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Blood and Soil: Paul Meissner and John Cowper Powys

IT SEEMS, now, one of the most improbable episodes in my fragmented career. In the autumn of 1937, between more agreeable lecturing assignments in Innsbruck and at University College London, I found myself teaching, for a single semester, in the English Department of Breslau University. The political atmosphere in Silesia, an eastern hotbed of Pangermanism, was already fraught and intimidating; and the English Seminar, while pleasantly located on the Sandinsel and still the setting for scholarly routine, had not escaped the general madness.

The Head of Department was Paul Meissner, a stocky, ginger-haired man of pale complexion, whose wariness masked an inner insecurity. Outwardly a conformist, he would sometimes give lectures attired in the unbecoming brown uniform of the SA. Beneath such posturing lurked a scholar fashioned in the solid Teutonic mould, and I was uncomfortably aware that he knew much more about contemporary British authors than I did—including John Cowper Powys, of whose name I had only recently heard.

Having returned to London with some relief, I rightly assumed I was unlikely to meet Professor Meissner again. But in 1941, while lecturing in neutral Sweden, I unexpectedly came across a survey of modern English literature he had written, a work which must have been in gestation during my stay in Breslau. It had been published as volume 1136 in the long-established Sammlung Göschen.[1]

In reviewing literature of the post-war period (i.e. post-1918) Meissner treats the novel under four main headings: Society, Politics, Soul (*Seele*) and Landscape. John Cowper Powys is dealt with in the English section of 'Landscape', where he is bracketed with such writers as Sheila Kaye-Smith, Eden Phillpotts, Tennyson Jesse, Mary Webb and Constance Holme. Such arbitrary groupings may well invite the criticism that authors often fit more than one category. Thus the Powys brothers surely merit further mention under 'Soul', where, amongst others, Meissner places Dorothy Richardson and D.H. Lawrence. The list also hints at another difficulty. Given the wide-ranging nature of Meissner's enquiry and the obvious limitations on space (150 pages overall), no writer, however illustrious, can hope for more than a cursory sketch of his work. Allowing for these constraints we find that John Cowper Powys is accorded fuller treatment than most, while Theodore is given shorter shrift and Llewelyn ignored.

Here, then, is Meissner's summary of John's achievement, a view coloured by the contemporary obsession with Blood and Soil—a school of criticism which was initially a benign exercise in regionalism but which, in Hitler's Germany, became tainted with racist assumptions.

> (Like Theodore) John Cowper Powys (b.1872) sets his characters squarely in Nature's eternal struggle (*Wolf Solent*, 1929). The dæmonic

[1] *Englische Literaturgeschischte IV — Das 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1939. The breadth of Meissner's learning is attested by his authorship of two preceding volumes in the same Göschen series: *Von der Renaissance bis zur Aufklärung* and *Romantik und Victorianismus*. In his third contribution, the centre piece of our present argument, Meissner showed himself to be remarkably up-to-date. Thus, in agreement with the enthusiastic verdict of F.R. Leavis, he detected 'positive energies' in the poetry of Ronald Bottrall who, in 1941, became the youthful director of the British Council in Stockholm.

> forces, passions and lusts released by their instincts rule their lives. To obey these forces is the injunction Powys repeatedly urges upon us (*In Defence of Sensuality*, 1930), since he sees them as cosmic revelations: they point the way to the Grail. This is the mystic substance of his lengthy novel *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933), in which the epic fable is almost submerged beneath the philosophic content. Good and Evil war fiercely against one another in the landscape of the Arthurian legend. Those who wish to attain the Grail, the primeval life-force, must retreat into solitude. Powys had already insisted on this in his treatise *The Meaning of Culture* (1930), and it is also the main theme of his *Philosophy of Solitude* (1933) in which the mystic conjures the spirit of Forgetting and counsels sinking into the depths of ultimate Aloneness as the precondition for felicity (*The Art of Happines*s, 1935). It is thus that Powys depicts himself in his *Autobiography* (1934), no less than his fictional characters who, from the standpoint of the normal world, appear as eccentrics: questing spirits, mystics, sometimes prophets like Sylvanus Cobbold in *Jobber Skald* (1935), people persecuted for the sake of an idea. They cling to this persuasion because they feel in harmony with Nature's elemental powers.
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> It is difficult for us to find the key to Powys's writings; his art remains alien. The panorama of his world often looks grotesque; the figures in it resemble spellbound marionettes; and the search for the *prime mover*, which is also the theme of the novel *Maiden Castle* (1937) is viewed entirely from the perspective of the irrational. Powys must be measured by his own criteria if one wishes to do him justice. He assumes the legacy of Celtic-Mediterranean civilization, in which life follows laws different from those suited to the Germanic-Nordic world.[2]

Were Meissner alive today, he would be astounded to discover how much Powys accomplished during the last two decades of his life, yet feel bewildered by the diversification and at times perverse ingenuity which have transformed recent critical theory. As to John's ever-widening and deepening posthumous reputation, he might have mixed reactions. Despite his obligatory obeisance to sterling 'Nordic' values, one senses that Meissner was beguiled by those 'Celtic' values and traditions which he seeks to impugn, while nevertheless recognising their fundamental significance. He had found "the key to Powys's writings" even though he warns the reader that their message is hard to fathom.

