

“A craving old as the hills” Notes on Narrative Desire in John Cowper Powys’ Wessex Novels

IN HER RECENT *Feminist Narrative Ethics: Tacit Persuasion in Modernist Form* Katherine Saunders Nash makes a highly fascinating major comment on narrative desire in *A Glastonbury Romance*. In her reading, JCP innovates on plot dynamics to create an “erotics of progression,” which calls for feminine reading practices, as opposed to the masculine models of narrative desire and reading associated with renowned literary critic Peter Brooks’ insights (Nash 117-121; 126-129). I find it impossible to do justice to the full implications of Nash’s conclusion—or to argue with it, for that matter—within the limits of the present article. Let me simply point out that as far as *Glastonbury* is concerned, I find the Brooksonian model of narrative desire—with due respect to Brooks’ self-proclaimed limitations, as far as modernist texts are concerned¹—not only applicable to JCP’s text, but also a very fruitful theoretical context for its interpretation. Indeed, in my reading elsewhere of *Glastonbury*, I tried to demonstrate how Powysian heroes—and the Powysian narrative—can be defined as narcissistic precisely because they keep evading the fulfilment of desire, the motive force of storytelling in Brooksonian terms, and thereby are able to prolong narratives almost *ad infinitum*. That said, Nash’s provocative ideas made me take another look at the issue of narrative desire in Powys from a slightly different perspective—the novels’ own. That is, I briefly inquired into how the Wessex novels reflect on (their heroes’, their own) desire in their metafictional excerpts to find that Powys is shockingly aware of desire’s crucial role in shaping narratives in an actually rather Brooksonian manner. As to reaching the object of desire, however, the same excerpts suggest an implied author ever so cunning in *avoiding* it—maybe for the mere pleasure of being able to write on.

But first things first: what exactly does Brooks mean by narrative desire, in what sense is his model of narrative desire masculine, and how is one to understand Nash’s claim for JCP’s innovativeness in that light? Relying on Sigmund Freud’s and Jacques Lacan’s ideas, Brooks argues in *Reading for the Plot* that the “question of identity [...] can be thought only in narrative terms” (33), whereas “it is in essence the desire to be heard, recognised, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener” (54). Thus, the ‘engine’ of both story and story-telling is desire: the longing to reach the object of one’s desire, in general, on the one hand, and the desire to formulate a meaningful and therefore “transmissible” version of one’s life(-story), on the other. The prime mover of narratives is the object-cause of desire—a lack (37-61). Accordingly, prematurely fulfilled desire—such as finding the object at home by incest—short-circuits desire and brings an untimely closure to the narrative, making all further story(-telling) impossible (103-9). Therefore, in the Brooksonian context both characters’ and readers’ attitude to the fulfilment of desire is ambivalent: while this (reaching the

¹ Brooks himself accompanies his theory with a sequence of insightful analyses pertaining to 19th- and early 20th-century narratives. He stops at (the) *Heart of Darkness* on the note that modernism is what it is because finding a meaningful end—a message that can be transmitted, a goal to be desired—becomes impossible with the turn of the century.

end of the story) is allegedly their major goal, it is also their greatest fear, precisely *because* it equals the end—of life, of reading, of pleasure. In short, it is a kind of death—even though for fictional characters and, as Roland Barthes has famously declared, for authors (“The Death of the Author” *passim*) more literally than for readers.

I find it hard to disagree with Nash’s view that behind Brooks’ train of thought the tropes of masculine sexuality—a purposeful striving to gain pleasure combined with the fear that it will end at the same moment—are clearly discernible. Equally hard would it be to sustain the claim that Powys’ novels should be characterised by such a straightforward movement, either of narration or of plot. So what kind of alternative model does she suggest? For a start, relying on Susan Winnett’s critique of Brooks, she both rejects the applicability of Brooks’ masculine model of plot dynamics in general and its applicability to JCP’s novel in particular. Though I personally find Nash—following Winnett—here a bit too overenthusiastic to discard an author who clearly senses the limitations of his own model, no one can accuse her of being partial: in terms of its relevance to *Glastonbury* she goes on to discard Winnett’s own feminine model for plot dynamics, which focuses on new beginnings. Nash proposes instead a model which privileges careful attention to ‘middles’ (of plots) by bringing plot lines to unproductive, bathetic and untimely endings, on the one hand, and by propagating absorbed, attentive, almost mesmerised receptivity—associated with young girls, primarily—as ideal reading, on the other. The latter is demonstrated first and foremost through a careful close reading of the pageant scene as the novel’s *mise en abyme*. Nash draws the conclusion that JCP as implied author structures his novel with such an ideal “authorial audience” in view—which is feminine, absorbed, attentive, at best indifferent to reaching the end as their object of desire —introducing an absolutely innovative plot pattern on the modernist scene (117-142).

