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Wallalone !

An unpublished poem by John Cowper Powys

INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES

Wallalone!

In the crowded streets I hear it...

Wallalone!

And I fear it, I do fear it,
As its anguish draws me near it,
That the mother of all things
Weeps by the eternal springs!
There is devilry abroad;
There is foul play here, my lord,
When a cry like this is hurled
From the centre of the world.
Break, you human walls of stone!

Wallalone!

In the silent fields I hear it...

Wallalone!

And the dumb sheep hurled near it
Shudder in their place and fear it.
Hush! again - again - again!
Like a beast that howls with pain...
There is devilry abroad;
There is foul play here, my lord,
When the mother of all that is
Bays ~~walls~~ like a dog from the abyss...
Will you not break, you walls of stone?
Wallalone!

Wallalone 2 -

In the woods there is strange Thunder . . .
Wallalone!

And the rain-dark pools there under
Feel their shadows rent asunder
By this world-disturbing moan.
There is devilry abroad -
There is foul play here, my lord,
When the mother of ~~her~~^{life} gives tongue
Like a tigress robbed of ~~her~~^{her} young!
Break, you human walls of stone!
Wallalone!

In the night, in the heart of my girl, I hear it . . .
Wallalone!

And I fear it, I do fear it,
'Tis the very cry, or near it,
Of the mother of all things
Weeping by the eternal springs!
There is devilry abroad -
There is foul play here my lord,
When a thing lovely and white
Howls like a demon all the night!
Will you not break, you walls of stone?
Wallalone!

Wallalone !

A previously unpublished poem by John Cowper Powys

In the crowded streets I hear it ...

Wallalone !

And I fear it, I do fear it,
As its anguish draws me near it,
That the mother of all things
Weeps by the eternal springs !
There is devilry abroad;
There is foul play here, my lord,
When a cry like this is hurled
From the centre of the world.
Break, you human walls of stone !

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In the silent fields I hear it ...

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And the dumb sheep hurdled near it
Shudder in their place and fear it.
Hush ! again — again — again !
Like a beast that howls with pain ...
There is devilry abroad;
There is foul play here, my lord,
When the mother of all that is
Bays like a dog from the abyss ...
Will you not break, you walls of stone ?

Wallalone !

In the woods there is strange thunder ...

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And the rain-dark pools there under
Feel their shadows rent asunder
By this world-disturbing moan.
There is devilry abroad —
There is foul play here, my lord,
When the mother of life gives tongue
Like a tigress robbed of her young !
Break, you human walls of stone !

Wallalone !

In the night, in the heart of my girl, I hear it ...

Wallalone !

And I fear it, I do fear it,
'Tis the very cry, or near it,
Of the mother of all things
Weeping by the eternal springs !
There is devilry abroad —
There is foul play here my lord,
When a thing lovely and white
Howls like a demon all the night !
Will you not break, you walls of stone ?

Wallalone !

John Cowper Powys

These, to many, will appear only *words*; but what wondrous words! What a spell they wield! What a weird unity is in them! The instant they are uttered, a misty picture, with a tarn, dark as a murderer's eye, below, and the thin yellow leaves of October fluttering above, exponents of a misery which scorns the name of sorrow, is hung up in the chambers of your soul forever.

George Gilfillan, *Critic*.¹

AS WE SHALL SEE, John Cowper Powys wrote 'Wallalone'² in Bloomington, Indiana, when travelling as an itinerant lecturer. The poem, not dated, is written on paper with the Indiana University department of Romance languages letter-head. The only indication from his published correspondence with respect to any



Indiana University, Bloomington campus, c. 1914

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [file 6a04294u.tif]

lectures in Indiana within a reasonable distance from Bloomington, where the Indiana University campus is situated, is in his 20 January 1917 letter to Llewelyn from Indianapolis where he stayed from 20 January to 24 January³, almost certainly to give one or more lectures in Indianapolis and in Bloomington. This was the year following JCP's nervous breakdown which would account for the somewhat lugubrious dark tones of the poem, he would not have written such a poem after Phyllis came into his life. In a letter from San Francisco in December 1922 to Llewelyn, after thanking him for his help in producing *Samphire*, he writes: "And I wish 'Wallalone' was in it instead of 'Bergamot'."⁴ So one may surmise that it was written between 1917 and 1922, and most likely at Indianapolis in January 1917.

¹ G.Gilfillan, 'Edgar Allan Poe', *Critic* 13 (1 March 1854), London, pp.119-21.

