THE MYSTIC LEEWAY, by Frances Gregg[1]

Edited by Ben Jones
With an Account of Frances Gregg by Oliver Marlow Wilkinson
Carleton University Press, 1995

Some time in 1938, Frances Gregg, 'challenged' by John Cowper Powys in a letter to write a book, ("I am so scared you'll go & *forget* some of these things & scenes & incidents & gestures & backgrounds...") answers with some trepidation: "I think I shall get a huge map and draw a line from here to here and there. It will be a mystic pattern of my wandering soul. Are they wandering stars? Or do they abide a course that is rational and apparent?" (Letters, II, 134)

The book which was finally retrieved among the ruins of bombed Plymouth (where Frances Gregg lost her life with her daughter Betty and her aged mother Julia, in 1941) with its enigmatic title deserves all our attention. It has at last reached us, thanks to the combined care of Oliver Wilkinson and Professor Ben Jones who are both responsible for its publication. It comes to us in an elegant and unusual format, ensconced between the Editor's preface and introduction, Oliver Wilkinson's memories and Endnotes, with many photos of Frances, her children, her mother, Hilda Doolittle, Ezra Pound, John Cowper and Llewelyn Powys and others. And it might well come as a shock to readers of *Autobiography,* who will remember John Cowper Powys's description of the Venetian lithe, ambiguous boy-girl who, at the suggestion of her demented lover—already married—had accepted the bonds of marriage with Louis Wilkinson, his best friend, and was nevertheless bringing John Cowper and Llewelyn to near folly. *That* had taken place in 1912, eons of time before. This book is the spiritual testament of a woman almost thirty years later, who has lived a life of trials and hardship and is trying to take stock of herself in a kind of cleansing ritual, under the understanding eye of John Cowper, her "Side-tracker" as he terms himself.

It is a difficult and exacting book, written by a difficult and exacting woman. In spite of her importance in the life of John Cowper, I think we should try to put into parentheses their complicated relationship, concentrate on the text itself and follow Frances for her own sake in the intricate journey she undertakes through her life examined in a spiritual light. As Oliver Wilkinson explains, at the beginning of his moving account of his mother, the title is arresting for the different meanings it implies: "*Lee* is the quarter from which the wind blows. It is also the shelter against the wind. A ship drifts to leeward. There is the leeway of overtaking, the leeway of work not done (...) There is the shelter before God's storm : unsustained tranquility, temporary shelter."[2] Frances never knew anything but "temporary shelter", the whole course of her tumultuous life was that of a gypsy, as she admits from the beginning: "I am like them. I have something in common with jews, and gypsies. I want to claim no country for my own, and to take the whole world in my stride."(55) The eleven chapters which compose this strange 'quest' unfold a disorderly tale, but one in which, unmistakably, the voice of a proud, passionate and disturbing woman emerges in search of... herself.

> I had been summoned to be a Woman, unknown, unnamed forever. It seemed to me a grander destiny than that of any queen or goddess or magicked witch.(105)

She shows redoubtable strength (her life is testimony to this) and she makes choices by rejection. Away with love, art, bourgeois comfort, marriage, literature, religion! After a late start, learning through bitter experience, she abandons one after the other her illusions, her innocence. And she deliberately always chooses the arduous way. There is in her a seething mixture of Luciferian pride and the humbleness of a Prince Myshkin. In fact the radical American Frances Gregg, seeker of ultimate values, strikes me as the female counterpart of the Russian, plebeian, cruel and compassionate Dostoevsky. Like him, she shows ability to "feel ideas" as others feel cold or heat. Like him, in the midst of her earthly adventures, as muse, lover, wife or mother, she shows an unquenchable thirst for "the Real", which for her is the life of the spirit, with as its Messenger, Christ.

