

The truth of phenomena

John Cowper Powys & Johann Wolfgang Goethe

1.

THE REACTION to Goethe in Anglo-Saxon countries is not particularly enthusiastic, at least in the 20th century, whereas Goethe admired Englishmen, particularly Lord Byron. Victorians however still admired German philosophy and culture, and above all the Weimar Sage, to whom Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle, among many others, paid visits. George Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater in England, R.W. Emerson in America regularly referred to Goethe. A great many of these interactions between England and Germany were due to Thomas Carlyle, magnificent translator, literary “agent provocateur”.

While for various reasons — among which one could take into account the world-wide influence of American culture, and the two wars — English people showed a flagging interest for German culture during the 20th century, there remained at least one writer who, in spite of fashion, retained all his life a deep admiration for Goethe. John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) felt sometimes as though he was a re-incarnation of the German poet-philosopher. In his *Autobiography*, a bizarre but magnificent masterpiece, he defines himself as a “Goethe born in Derbyshire.”¹ When still a young man, visiting Italy, his copy of Goethe’s *Travel Sketches* never left him, and he would play the part of “*John Powys visiting the Fountains of Rome.*”² Although he liked Goethe and classical German culture, he hated German politics. During the two world wars, he wrote books against the imperial and national ideology of Germany. In *The War and Culture* (1914), where he champions American involvement, he contrasts German culture, symbolised by Weimar and Goethe, with Prussian Germany.

While he was at Cambridge reading history, Powys became acquainted with Goethe through his friend and “mentor” G.P. Gooch³, who later became president of the Goethean Society of England. He then started to read, in English translation, first “those wonderful *Conversations with Eckerman*”⁴, followed by the novels *Wilhelm Meister* and *Elective Affinities*, the autobiographical work *Poetry and Truth* and *Travel Sketches*.

Before becoming a writer and novelist, Powys was a commercial traveller in literature. He gave lectures in Europe and in the United States on literary and philosophical subjects. During one of these tours, in Germany in 1908, under the aegis of Oxford University, he visited Weimar which attracted him for two reasons.

First he wished to meet the sister of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche,

¹ *Autobiography*, p.294

² *ibid.*, p.294

³ *ibid.*, p.181

⁴ *ibid.*, p.180

who had died eight years before. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who was at that time busy arranging the Nietzschean heritage later exploited by the fascists, invited the passionate English admirer of the German philosopher to come and have tea with her.⁵ In 1916, during the war, when Nietzsche was despised in Anglo-Saxon countries, Powys took his defence, and it may have been this visit which inspired him to say: “Nietzsche’s writings when they fall into the hands of Philistines are more misunderstood than any others.”⁶

The other reason for his visit to Weimar was Goethe: “Never, I fancy, has Goethe received such adoration from an introverted Celt as I offered to him then.”⁷ He names Goethe along with four other German authors (Nietzsche, Heine, Sudermann, Hauptmann) in his list of the world’s masterpieces, *One Hundred Best Books*. He recommends *Faust*, *Wilhelm Meister* and *Conversations with Eckermann*. It is a triplicate Goethe he now sees and who is a reflection of himself, Powys: as thinker, as spiritual leader on the art of life and as novelist-poet. In 1915 he published a collection of his lectures and essays under the title *Visions and Revisions*. In the essay on Goethe, he remembers how he read *The Sorrows of Werther*, “in a Barge, towed by three Horses”, on a river in Somerset.⁸ But the masterpiece for him remains *Faust*:

Personally, I do not hesitate to say that I think Faust is the most permanently *interesting* of all the works that have proceeded from the human brain.... When I meet a man who shall tell me that the philosophy of his life is the philosophy of Faust, I bow down humbly before him. I did meet such a man once. I think he was a commercial traveller from Buffalo.⁹

In another essay on Goethe, twenty years later, he speaks of the “vast Mythological Cathedral”.¹⁰ And he adds that there is no other writer in his life who has more influenced him. He notes the importance of “the Eternal feminine” in Goethe and one must remember that Powys himself is one of the 20th century authors who has given most thought to this problem. He also recognises Goethe’s life culture, that is to say the methods used to apply himself equally to poetry, to mysticism, to sciences and to political life. “There is no other human being who has pronounced such oracles.”

Moreover, one can find many references to Goethe in his novels. Sylvanus Cobbold, in *Weymouth Sands*, meditates on the feminine Principle and Goethe’s “Eternal Feminine” (*Faust*). The narrator of *Morwyn* compares his spiritual love for Morwyn with love as it is represented in *Faust*. It has also been argued that the end of *A Glastonbury Romance* was heralded in the end of *Faust II*.

