

## Reading *The Mystic Leeway* Thoughts about Frances Gregg

"ALL THAT I AM is most necessary".<sup>1</sup> For me, this is Frances Gregg in one sentence. I find in this universality, for all of us who desire to be accepted up to our utmost incongruities. *The Mystic Leeway*, the autobiographical account from which this uncompromising principle is extracted, presents us with a woman who certainly inspired many writers but who, it seems, never fully recognised for herself the importance of being one. Maybe this daughter and grand-daughter of suffragettes, raised alone by her mother, without a father figure, and probably sacrificing a more developed personal life, had been born at the wrong time. Was there really independence of mind in the fact of never wanting to part with her ever-present mother, or ceaselessly praising her son whilst evoking only in passing her own daughter, then refusing for herself the talent that others saw in her?

The autobiographer that was Frances Gregg when she wrote this book at the intimation of her erstwhile infatuated though steadfast lover certainly had affection for him. John Cowper Powys can be seen as a sensualist and an egoist, but he was instrumental in the writing of these delicate but forceful memoirs. Delicate as the woollen combinations she devotes a paragraph to, and forceful as her obstinacy to carry on against all odds to the point of residing in a caravan, sticking to the last with her own flesh & blood (children & mother...) and cats & dogs....

I was no more than a flowering weed, plucked idly, stared at abstractedly, and dropped unwittingly by the wayside.

How many many times have I seen John Cowper of the Powyses stoop to gather up just such fading flowerets to lay them tenderly by the wayside out of the path of unheeding feet, and never have I seen this without thinking of all the languishing ladies, the spinsters, the hopeless ones, the nearing forties, the abandoned and heartbroken, whom he has with that same tender generosity, healed and rehabilitated with adroit, or maladroit, but always well-intentioned sensuality.<sup>2</sup>

All through her book is the constant feeling of not fitting, even in a place where being different, an artist, was normal. But in fact, those artists seem to have been the only ones to have accepted her. She denounces their futility, their mockery when they deride her about her faith, but at the same time when she must write about her life, they are her subject-matter. They have been important for her. As she was also a non-conformist they accepted her, this woman who does not seem to be accepted, understood or tolerated, even by her own self.

I was not giving up as much as another, for, if truth were told, I had no talent that would reap me fame, I had no place among men for never have I known a being more universally rejected by all classes and manner of men than I; I was Hilda's, James's, Jack's protégée, never really their friend, and never never did I master the art of easy communication with my fellow men.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frances Gregg, *The Mystic Leeway*, Carleton University Press, 1995, Chapter Eleven. p.170.

<sup>2</sup> Chapt. Nine. p.154.

<sup>3</sup> Chapt. Five. p.118.

(...) Yet here I sit, typing with old, work-roughened hands, still indomitable, still pressing on towards my goal, this, most tardy rib of Adam, shall yet be a woman.<sup>4</sup>

This violently soulful angel couldn't but gather an adoring Powys or two (if we add Llewelyn) at her feet. Yet she was not the type to be fooled by any idolatry, for she knew clearly the raw power of life. Her artist friends mocked her Christian love. Indeed her artist friends or lovers might have ridiculed her admiration for Jesus, whereas all she really wanted was to deal with the truth, not the hypocrisy of religion, which she incorporated in the ludicrousness of taking superstitions of all kind seriously.

Mumbo-jumbo, superstitions, muddled mythologies, have been my fate among these artists and prelates and magicians, these escapists from life – from Life!<sup>5</sup>

(...) For them to laugh me down when I spurned their puerile conception of love and life seemed blasphemous to me. It was not I who spoke to them. I, this very I, almost, as against the spectacle of vast ages, as short-lived as a butterfly, was a poor thing, a thing that yearned for shelter, for caresses, for warmth and ease of living.<sup>6</sup>

Why did she marry? Her view of marriage was utilitarian. She wanted children and a father for them. In her Christian passion she found strength to deal with life. Maybe Christ is the only man that she could safely love. It is in fact the rare person in her text never to be overtly criticized. For her, he must be the perfect man, the inaccessible man. Maybe in Jesus she sought the presence of

her missing father, somebody who existed but who was always hidden, out of reach. Maybe the words '*Father, why have you forsaken me?*' rang with a distinct tone in her.

So far, in all my life I have met no single Man – though I have done my best to make one of Oliver Marlow – nor has any man encouraged me, or indeed been willing for me, to be a Woman.<sup>7</sup>

(...) I would marry to get me a son, someone whom I deemed fit to father him and never would I yield up the surge and fever of my blood except to one who was abhorrent and obnoxious to me. Other women, stricken by my same malady, had their own solution to the problem, but I had no wish to become a spinster, or to bring an unfathered child into the world. So I set myself to take refuge in the leeway of marriage.<sup>8</sup>



Frances and Betty, 1929  
courtesy Chris Wilkinson

Every parent loves his children differently. And I find striking the way Oliver is mentioned much more than Betty. Her daughter Betty was a young woman in her twenties when this book was written. Yet she is mentioned at the beginning of the book in reference to her looking like a boy by her stature and her hair

<sup>4</sup> Chapt. Eight, p.147.

<sup>5</sup> Chapt. One. p.61.

<sup>6</sup> Chapt. Ten. p.161.

<sup>7</sup> Chapt. One. p.61.

