences that are central to Powys's idea of human happiness.<sup>4</sup>

**Nephelegeretay (89):** Greek *Nephelegeretes*, "lord of thunderstorms".

**since he conquered Time (90):** Zeus defeated Cronos [Ed: Robert Graves mentions p.66 in *The White Goddess* that Cronos is sometimes confused with Time (Chronos)].

**I shall find my love once more (120):** Cicely Hill, in her discussion of 'The Ridge', in *Powys Review* No.13, identifies the mysterious "other" with Powys's sister Eleanor, who died when she was thirteen. John Dunn suggested Frances Gregg in his essay. But see the next note.

**I had a true love once (137); rock occidental (143); River Kaw (144):** This alludes to Phyllis Playter, because the River Kaw is the local name for the Kansas River which flows through her birth place Kansas City, Missouri. Theodore Dreiser, in a letter of 26 March, 1926, referred to Phyllis as the modern sphinx from the banks of the Kaw. (*Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection*, ed. by Robert Elias. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959). The phrases "rock occidental" and "a mineral bed" are presumably part of this geographic allusion. But there is no explanation as to why she was taken away, nor why he has forgotten her name!

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<sup>2</sup> Even though it does not really explain the negative view of sex in the poem, it is worth noting that Powys was pleased when his own sexual feelings apparently ended, along with sadistic and lecherous thoughts, in 1942 (Unpublished Diary: 11 April, and 25 May, 1942. National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth)

<sup>3</sup> In *Owen Glendower* Broch has the same view (as Cadawg), in contrast with Glendower (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940, p.775). It is the worship of life and the ego, while ignoring the importance of death, not nihilism, nor hatred of pleasure, with which Powys is concerned.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of unhappy home life, see the vampirising maternal love of Betsy for her son Seth in *The Inmates*: "swallowing its offspring's freedom to live a life of its own" (Village Press, 1974, pp.199, 200).

**Brown as a blade of bronze that the waves of the ocean have rusted** (149): Powys refers to the pitiless bronze of the warlike Celtic conquerors of the Pacific Aboriginal Welsh, in the chapter 'Welsh Aboriginals' (*Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-47*. Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1947, pp.8, 13). See also *Glendower*, p.563.

**What is the Night-Mare Life were the Dapple of Sancho** (169): There appears to be a typographical error with *were* for *where*. While this allusion to Dapple<sup>5</sup>, Sancho's ass in Cervantes *Don Quixote* is unclear, as this section of the poem focusses on madness, it is significant that Powys suggests, in his 1938 essay on Cervantes, that Don Quixote's madness was about "[n]othing less than the restoration of the lost golden age" (*Enjoyment of Literature*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938, p.177). The final stanza of Canto I is a modernist jumble of allusions, linked by the idea of madness, but without any unifying narrative line, that is reminiscent of the style of *The Waste Land*.

**The Prophet Blanco** (171): This allusion is obscure.

**Hobdance**: *King Lear* I.iv. 214; **Mahu, Mado**, *King Lear* III.iv. 143. Mado and Mahu are fiends; **Dead for a ducat**: *Hamlet* III.iv. 23 (175-80). Powys alludes to Don Quixote's, Edgar's and Hamlet's madness in the Prefatory Note to *The Inmates* (vi); that of Edgar and Hamlet in his essay on Cervantes mentioned above.

**All of a sudden ice-cold as a polar bear-skin**(181): See *Porius*, pp.441-2, e.g. A chill of a peculiar kind (441); the corpse-like chill (442).



Liberty Hall, on the ridge above Cae Coed  
courtesy Chris Thomas

### Commentary

'The Ridge', which was first published in January 1963, in a special Powys number of *A Review of English Literature*, shortly before Powys's death in June that year<sup>6</sup>, was possibly written around 1952. It has strong affinity with *Porius* (1951), as

<sup>5</sup> The name given to Sancho's ass in some English translations, including that by John Ormsby (1885). In Spanish the ass has no name and is just called 'el rucio', an affectionate synonym of ass.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in *Powys Review*, No.13, 1983-4

indicated by the allusions to Cronos and the Age of Gold, as well as the idea of the death of Christianity's God. It also shares this latter theme with the long narrative poem *Lucifer*, originally written in 1905<sup>7</sup>, but not published until 1956, while the allusions to madness also suggest a possible connection with *The Inmates* (1952).<sup>8</sup>

The narrative structure of this poem is autobiographical, shaped by the idea of Powys composing it one autumn as he undertakes his morning walk up to the ridge of the Berwyn Mountains above his home in Corwen.<sup>9</sup> However, this is not an ordinary walk, because the imagined climax on the Berwyn Ridge involves both reunion with Powys's true love, who "they took... away for thinking / Thoughts against God", as well as "the Death of God" (136-8). The death of God is also directly linked with the ecstatic experience of Powys's elemental philosophy.