While Nash corroborates her view by following plot and narrative structure in *Glastonbury*, let me address this issue from the perspective of self-reflection: what kind of metafictional statements do the Wessex novels make—if at all—on the interrelationship of narrative and desire? The first point I would like to make is that all four narratives define themselves metafictionally in some relation to the genre of the chronicle. In other words, the four novels each contain a metafictional element which interprets the entire text as a subversive, alternative version of the “Grand Narrative” of History itself (cf. Lyotard 31-41). This is how *The History of Dorset* and *Wolf Solent* are related to each other², how a narratorial comment defines *A Glastonbury Romance* as the “psychic history” of Glastonbury (747) or how the historical-mythical pageant functions in it, how Richard Gaul’s philosophical history reflects on *Weymouth Sands*, and how Dud No-man’s historical novel, paralleling the narrative of *Maiden Castle*, characterises the entire text. Indeed, as Richard Maxwell so aptly pointed out, the “Wessex romances are full of history and historical novelists” (85).

Thus, whether focussing on character or place by the testimony of the novel titles, Powys obviously attaches outstanding importance to historical narratives in defining personal or local identity and thereby securing relative personal integrity in a modern world seen as largely hostile. But for Powys—who is

² Charles Lock holds a similar opinion, pointing out that readers of *Wolf Solent* might feel as if they were actually reading Wolf’s *History of Dorset* (124-5).

sometimes described as a regional novelist—history seems to be unimaginable without the locale: history is written only after it has been read first in the signs carved on the body of the land which encode the past. One needs only to remember the monumental excavations of Maiden Castle providing the backdrop of Powys’ eponymous novel—in fact, of its central scenes and of Urien Quirm’s mythical self-definition. Similarly, the mythically inspired narrative of *Glastonbury* is much more an emanation of the locale than a sequence of events simply taking place there. As John Crow puts it rather sceptically, in *Glastonbury* “the land reek[s] with the honey lotus of all the superstitions of the world!” (122). And *Wolf Solent*, in order to write his chronicle, must in Mr Urquhart’s words, “isolate the particular portion of the earth’s surface called ‘Dorset’; as if it were possible to decipher there a palimpsest of successive strata, one inscribed below another, of human impression” (45). In brief, Wessex lands seem to be for Powys, as for the Jobber in *Weymouth Sands*, “something unutterable, something written upon over and over and over with the hieroglyphs of spirit” (343). Or, to quote Perdita’s thoughts, the “coast [...] is like a piece of ancient writing” (345), which (fore)tells the (hi)story of Powysian heroes long before they were born.

Wolf Solent deserves special attention in this respect. It contains a metafictional element of crucial importance: a brief excerpt from the drafts of *The History of Dorset* which is accompanied by references to the writing process itself:

Cerne Giant—real virginity unknown in Dorset—“cold maids”; a contradiction—Sir Walter’s disgust—His erudition—His platonic tastes—How he was misunderstood by a lewd parson—
[...]
‘Good Lord! [...] I must be careful what I’m doing just here. The old demon has changed his tune. This isn’t garrulous history. This is *special pleading*.’ (330, emphasis added)

As is clear from the above, *Wolf* is provided with notes by Mr Urquhart, and he is to restore the continuity of the narrative on that basis by adding mostly syntactic elements to supply the missing logical connections. What he comes to realise, however, is that even the broken fragments imply Mr Urquhart’s rhetorical intent: a defence of homosexuality in general, and in particular, the production of a discourse that enables him to come to terms with the tragic fate of the latest object of his desire, his previous secretary, the late Redfern. Judging from *Wolf Solent*, writing the history of the land is inseparable from writing the individual’s (hi)story, a story of their desire. Contrary to Nash’s critique, at least in one of the Wessex texts Powys metafictionally stages Brooks’ critical insight: not only does *Wolf Solent* show that narratives are born out of a desire for self-understanding (Mr Urquhart’s and, just as importantly, *Wolf*’s), but literally from transgressive sexual desire, as such.

The above references to writing history by reading the signs of the land lead to yet another characteristic feature of JCP’s writing, probably well-known to his ardent readers: key to the formulation of the characters’ historical (self-) narratives is myth. Indeed, functioning as a model of *Wolf*’s entire writing process, the above excerpt poses the mythical figure of the Cerne Giant carved on the hill-side as the core of *The History*: not only does it provide inspiration for the writer(s), but it also encodes and reveals the desire behind writing that history. The mythical nature of the central narratives evoked by the landscape of

the other three Wessex novels also goes without saying. To mention only the most obvious examples: Arthurian legends, which are constantly evoked by the Glastonbury setting, structure *Glastonbury*. The myth of the Golden Age is as good as inscribed on the shores of Weymouth (cf. 462-3) to provide one of the central underlying mythical narratives for that text.³ And the Bran narrative, associated with the Celtic hill-fort of Maiden Castle, is essential to the shaping of Urien Quirm's character. In the present context, however, a not so often discussed aspect of this well-known phenomenon seems to deserve critical attention: if in the Wessex novels narrative desire is shown as inseparable from (hi)story-telling, whereas (hi)story is inseparable from myth, then an understanding of the connection between desire and myth is crucial to interpreting narrative desire in Powys.