> He (Christ) had seemed a man to me, one who scorned any divinity except such as he found in his manhood. He had relied upon himself, accepted responsibility, foresworn God, and abandoned the Church. He, and his companions, had seen life grandly, as eternal: and themselves, humbly, as ephemeral, yet they had the courage and the honour to love others as they loved themselves. There was no pity, no patronage, no far-Godheadness in that love, the "love of the saints."(105)

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[1] Review originally published in *Powys Notes*, Summer 1998.

[2] *The Mystic Leeway*, p.17. Further page references in brackets.

As we try to follow her in the meanderings of her reasonings, we are spellbound and fascinated by the burning force of her arguments, the lava which spills forth from this terrible mystic mind who knows nothing of middle terms and compromise. She must have been a formidable person, not afraid to lash out unpleasant facts with cold fury to all concerned, not sparing herself, forever argumentative, unsatisfied, always putting the bar higher and higher. She was also ambitious, in her cosmic awareness of the evolution of man in the future and severe with what she called the “ape” in the present time, including her own self.

> No, my problem was (...) only how to be the woman that had been summoned from space. Woman, or highly evolved female ape, that is the dilemma that faces a girl with her first kiss. We are before our time in saying that we "are descended from the ape." We are ape yet.(94)

She rejects the “life of the senses” which she sees as a kind of bondage. Sex, she says, should be done with while very young, so as to have time to deal with more serious matters. She also made a certain number of rules for herself, including “to meticulously fulfil all duties, all responsibilities pertaining to my relationship with my fellowmen.”(117) This point of view led to many passionate discussions with her intimate friend Hilda Doolittle for whom nothing was more important than dedication to art and who was ready to sacrifice personal relationship for it. Frances counter-attacks with a terrible—and funny—definition of the artist, “one of that company of ghouls at work upon their spiritual offal.”(127) In spite of her frightful iconoclasm, the way she tears off all little niceties like a wild cat, she can show terrible humour which makes one chuckle *malgré soi*. For instance, this is what she has to say about one of her earliest friends (and for a short time suitor):

> I could not believe that so gauche a creation as our Mr Pound was due an esquire upon his letters. He explained to me fully, foully, and with rude emphasis that it was his due and that I was an ignoramus.(p.142)

I also relish her description of John Cowper playing the part of Lorenzo, in tights:

> Those legs were out of a nightmare of Durer's. They suggested a monstrous offspring of Don Quixote and Rosinante. Lucrezia could, and did, fold her garments round her in swathes, but I don't know what held those tights up.(p.81)

Or, about a visit Hilda and herself paid to George Moore:

> I don't know what we thought genius was. I do know, however, that genius should never be seen at home.

And I am not forgetting the delicious fragment of comedy (Chapter 2), when, with unmistakable Jamesian understatement, she transcribes, she says, “the only conversation with Hilda she remembers with almost verbatim vividness”, about certain “woolen combinations”...I will let the reader discover for himself her talent for the absurd.

Although the eleven chapters are written in defiance of any chronological order, her “frantic memories” are far from a rambling rough copy. She writes with distinctive care a prose of sustained tone, professing candidly that she is ignorant, and never boasting about her culture, but springing sometimes the surprise of a few antiquated or strange words: “It is a street that has wandered out of the quartier and taken to itself an English sobriety that sets quaintly upon its askewities”(158). Each chapter in turn was sent to John Cowper for eventual comment and criticism. As Oliver Wilkinson remarks, they were written in the most unpromising circumstances, after her hours of work, in utter poverty and discomfort, first in a caravan, then in a seaside bungalow, then in an “ugly shack” in Buckinghamshire, where she was tidying two acres of land to turn them into a market garden and finally in a holiday cottage in Cornwall. And always John Cowper's response was warm, appreciative, encouraging:

> If I can get into your proud-humble criss-cross no-compromise Skull that this book is going to SURVIVE all our deaths I don't worry about it's being written at odd times; only I don't like you to go to bed at one and get up at 6 o'clock *wh* is only *Five Hours Sleep* (Corwen, April 19, 1939)

The reader who is ready to follow Frances in her analysis of herself and willing to share her indignations and discoveries will not be disappointed, for her “excursion of the soul” offers food for thought, and from these pages emerges the full stature of an implacable Deity in arms, with high aims for that poor humanity in the making, a challenging and exasperated mind groping for a moral, even messianic world of love and compassion, to replace the dark “jungle” in which we are entombed.