Significantly, in 1905 Powys had written a long, mythological narrative entitled *The Death of God*, modelled on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "... whose hero, just as he was Milton's, is Satan." However, this was not published until 1956, when the title was changed to *Lucifer*, since God "apparently didn't die..."<sup>10</sup>. In *Lucifer* it is suggested that God was first created by the minds of men, but is now dying because men no longer believe in him:

...The long drawn tide  
Of the bright-rocking ocean of Belief  
That swept us to our throne, now in slow ebb  
...  
Receding, draws us pitilessly down,  
Back to those gulfs from which at first we rose. (*Lucifer*, p.30)

*Lucifer* ends with Satan, having climbed a mountain ridge, speaking of "... God / Blundering, hath led this Race to ruin's brink" (p.152), and of "the fairer Earth which he would build" (p.154) in the future when God is dead. The death of God is linked to the idea of the end of Christian belief, alluding to Nietzsche's use of the phrase "God is dead" in *The Gay Science*.<sup>11</sup> Similar ideas, about how the human imaginations created gods, heaven and hell, are explored in Powys's

<sup>7</sup> Preface to *Lucifer*, London: Village Press, 1974, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> There is also a chapter titled 'In Spite of Madness', in *In Spite of: A Philosophy for Everyman*. London: Macdonald, 1953. Powys had completed *The Inmates* in 1951 (London: Macdonald, 1952) and was revising the typescript of *In Spite of* in January 1952 (letters from Powys 22 January and 27 January, 1952 *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, ed. A. Uphill, London: Bertram Rota, 1971, pp.116-7. *Porius* was completed February 1949 (*Porius*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p.11).

<sup>9</sup> "Every day I walk up the mountain from about 8.30 to 10.00 or 10.30." (Letter from Powys of 27 January 1952, in *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, Rota: London, 1971, p.116). Walking was of course of great importance in the creation part of Powys's elemental philosophy of life: "In the process of actually touching the earth [while walking] you realize what an escape from everything that hurts you worst in the world the Inanimate is." (*A Philosophy of Solitude*, p.145). See also Powys's published and unpublished diaries.

<sup>10</sup> Powys's letter of 7 May, 1956, in *Ross*, op. cit. p.131. Also see *Autobiography*, London: Macdonald, 1967, pp.357-9, 458.

<sup>11</sup> "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1974, p.125. Nietzsche was of course an important influence on Powys. [He too was addicted to walks and climbing mountains. Ed.]

novel *Morwyn* (1937).

The death of another god, Cronos, as described by the Greek poet Hesiod, is also alluded to earlier in 'The Ridge'. However, after the opening lines there is no further explicit reference to Cronos or to Hesiod. But in *Porius* Cronos is of major importance because the Arthurian magician Myrddin claims that he is a reincarnation of Cronos, and that he will bring a new Age of Gold 2000 years into the future.<sup>12</sup> Myrddin/Cronos is also the Anti-Christ, the Devil. Powys is suggesting in *Porius* that Christianity by rejecting the demonic and creating its mythology of sin, heaven and hell, is also responsible for creating tyranny, cruelty, war, and all human suffering. But 'The Ridge' only refers to the passing of Cronos (1), not directly to any return,<sup>13</sup> and the focus is on the suffering Christianity's God has caused. However, because Christianity's God is equated with Zeus in *Porius*, his death in 'The Ridge' (as in *Lucifer*) would seem to imply the return of the Golden Age.<sup>14</sup>

In addition the death of God is also directly linked in 'The Ridge' with Powys's elemental philosophy, which in this poem is particularly connected with "the colour up there"<sup>15</sup>, "that dubious tint", "Brown as a blade of bronze that the waves of the ocean have rusted" (163, 151, 149). As Powys tends to speak of colour as if it were a distinct entity, it should be noted this experience in fact relates to the element earth. Significantly this colour brings a feeling of "enchantment", and then the idea that it might be "the colour of God's extinction", as well as "The colour of Matter's end" (153, 165, 166). Powys's *Autobiography*, in particular, reveals the importance of colour to his elemental philosophy:<sup>16</sup>

*Colour!* What a thing to have appeared at all under the sun! To anyone who like myself is... a confirmed sensualist, this phenomenon of colour is like a vast number of entrancing delicious fragrances *grown visible*. No it is more than that. It is like a human body with which you are infatuated. It is any rate something you touch, taste, feel, and embrace with your whole soul. It is something *you sink into* and enjoy like the revelation of an erotic Fourth Dimension.