And this is exactly what is provided by yet another metafictional excerpt—this time from *Weymouth Sands*. Richard Gaul's monumental *Philosophy of Representation* is organically related to the above-mentioned metafictional Powysian historical narratives: despite its title, similarly to Wolf's chronicle, the pageant in the *Romance*, and Dud No-man's novel, Gaul's enterprise is actually historical in nature. That is, though Gaul aims to build up his own philosophical system in volume four, the first three volumes of his work provide a historical overview of answers to the ontological queries of humanity in ancient beliefs, contemporary religions and metaphysics. Let me extend this analogy and treat this one sample of embedded creative writing in *Weymouth Sands* as yet another self-reflexive comment on writing. The more so, because incidentally—or not so incidentally—its central idea concerns the very topic the other metafictional excerpts have brought into the limelight: the interrelation of myth, desire and storytelling (the latter featuring here as “representation”):

If Richard's system could be said to have any really valuable clue to the mystery of things this clue was to be found in his own word “representative”. His idea was that all the exciting concepts of religion, mythology and metaphysics were true; but not *literally* true. He held they were true in a “representative” sense; that is to say, he held that behind every human creed and behind every mythological figure lay a quite definite human craving, a purely emotional and very often a quite irrational craving, a craving old as the hills and apparently springing from something ineradicable in human nature. And just as there could be discovered, if you analysed far enough a concrete and quite definite human exigency behind every religion and every cult, so you could discover, behind every single one of the great metaphysical systems, precisely the same body of concrete palpable yearnings that existed beneath the cults, only with the stress laid upon first one aspect of them and then another. (88-89)

Gaul's notion, which presupposes one particular—unnamed, but still very concrete—desire behind all mythical, religious and metaphysical explanations of the world, again shows a striking parallel with Brooks' concept of narrative desire. The central role of lack in motivating storytelling and writing is brought to attention not only by the heavy emphasis on “craving” and “yearning,” but also by the very *lack* of naming this unspecified desire. Thus, as opposed to *Wolf Solent*, here one can only guess at its nature—or the nature of the desired object, for that matter. One possibility for solving that mystery is to take as a clue the fact

³ For a brief elaboration of this idea see my *Desire—Identity—Narrative* (186-188).

that Gaul has been working on the *Philosophy of Representation* for seven years, purely for his own enjoyment (cf. 88): that will take readers directly to the Barthean “pleasure of the text” (cf. *The Pleasure of the Text* 10) as a solution. In other words, Gaul’s sole purpose might be to fulfil one desire, his own, through the autoerotic pleasure of writing a prolonged, possibly never-ending narrative—about the fulfilment of desire. Alternatively, the obvious similarity between Gaul’s idea and Paul Ricœur’s hermeneutical train of thought, according to which myth is born out of the desire to fill in an ontological gap (Ricœur 5, cf. Gould 6), might lead to a very different but, I think, equally valid conclusion. In fact, in my opinion the key to understanding the mechanism structuring Powys’ narratives might reside in the interplay of these two desires: his texts might be born out of a desire for answers to the ultimate questions of humanity, but that does not hinder him from finding the mythical quest—storytelling, writing—so enjoyable that reaching the object of his first desire proves to be of secondary importance, after all. Especially, because that object might better be left unfound, at least as far as Gaul’s vision of it is concerned. As the above-quoted excerpt reveals, his philosophy of representation theoretically makes story-telling—a quest for ontological answers as objects of desire—infinite by undermining the universal validity of any answer; that is, by questioning the status of the object found as *the* object of desire. If all answers to the ontological questions of humanity are true in the representative sense, to use Gaul’s terminology, it means that none of them are true—or rather that like *tropes*, none of them can ever be *literally* true—and the quest may go on forever, with one *figurative* truth leading to another, in an infinite chain. Gaul’s theory outlined here is no exception to his own rule, even if his philosophical “system” is nothing but a systematic undermining of ultimate, absolute truth. And the description of Gaul’s method and attitude to language makes that highly probable:

Unlike most philosophers who are content to use their one grand, basic inspiration about life and then bolster it up with infinite logical and rationalistic devices, Mr. Gaul by a bold original method of his own kept his argument fluid, flexible and porous; subject in fact to the various *daily* inspirations that came to him as he lived in Brunswick Terrace. What he would argue was that the rigidly *monumental* method of exposition adopted by most philosophers was an unnatural method and was a method, moreover, that sacrificed a great deal of organic flexibility to the dead hand of logical abstraction.