> Man, if he could but be persuaded to accept his destiny, is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is born on this planet. What the past holds in secret, and the future in promise, is not for him; those are the spoils of death. His destiny is to live, and he has to do it by the rules evolved from his brain, his soul, his conscience, the—for lack of a

> better phrase—the God-within-him—which is his sole endowment from the mystery from which he has sprung, from which his planet has sprung, from which all life comes.(63)

Behind this high-strung woman we also detect the little girl of unusual sensibility who had to find her own answers to all the enigmas of the crazy world she was witnessing. Although she is in fact rather discreet about her first years and her education, we cannot but be struck by the fact that to be descended from a long line of pioneer women in whose world men seem to have been non-existent, and to find oneself the only child of the ever-present, strong-willed and exasperating "Mater" Julia Vanness Gregg must have been quite a trial. We suspect that some nerves of that intelligent little girl were scorched and damaged early. Hence her tenderness for and understanding of little children, which surge sometimes along the pages and are like milky pools of "human kindness", in the middle of her feverish quest.

I think we may safely assert that the only man who really counted in Frances's life was her son Oliver, for whom bravely she tried to be mother *and* father, and to whom she certainly said:

> You are now approaching manhood, a state of consciousness dragged over from the unknown by the sufferings, the passionate enterprise of millions of forebears. It is a sacred heritage and life's greatest gift. Protect it, young knight, add your own riches to what is already glorious, for well we know, we educationalists, we priests and prelates, how your young spirit aches for high and noble deeds, how your young eyes search the universe for beauty. You are ape, but you are also man. Go in peace. The ape must die in you, just as thousands of lives have already died in your making, from that protoplasm which was your first beginning, through reptile, fish, and eyeless newt, through the stage when you might equally well be cat or dog, or fox or tiger, up to the point in which you are projected upon the universe in the guise of man.(140)

I have not yet said anything of the last chapter of this disturbing work. It is so daring and strange that it would justify reading the book for its sake. It is the inspired peroration of a high priestess delivering her vision to the world. And what does Frances prophesy, in that terrible month of January 1941? Nothing less than the advent of a new religion, which will save the world from madness, murder and chaos. As she sees it, after having examined the failures of America, Europe and Asia, she predicts that it is bound to come from the East, and more precisely from the Jewish people itself. There is, deep in her, a puzzling conflict, an ambivalence which Ben Jones names her "philo/anti-semitism". She can bluntly declare "I do not like Jews" and in the next sentence proclaim that the Messiah to be will be Jewish *and* a woman. She also has this curious remark:

> We Jews, and we women, know these things. We are the betrayers, but through us alone will the way of salvation be found.(173)

As always with her, the message is baffling and offers difficulties of interpretation. She profers strong words against Paul and boldly claims that

> The early Pauline Christians were Jews and remained Jews, and the present Christian Church is the living embodiment of the Jewish curse.(171)

Therefore we must now hope for the emergence of a new religion, some time in the mysterious future, which the visionary Frances counts in thousands of years, "these will be the years of Jewish-matriarchy, the years of the Christian era, when men will seek God anew".(172) Ben Jones, in his brilliant introduction, analyses her thought thus:

> The history of Judaism and the history of woman are parallel - both have been betrayed by the master lover. Betrayal has been accepted, but it must be overcome. The Jew and the Woman, released from mutual bondage in history, will relieve the world of its insanity.(14)

We should not fool ourselves in thinking that John Cowper (so apt to decipher human frailties) was mistaken when he wrote to Oliver Wilkinson, at the death of Frances Gregg:

> But who could really understand her. She was the greatest woman of genius I can imagine or have ever supposed was possible.

Jacqueline Peltier

Texts cited

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