Powys also uses the word "tint" twice in an earlier passage<sup>17</sup> in *Autobiography*, where he describes how he creates the same ecstasy by pressing his knuckles against his closed eyelids. This ecstatic experience is precisely part of Powys's psycho-sensual elementalism. It is also part of *Porius*'s cavoseniargizing: "... his own secretive psycho-sensuous trick of ravishing the four elements with the five

senses, and doing it with these latter so fused together that it was like making

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<sup>12</sup> "Through my voice the Son of the Morning speaks... Cronos is his name..." (p.109). "the Son of the Morning" is also called Lucifer and when *Porius* sees Myrddin on yr Wyddfa, he "had the odd fancy that he could even catch... the visible rudiments of horns!" (p.748).

<sup>13</sup> The idea of the Age of Gold, and implicitly the dead god Cronos, is also alluded to in stanza 3 of Canto I, with the gold imagery associated with the autumnal larch needles:

Gold the rent ceiling through which the azure emerges  
A floor of gold is the ground—on gold I am setting my foot.

<sup>14</sup> See *Porius* pp.257 *et seq.*

<sup>15</sup> It is presumably the mountain ridge, that is up there, rather than the sky.

<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography*, p.73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.40-1. Harald Fawkner also has important comments on colour and ecstasy in *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys*, New Jersey: The Associated Univ. Presses, 1986, pp.52-4. G. Wilson Knight also refers to *Autobiography* in his discussion of these lines.

love to the earth-mother herself.”<sup>18</sup>

Words like mysticism and pantheism are used in discussing Powys's attitude to nature, but what his elementalism is concerned with is an ecstatic response to the natural world and the four elements, epiphanies such as Wordsworth describes in his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', though with an important difference, because Powys believes that the ecstasy of the young child can be retained by any adult who cultivates the imagination. For Powys, and the protagonists of his novels who resemble him, the cultivation of a psycho-sensual philosophy is as important as the Christian religion was for earlier generations.<sup>19</sup> The death of God comes with the end of any need for gods.<sup>20</sup> G. Wilson Knight, in his essay on the poem, comments significantly: “the ultimate is, not God, but a colour, an enchantment”. (p.45)

The significance of Powys's reference to a lost true love, whose name he has forgotten, however, is unclear, especially as the allusion to the River Kaw indicates that she is Phyllis Playter. So what does Powys mean by saying that she was taken away, and he has forgotten her name, unless perhaps the narrator is mad like Lear on the heath? Furthermore the link between this reunion and the poem's other main themes is not made explicit.

'The Ridge' contains some fine poetry, including lines in the final stanza inspired by Powys's elementalism:

But what are the things on which this rhythmical marcher marches?  
Stalks of heather so old that they look like bone;  
Leaves of bracken bent into filagree arches,  
Beds of emerald moss and pillows of stone,  
And little opaque pebbles like eyeless sockets  
And crumbs of gravel the colour of mouldy bread;  
And the roots of old dead thorns like exploded rockets,  
And whinberry leaves that are turning a curious red.

But it also has less effective parts. For example, the section that deals with “the colour of Matter's end” (166) is obscure, and fails to convey the narrator's ecstasy, or clearly show the connection between Powys's elementalism and the death of God. Equally ineffective are the juxtaposed images on the theme of madness in the final stanza of Canto I. It is to be regretted that it was never completed, because it contains genuine poetry (as do the Taliessin poems of *Porius*) which was recognized by Philip Larkin, when he included a short section from 'The Ridge' in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* in 1974.

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Robin Wood took early retirement from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada in 2002, and is currently working on James Hanley, Theodore Powys and J.C. Powys, as well as articles on Wikipedia.

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<sup>18</sup> *Porius*, p.466.

<sup>19</sup> See especially: Powys's *Autobiography* and A.C. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*. Totowa, N.J., Barnes and Noble, 1982; Macmillan, London, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> When Powys is thinking mythologically he does of course refer to the Mother goddess, or to Death as a god, and even the elements are like gods, but behind everything finally is the god-like creative power of the human imagination.