² Unpublished MSS held by Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington, which came to my notice in April 2012.

³ *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, vol.1, London: Village Press, 1975, p.218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.307. I wish to thank Jacqueline Peltier for pointing out these two relevant letters to Llewelyn.

'Wallalone' is also mentioned in a February 1923 letter (p.332) with respect to a refusal from *Pearson's Magazine*.

In 1961, John Cowper Powys's friend Redwood Anderson hoped that Indiana University, with its history of French studies, might publish his translation of poems by the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren. JCP wrote to Nicholas Ross who then contacted the department of Romance Languages at Bloomington, following which Professor David Randall, then professor of bibliography and head of the Lilly Library at Bloomington, agreed to help. Some time in 1962 Powys came across the 'Wallalone' manuscript which brought back memories. Thinking that Randall would be pleased to have it, he asked Ross to send it to him. In his cover letter, Ross wrote: "He [Powys] thought that it might interest you because of the paper on which it is written & that it was set down when on a lecture visit to the University many years ago."

What is 'Wallalone' about?

A cry: Wallalone, all alone, a wall alone, walk alone, wail alone, woe alone ... This poem is all of this and "Wallalone" comes back and back like a cry from the abyss, the abyss-like world that human beings live in, the cruel man-made abyss where a being is isolated from his fellow-creatures either by his own volition in a nonetheless painful way, or because he is ostracised. This poem is first and foremost a cry of woe.

On first reading, the word "Wallalone" is arresting and powerful. It is a cry of solitude, the cry of the itinerant lecturer eternally wandering around America, homeless, a nomad, not really belonging anywhere and yet part of a universal reality.

He had of course the affectionate presence of his friends, his sister Marian, his experiences as an actor and the subsequent enjoyment of these activities (in New York and in Maurice Browne's Little Theatre in Chicago), but what was John Cowper's real life like? One must remember that he was above all alone, estranged from his wife Margaret, far from his native land, family and young son, Littleton Alfred who would soon be fifteen years old. As for his love life, it was something of a tangle, a triangle formed by Frances Gregg (who was expecting her second child), Louis Wilkinson and himself, and there was also another woman "my other Iseult ... still in New York, a little actress at the Comedy Theatre"⁵. Coming and going like a stray dog, sharing and leaving, in alien cities he was introducing literary spirits to audiences of all kinds that he despised at the time "...how I hate America and all this lecturing ... The full-fleshed faces of these jocular cigar-smokers, brutally shoving themselves to and fro — brainless animals that they are! (...) when I am free from these unspeakable people and hideous streets and dreadful hotels — I may be able to do something."⁶ How he must have felt acutely alone at times! Hopefully sometimes enjoying the situation, most times resenting such isolation from his fellows and feeling he did not belong. A few lines towards the end of Edgar A. Poe's 'Ulalume' reflect a similar sense of being lost and stranded in a god-forsaken environment :

And I cried — "It was surely October,
On *this* very night of last year,
That I journeyed — I journeyed down here! —
That I brought a dread burden down here —
On this night, of all nights in the year,
Ah; what demon hath tempted me here?"

⁵ *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, p.222.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.218-9.

In his letters to Llewelyn that year, John Cowper sounds desperate.

Indianapolis, 20 January [1917] ... This year and last — I wouldn't go through again The iron has gone deep. I have known the taste of misery — I am protected when I am writing.... I think of a new novel — and let it go. I think of a new book of verse — and let it go. It is almost impossible for me to write without the incentive of publication (...) It is only when I am writing that I am free from a certain sort of misery. It is only writing that protects me from America.

San Francisco, 21 April [1917] ... I am now writing a book of poems — desperately — one after another.

In *Autobiography*, John Cowper Powys writes about a time when he was staying in Indianapolis at the Claypool Hotel:

This was an occasion when other nerves than those in my duodenum began to twitch. On this occasion I can well recall how all the grey madness of decomposition moaning to itself as it washed to and fro and “floated the measureless float”, surged up around me and left me numb and inert ... I do remember feeling ... on the verge of some weird nervous collapse. A queer paralysis took possession of me. The air was full of nameless dread, but I could see no escape, nor could I lift a finger. I still felt this devilish quiescence, as if the life-force were draining away from my veins, when I reached Chicago ... Like an Incubus embracing a Succubus, Inert Misery and I sat cheek by jowl on the unmade bed ...⁷

Equally, “Wallalone” sounds like the cry of a lost child, “I'm wallalone”, the gibberish language of the Powys children-officers of the Volentia army stranded on an alien continent. When in great pain or unhappiness, there is comfort in going back to child-talk to express a gut-feeling.