<sup>8</sup> Chapt. Nine. p.157.

having been cut short — as a boy's — and indeed her inhuman intelligence. And that is all. Did she want to preserve Betty? Or is it an unconscious omission? Or did she simply never have time to finish writing her account and hoped to include her later fully in length? How could it have been like to be a woman at the turn of the century, at the beginning of the XXth century? It is my impression that for a woman like herself to be liked, she must take the masculine guise. John Powys would keep fond memories of her dressed as a boy — his *Autobiography* doesn't even say as a man — in Venice. He was of course referring to Frances disguised as such. What strikes me is that, for her description of her grand-daughter Judy or her own daughter Betty, she has to turn woman or girl into boys to appreciate them. Judy will be a "little tough guy",<sup>9</sup> and when she gets scared at the gypsy camp, she says to Betty: "Perhaps they will think you are a boy."<sup>10</sup>

For Betty is taller than any girl I know and recently, in a freakish desire to see what she would look like, I had her hair cropped like a man's.<sup>11</sup>

Gregg, with a great soul, was nevertheless a frustrated woman. Her difficulty to conceive woman as a true artist is the key as to why she never fully developed as a writer. She says that she sometimes hated women and was severe to her own kind, that she sometimes hated men and revered them all the same. Hers was an uncomfortable reality where women were still campaigning or just getting the rewards of the suffragette movement. Indeed she was just eight when her mother and grand-mother were amongst the many American activists of the time. I think she had this sense of doom, that she describes in her definition of womanhood who has only one choice of man in life.

The catch in life is that each dreaming maiden is given but one choice. It is never the right one and they all break their hearts. This probably accounts for the weeping, wailing, wicked sisterhood that is Woman.<sup>12</sup>

(...) Show me a young woman artist and I will show you a stealer of some man's thunder. Thousands and thousands of them paint their pictures and write their songs — till — they marry and get on with life. If they remain spinsters, that is bachelor women who have their affairs, then they may develop this abortive art, as, for instance, Amy Lowell. (...) No, I will believe in the woman artist when I first see a grand-mother bursting into song. I am probably the first real woman artist. If they ever have a beginning, they die young, like Emily Brontë. Not Charlotte. Any man could have written her stuff. But could aught but a woman have conceived *Wuthering Heights*?<sup>13</sup>

She feels deceived by her lesbian lover Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), who "had invented a state of soul that I [Frances] can only describe as 'lecherous'",<sup>14</sup> and which would exclude love. Frances wishes to get over sensations, she disapproves of them and consigns them to the childish sphere and they have to be gotten over quickly, so as to devote oneself to the wisdom and responsibility of adulthood.

Of course there are women dear to her, and H.D. had been this too. Her

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<sup>9</sup> Chapt. Seven. p.135

<sup>10</sup> Chapt. One. p.53

<sup>11</sup> Chapt. One. p.54

<sup>12</sup> Chapt. Four. p.103

<sup>13</sup> Chapt. Eight. pp.145-146

<sup>14</sup> Chapt. Two. p.65.

mother is also for her a guardian, somebody who spends a whole night by her side and by this is called her best friend. But she also is the venomous presence that prevents her daughter from enjoying the freedom she so misses. Then there is Amy Hoyt, whom she describes favourably as boyish in appearance. She was girdled in a woman's condition that only saw a way out through the masculine guise or vicariously through men's expectations and actions. When she recalls Amy, the lesbian attraction is obvious in its touching sensuality. It is contrasted with the preying masculine embodied by Jack (John Cowper Powys).

My own friend, Amy, was not like any of these. She had a sweet, massive, boyish head, with thin, wispy golden hair, eyes that were as pellucid a blue as flowers. She had a young, flat body, with angular hips, and little sculptured hands of warmest ivory. I remember once Jack taking up that little hand and lifting the fingers one by one, peering as he did so, goat-wise, Pan-wise, demon spy into that dear face. My heart beat. It would have been an intolerable grief to me had she yielded up one whit of her chaste, virginal reticence to that bold intruder. Upon that moment, and upon that episode rests all the faith in woman that I was ever to have. I have known no other woman who was good.<sup>15</sup>

Frances Gregg talks of this looking endlessly for a home. Always on the move, at some stage in a caravan, exiled from America, restlessly trying to secure the well-being of her family, she desperately sought the comfort of a place where she could stay, be loved.

No one, but I, knows the tricks, the subterfuges, the sagely argued reasons, the elaborate befoolments with which I have uprooted my parent, and my offspring, together with the dogs, cats, fowls, or rabbit of the moment, and moved them on to sate this unconquerable urge. I do not know why I do it, nor what I seek, nor towards what bourn I am eternally pressing. I don't know. Nor do I know who it is who weeps darkly within me, longing for its "home".<sup>16</sup>

Her life ended accordingly as she wanted, quick and violent, amidst the Plymouth bombings, whilst she was looking for her mother and daughter, against reasonable advice. She was not sparing her energy, between working for the Red Cross, providing for her family and recording her life with broken glasses, leaving these memoirs which got miraculously rescued from the rubble, in a trunk ... by her son Oliver Marlow Wilkinson.

#### Odile Stuart

Odile Stuart has been living in Leeds for quite a few years now and is a translator. She loves reading. Taking an interest in the works of the Powys, in particular Theodore's, led her to discover *The Mystic Leeway* which she is presently translating into French.

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<sup>15</sup> Chapt. Three. pp.99-100.

<sup>16</sup> Chapt. One. p.55.