In his all-too-brief comments on John's brother, Meissner similarly stresses the importance of Theodore's 'Celtic legacy' (*sein keltisches Erbe*). Like Matthew Arnold seventy years earlier, he believes in pervasive Celtic values[3]—though not, perhaps in what Arnold held to be "the greater delicacy and spirituality of the Celtic peoples."

Meissner's insight may well owe much to the *genius loci* of Silesia. The Giant Mountains have a rich folklore, and mystics have abounded in the Oder Basin ever since the days of Angelus Silesius. Given, further, the survival of a vigorous local dialect and the relative isolation of a frontier province, ideal conditions prevail for the creation of a *Heimatdichtung* at once earthy and transcendental. We might indeed even claim that several Silesian writers, including the Nobel prizewinner Gerhart Hauptmann, show marked affinities

[2] op. cit., pp.110-111 (tr. by Cedric Hentschel)

[3] Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, London, 1867, p.vii

with the work of John Cowper Powys. The novelist Hermann Stehr taps into the same elemental vein.[4]

How, with hindsight, should we assess Meissner's appraisal of Powys? Many of his comments may, by dint of later repetitions, now seem trite; but when Meissner wrote them he was venturing into almost uncharted territory. His views acquire added significance if we compare them with what students of English Literature were being taught elsewhere. In the same year as the Göschen volume appeared, the Cresset Press, of London, issued as the final part of Bonamy Dobrée's introduction to literary history, *The Present Age, from 1914*. Dobrée, as general editor of the series, had entrusted this fifth volume to Edwin Muir. In his chapter on Fiction, Muir devotes one paragraph to Theodore but otherwise excludes the Powys family. His Bibliography however finds space for the major works of all three Powys brothers and Llewelyn ("a charming writer with an exquisite visual talent") is even given a modest bouquet. John is less fortunate. After listing thirteen of his publications (one miss-spelt) Muir provides the following meagre and unworthy summing-up: "*Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* are strongly flavoured 'mystical' novels, in which a few admirable scenes are lost amid a waste of bombastic 'evil'. The *Autobiography* is interesting."[5] Compared with this verdict Meissner's own reservations seem mild. It is baffling that Muir, himself a visionary poet as well as a Kafka enthusiast and a gifted translator, should have been guilty of such blinkered misrepresentation.

Nor did such failure to accord Powys his due end in 1939. The story of his neglect in academic circles continued into the 1950s. Thus when Henry Harvey came to revise Sefton Delmer's well-known textbook,[6] he was keen to add detailed paragraphs on such novelists as E.M. Forster and Ivy Compton-Burnett, while dismissing the author of *Mr Weston's Good Wine* in a single sentence and deeming his siblings unworthy of notice. This omission is the more inexplicable as Harvey's sister Elizabeth was a close friend of the Powys family and herself revered John.[7]

With the passing years I find myself taking a less harsh view of Paul Meissner than was possible in 1937. I see in him a vulnerable human being uttering a mixed message in an age of intolerable political pressures. A scholar now largely forgotten, he was yet a beacon of knowledge in a German seat of learning which the fortunes of war transferred to Poland.

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[4] His cast of thought and phraseology are at times very close to John's, while also attuned to Theodore's more sombre mood: "An oak can never change into a beech, nor one drop of water into another. Who can turn his inner shape into that of his neighbour? We human beings must ever remain alone, solitary as the hills and the mountains, which only meet in their stony roots, where they are not yet hills and mountains." Tr. from *Der Heiligenhof* (1917); and see my article "Hermann Stehr" in German Life and Letters, vol. III, n°2, Oxford 1939.

[5] Edwin Muir, op.cit., pp.243-4

[6] F. Sefton Delmer, *English Literature from Beowulf to T.S. Eliot*, "for the use of schools, universities and private students", 22nd edition ed. H.S. Harvey, Berlin-Cologne 1951. In his new Preface, Harvey reveals that his revision had been undertaken during 1949-50 in 'Göttingen and Cambridge', but his lack of sympathy for the Powys cause was perhaps more influenced by his own Oxonian background and temperament.

[7] See "John Cowper Powys: A Visit", her contribution to *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, ed. Belinda Humfrey, London 1980

In a new millennium when further Powys societies are being formed, books translated and doctoral theses composed, it is interesting to reflect that, in academia, thanks to a few men like Paul Meissner, John Cowper Powys had achieved a European dimension long before he received comparable recognition in Britain. Despite the distasteful associations of the *Blut und Boden* school, Meissner came close to the heart of the mystery, stressing the unique qualities of an author who, he rightly insists, should be judged "by his own criteria".

Cedric Hentschel

We are in mourning for a friend. Cedric Hentschel was a life-long admirer of the Powys brothers and a long-standing member of the Powys Society. Of German and Polish origin, he studied hard and well, was lecturer for some years and joined the overseas service of the British Council in 1940. His first position was at Uppsala and he remained in Sweden during the war. There he met Eva Bolgar, a Hungarian writer, who became his wife. There he also met Sven-Erik Täckmark, and would later edit the *Letters of J.C. Powys to 'Eric the Red'* for Cecil Woolf. He was a scholar, with a great knowledge of German literature, and he revered Byron. Cedric was generous, kind, encouraging and endowed with a fine sense of humour. We will miss him.

Mehr Licht! (Goethe)
Cedric Hentschel died on March 26, 2005