But in the case of this poem there is more to it. It is a cry of solitude, of personal and universal loneliness. All the creatures, all the elements of nature, myth and reality, are isolated and solitary. This solitude does not stem from cosmic abysses but is inflicted by the harsh cruelty and indifference of human beings. Where there is nobody there is not always loneliness. This, John Cowper has proved again and again in his beautiful rendition of the company of natural things and Nature in his novels and essays. Man provokes the feeling by enslaving and bullying his surroundings.

The author of *A Philosophy of Solitude*, accepting the inevitable, making best use of a condition forced upon him by circumstance, also enjoyed being alone as most elder children of large families do, relishing what is so rare.

Thinking of being pleasantly alone one is reminded of Henry Purcell's both happy and sad air ‘O Solitude’⁸. “Wallalone, wallalone” would remind one of John Cowper's favourite ancient Greek cry of woe: “Ailino, Ailino”. Whereas the Greek “Ailino” is a pure interjection, “Wallalone” is a very intimate and original interjection. They have similar sound patterns.

In “Wallalone” there is also a very strong feeling of fright, horror and evil. The cry is the cry of all that is cruel, bad and painful in the world. It is both the personification of horror or at least the lurking possibility of Evil in mankind and the cry of woe of the poet voicing the material presence of horror.

The reader is taken up first by a frightening feeling on the crowded streets

⁷ John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography*, Colgate University Press, 1994, p. 511-512.

⁸ The lyrics of which derive from Katherine Philips's (1631-64) skilful translation of ‘La Solitude’ by the French poet Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant (1594-1661).

of a city and then by the mother of all things. Gaia, the Earth Mother is made to weep tears of loss and fear besides the gushing flow of life from the eternal springs. It is a tale of exhaustion (the Earth) and compensation (life springs). Life is nevertheless balanced despite the dirge-like tones of 'Wallalone' as neither gains ground on the other.

From the evil affecting the mythical chthonic elements of the origins of life, Powys's zooming camera-like eye then moves on to animal life in the fields where 'something' communicates an unreasoned fear. This fear rumbles on like thunder and the tremor of an earthquake. The dumb but certainly not senseless sheep feel the same terror as the Earth Mother. The elements and animal life shake with the same fear while the tremor of Evil runs through their territory, speaking horror and pain in a language the sheep understand, the language of a wounded beast. The imagery of animal life is continued in the mother of all things baying like a dog from the abyss, reminiscent of the Argive myth of Linos. Among the many versions of this myth, the Argive version is possibly the more relevant. Linos was born of Apollo and Psamathe, daughter of the king of Argos. Afraid her father would find out about the child, she exposed Linos at birth. He was subsequently mauled to pieces by dogs. When he did find out, Psamathe's father had his daughter murdered. Apollo sent an avenging spirit, a Harpye, who killed all the Argive children. From then on a cult festival called "kunophontis" or "arnis" in honour of Psamathe and Linos was ordered by the Delphic oracle where dogs, usually strays, were ritually sacrificed and the people mourned and lamented Linos's death. The suffering of the Earth Mother may be paralleled with the suffering of the sacrificial dogs.

From the pastures, the author's mind then moves on to the woods where the reverberation of rolling thunder reveals the presence of that evil fear which was first felt in human territory. The horror-moan, death-moan, deconstructs the rainy aftermath of thunder, tearing the Orpheian shadows of the pools apart and thus dislocating all possible escape into a liquid abyss. This de-territorialisation affects the possibility of death in the pool but also of life and future with the robbing of the tigress mother's young. Loss is complete. Utter loss of death and life places all feeling and emotion in a timeless and meaningless purgatory. Motherhood is blighted, the promise of life suspended as even in the bosom of his girl — the use of the words "my girl" negate motherhood — the drumming "it" can be heard, beating relentlessly, excluding all life-force and exsuding un-named fear. The indefinite pronoun used to identify the terror that is contained in the human walls of stone resists all recognition and identification. The lack of a name does not exorcise its powerful reality.

The poem works in circular mode. This un-named fear circulates, going from one receiver to another.

