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The Diary of “Ecstasy”

John Cowper Powys
Petrouchka et la Danseuse
Journal (1929-1939)
Tr. C. Poussier and A. Bruneau
Paris, José Corti, 2001

JOHN COWPER POWYS (1872-1963) is certainly one of the major novelists of the 20th century. Henry Miller, George Steiner, Kenneth White all acknowledged this, but he nevertheless regularly falls into a strange ‘purgatory’. It is true that, to quote him, his blend of “nature, sex and religion”, seems to shock or disturb, unless it be his exuberant style.

It was in America (where he lived from 1904 to 1934) that he started to keep a Diary and where he wrote an unusual Autobiography, characterised in particular by the absence of women. During these ten years, we follow the author of *Wolf Solent* from upstate New York, where in an isolated little house he tries to recapture the English countryside of his childhood, back to Dorset where he arrives at the age of 62, and then to a small village in North Wales.

Reading his Diary of course helps to understand his novels, particularly his three masterpieces, *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle*, which we witness here as novels-in-progress. It will be read above all in order to share in the famous “ecstasies” which arise from contacts with “casual little material objects” and do not involve any sort of “Over-Soul or Religion or Unity or Brahma or God”¹, but a series of rituals during the course of his two long daily walks, when he names and embraces stones, trees, taps his head against them, etc.

John thus becomes a Powysian character. He longs to be a ‘magician’ in contact with nature and give meaning to his life. In the same movement, he recognises his ego is plural, and that his longing to become a superior being is only an illusion. Like his characters, he is forced to criticise himself while inventing all the time his personal mythologies. He turns towards the Mother Goddesses Demeter and Cybele, and above all towards her Welsh equivalent, Ceridwen with her Cauldron of Rebirth. In this way he defies all the gods with

¹ *Petrushka and the Dancer, Diaries 1929-1939*, ed. M. Krissdóttir, Manchester, Carcanet, 1995, p.98

their power and their immobility, and chooses revival, difference, freedom...

What is fascinating is that for this unrepentant idealist the real world exists in all its intensity. He never ceases to establish links between the divine, nature (he notes the day when he sees the first celandine) and the human body (his recurrent constipation and his ulcers, the hours he spends on the toilet with Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, etc). Then it is that he discovers his ego, not the ego of a magician, but what he calls his "ichthyosaurus ego" which belongs at the same time to the superhuman—to the gods and goddesses he keeps praying to or provoking—and to the infra-human, to the animal and vegetable kingdoms and to stones. One understands better Powys's long fight against vivisection, not to mention the newts he carries from dried-up pools to a pond, in order to make up for torturing some of these animals when he was a young boy. Because for him cruelty and sadism are everywhere, as much in his dreams as in the God who created eternal hell. Undoubtedly, the most striking pages of the Diary are those about the death of the Old, the dog he had brought back from the States and which had been his companion during his walks in the snow and the cold during all these years. At about the same time, Lulu (Llewelyn Powys), his beloved brother dies too and war is declared. For nine months, John (in his mind) keeps taking the Old for walks and making love to him...

For Powys is a man of love and desire, which for him is the same thing, and this Diary, contemporary with the *Autobiography* without women, is the novel of the T.T. These two letters designate *The Tao* or *Tiny Thin*, referring to Phyllis Playter, alias the Elemental, an American woman who was twenty-two years younger than him and who will be his companion until his death at the age of 91. Like a number of feminine characters in the novels, she was "an elfin girl of incredible slimness and exquisitely docile". The two together form two (electrical) 'terminals' producing, depending on their physical contacts, as many amorous ecstasies, sometimes imaginary and masturbatory, sometimes genital. For Powys, like his masculine characters, is an old pervert (without remorse and without reproach) alternating between fantasy and reality. The T.T. in fact hated solitude and walks, but she it is who deals with the stoves, with the house, and gives him his laborious enemas, while dreaming of great cities and of theatres. Transforming the argument of Stravinsky's ballet, *Petrushka* could nevertheless hold his dancer in his bed, a prisoner between himself and the wall... Selfishness, of course, but no one was more aware of it than the author, and one has only to reread the novels he wrote at that time to be convinced of that. He always promised himself to change, but the pleasures of nature and of dreaming were always so strong...

Petrushka and the Dancer: the title is not his, but Powys's Diary is nevertheless the debt of the nympholept to the dancer who will never have danced.

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