“I must get some more paper-weights,” [Mr. Gaul] thought...” (89)

Thus, Gaul’s attitude to language, text, system is characterised by fluidity and flexibility. His autoerotic and narcissistic engagement with the creation of his own text is opposed to textual production by logical abstraction in the same way as life (“as he lived in Brunswick Terrace”) is opposed to death (“dead hand of logical abstractions”). His openness to new impressions, as his rejection of rigid abstractions also suggests, also implies a subversive attitude to language: the style implied here is excessive, fluid, and disrespectful of rules and laws.

The metafictional implications of this excerpt are far-reaching: readers may easily be tempted to feel that this is nothing but the narrator’s implied author’s *ars poetica*, and as such, it is subject to the above rule of “figurative truth only.” For a start, no better example can be given for overflowing, boundless linguistic fluidity than the very sentence which sums up the notion. What is more, it is this

quality that makes most of Powys' writing notoriously unquotable. Nonetheless, as if to emphasise that the above exclusion of ultimate truths should also involve the speaker's ideas, even if they suspiciously resemble the implied author's standpoint, the narrator is distanced here from Gaul's notions by mild humour. Thus, Gaul is shown in a humorous light all of a sudden with the ambiguous reference to his "various daily inspirations." The catachresis-like usage of "fluid, flexible and porous" together—as if the narrator could not decide whether Gaul's (obviously immaterial) train of thought was solid or liquid—gives rise to a similar effect. And finally, the sudden, seemingly off-topic reference to his need for a paper-weight tops it all: liquid or solid, Gaul's philosophical theories, which lack the solid foundation and monumentality of terminology, might prove to be only castles in the air and "gone with the wind" before anyone takes notice. With such self-undercutting, subversive metafictional comments on representation and storytelling, it does not matter how very distinct the desire is that shapes narrative, failure to reach the object of that desire—or rather, refusal to accept any object reached as *the* object of that desire—is guaranteed. And so are endless quest and storytelling.

So what can be concluded from this brief look at some metafictional, self-reflexive excerpts of the Wessex novels? First and foremost, in my view they reveal an exceptional and amazing awareness of the interrelationship between desire, textual production and the qualities of the text written. Far ahead of his times, Powys, so to say, names (transgressive) desire as the inspiration or motive force behind narratives. Equally clear is Powys' refusal to settle on one object to fulfil that desire, and he seems to be more than willing to transmute apparently found objects of desire through linguistic play—the fluidity, flexibility, porousness of thought granted by tropes. As a token of that attitude, he opposes Grand Narratives, an exemplary case being his juxtaposition of the polysemy of myth to History at the core of identity—be it of the individual or a locale. Indeed, (hi)stories of individuals and places are hardly separable from each other: moved by "a craving as old as the hills" to find themselves, Powysian heroes are more than willing to wander infinitely among those very hills, in a bitter-sweet search for a way to *avoid* their nominal target and enjoy the *walk* instead. Whether the autoerotic desire shaping narrative is a symptom of the turn-of-the-century crisis of masculinity, whether it is feminine in any sense at all, and whether it is unique to Powys in modernist prose and therefore innovative, is beyond the scope of the present paper to decide.

Angelika Reichmann

Angelika Reichmann is Professor of English in the Department of English Studies at Eszterházy College, Eger (Hungary). She became interested in the works of JCP about fifteen years ago, when, as a PhD student, she specialised in Dostoevsky's influence on English and Russian Modernist novelists.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image – Music – Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. 142-148.
- . *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. London: Basil Blackwell, 1995.

- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot—Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Lock, Charles. “Wolf Solent: Myth and Narrative.” *John Cowper Powys’s Wolf Solent: Critical Studies*. Ed. Belinda Humfrey. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990. 117-30.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- Maxwell, Richard. *The Historical Novel in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009.
- Nash, Katherine Saunders. *Feminist Narrative Ethics: Tacit Persuasion in Modernist Form*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014.
- Powys, John Cowper. *A Glastonbury Romance*. (1932) London: Macdonald, 1955.
- . *Maiden Castle*. (1936) Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 2001.
- . *Weymouth Sands*. (1934) Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1999.
- . *Wolf Solent*. (1929) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964.
- Reichmann Angelika. *Desire—Identity—Narrative: Dostoevsky’s Devils in English Modernism. Pandora-könyvek 28*. Eger: EKF Líceum Kiadó, 2012.
- . “‘Pure Romance’: Narcissus in the Town of Mirrors.” *The Powys Journal 22* (2012): 21-39.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Trans. Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon, 1967.