With a starting point on the public streets of the first line, each stanza is like a coil that wraps around the refrain and finishes in the intimate private territory of the arms of a single loved one called "my girl", a strange way of naming a sweetheart, colloquial, youthful and anonymous.

From one type of human territory to another and finally to the Earth Mother — the beginning and the end — the chant unfolds first in natural, then elemental and finally animal territory.

The eerie, the spiritual, the organic (the cry, wail, howl) confront the material wall, challenging its strength. Will the cry break the wall which is in fact a

compacted, materialised form of the same? All the components of the world, whether animal, elemental or human experiences, are united, separately. Sharing a strong feeling of threat and evil becomes a collective and universal experience, both objective and subjective. It triggers activity when passive submission has been overcome. This is the element of tension filling up the abyss, making it into a world of feelings and sharing. The fact that the poem is concerned with a negative, frightening feeling does not exclude a positive aspect: because this feeling, the experience, is shared, it is made easier to bear. Whether Powys ever read Dickinson's poetry or not one may find echoes of this feeling in Emily Dickinson's poem on fear, poem 1277:

While we were fearing it, it came,
But came with less of fear,
Because that fearing it so long
Had almost made it dear.

(...)

'Tis harder knowing it is due,
Than knowing it is here.⁹

and again in poem 315, the lines that read:

When Winds take Forests in the Paws—
The Universe—is still—

This repeats the pawed animal theme and the threat of a storm that may be a metaphor for human violence unleashed while the surrounding world remains passive, accepting it.

'Wallalone' and its "L" sounds may again remind the reader of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ulalume' in that he uses names with an "L" component to name the women in his poems. Poe's Ulalume is a female lover whose death is bemoaned but may equally represent death itself. Whatever is feared in 'Wallalone' and is referred to with an indeterminate "it", "something", may remind one of "... the secret that lies in these wolds... the thing that lies hidden in these wolds" to which "the woodlandish ghouls" attempt to bar the narrator's way in 'Ulalume'. In the second part of the Oresteian trilogy¹⁰, the Erinyes were the vengeful spirits of retribution sent by the dead against the living, but the name of the Furies is withheld all along to the end and, as in both 'Ulalume' and 'Wallalone', is at the same time anonymous and neutral, the "it" and "something" prevent it from belonging to any human form.

In *A third Gallery of portraits*, George Gilfillan, who is quoted at the beginning of this paper, writes on Poe in terms that would provide an accurate comprehensive analysis and conclusion to 'Wallalone'¹¹:

The same shadow of unutterable woe rests upon several of his smaller poems, and the effect is greatly enhanced by their gay and song-like rhythm. That madness or misery which sings out its terror or grief, is always the most desperate. It is like a burden of hell set to an air of heaven. 'Ulalume' might have been written by Coleridge during the sad middle portion of his life.

'Wallalone' was evidently written during the most desperate, miserable and depressed portion of John Cowper Powys's life. However, through all his

⁹ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960.

¹⁰ The Oresteia: a dramatic trilogy by Eschylus, played in Athens in 458 BC.

¹¹ G. Gilfillan, *A third Gallery of portraits*, New York: Sheldon, Lamport and Blakeman, 1855, p.337.

subsequent works he strove and spelled out in every way he could the many ways in which to accept hardship and take up the Wordsworthian philosophy of enjoying all there is in life to be enjoyed.

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A word from the President of the Society: Yes, a strange and very haunted and haunting poem, and one that strikes the particular note peculiar to Powys's pre-Playter years. Poe of course is an influence — how he loved that word Ulalume! This new word seems to be an echo of it. It blends 'all alone' which is self-pitying with something ominous in the cosmos or at any rate the condition of humanity as a whole. The word 'wall' suggests both exclusion and enclosure; the vulnerability of defensiveness and the inadaptability that attends it. I certainly agree with you that the word should be left in its English form, for it is in its sound rather than in any specific meaning it may have that it is effective.

And effective it certainly is, one of the best poems of his that I have read. 1917 was very bad for him, and I well remember Marian telling me that at the time of writing *Rodmoor* he was close to total breakdown. This poem rings true to me — it comes from his inner self, not from any literary role-playing. And it reads aloud very well. The refrain of the 7th and 8th lines and the placing of it in each stanza is original: the address "my lord" stops the poem from becoming a mere soliloquy, at the same time formalising and distancing it. All in all it makes me want to reconsider his originality as a poet, especially his particular musicality.

Dr. Glen Cavaliero, 5 August 2012