Two quotations from Goethe have accompanied Powys like mantras all his life. In 1958, five years before his death, at the age of 86, he exclaimed in German, to his German visitor, Rolf Italiaander: “Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis”

⁵ *Autobiography*, p.398

⁶ *One Hundred Best Books*, Arnold Shaw, 1916, p.24

⁷ *Autobiography*, p.398

⁸ *Visions & Revisions*, p.139

⁹ *ibid.*, p.142-3

¹⁰ *The Pleasures of Literature*, p.579

(All things transitory are only symbolic) and “Im Ganzen, Guten, Schönen resolut zu leben”, (to live resolutely in the whole, the good and the beautiful). He exclaimed that this is the only thing that counts, and he repeated the magic formulas “in the whole” and “resolutely”.¹¹

2.

POWYS saw in Goethe this spirit of universal man who possesses the spirit of the Whole. In his essays, *In Spite Of*, and *A Philosophy of Solitude*, Powys attacks the particularism and the specialisation of the modern world and of scientists. He counts himself among “the unspecialising philosophers” and that is how he finds himself in a line of philosopher-writers going from Heraclites, Marcus Aurelius, Chuang Tse and Lao Tse up to Rousseau, Goethe, Whitman or Nietzsche. In his eyes Goethe represents the human potential before the “dissociation of sensibility” which T.S. Eliot diagnosed, setting it in the 17th century. But Powys takes care not to fall into the elitism which is attached to Eliot’s modernism. On the contrary, he praises Goethean philosophy which would seem to be a practical philosophy, which every person, rich or poor, young or old, may use.

There is another quality which Powys notices in Goethe’s method and philosophy. When Goethe and Schiller first met, before they became friends, Goethe explained to him his conception of the metamorphosis of plants. Goethe was describing it with such sensuality, as though it was a real experience, that Schiller interrupted him, remarking that it was only an *idea*. But it is precisely this Goethean quality of sensualising thoughts which fascinated Powys. He sees Goethe and Nietzsche as “romanticists of ideas” insofar as they transform thoughts into sensual and dramatic figures. However, both writers use certain mechanisms in order to keep control over excessive sensualism. Whereas Goethe devotes himself to a scientific study of nature, Powys recommends Montaigne’s scepticism and Rabelais’s humour — two attitudes which he will invoke against the pseudo-mysticism of the Nazis during the Second World War. This means that Goethe and Powys were conscious of the dangers inherent in the sensualisation of ideas. This being said, their criticism of modern life remains valid. It is precisely because modern life suppresses most of our sensations in order to better allow the operations of society and technology that senses, dreams and images develop seditious and subversive tendencies.

The reaction of both Goethe and Powys lies in the rediscovery of phenomena. Goethe was a great observer of the natural world. He studied stones, plants, animals and human anatomy, where he discovered the intermaxillary bone. He had the cranium of an elephant sent to him in order to better study its structure. For he thought he was more competent in science than in art. One only need remember his dispute with respect to Newton’s theory of colours. But what is important in his scientific work, part of which is still taken into consideration by some contemporary thinkers (Werner Heisenberg, Carl-

¹¹ *The Powys Review* n°14, 1984, pp.54-7

Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Roger Caillois, Hugo Kükelhaus, Owen Barfield) is, if not love, at least the affinity which the seeker feels for his subject, a relation which might perhaps be reciprocal. That is why he became so interested not only in the classification of clouds by the Englishman Luke Howard, but also in the meteorologist's life. He even dedicated some poems to him to honour his achievements. The scientific approach, for Goethe, is thus intimately related to the discovery of self. He is therefore opposed to the detachment practised by modern science towards psychology, the group, society and moral values. For Goethe, science is part of the complexity of life and cannot be separated from it. We find a similar attitude in Powys. In his 1920 philosophical essay, *The Complex Vision*, he stresses that truth is “a gesture of our whole being”, “a creative equilibrium, an equilibrium between eternal contradictions.” Truth, in fact, is possibly “a living organism”.

3.

GOETHE and Powys were both attracted by surfaces, by appearances and phenomena, by all that “manifests itself”. Goethe spoke of a “revealed mystery” in the appearance produced by nature. One must be gladdened, he says in his poem *Epirrhema*, by the true appearance, by the serious game, because life is never of one piece, but rather an infinite variation (“Kein Lebendiges ist ein Eins, / Immer ist ein Vieles.”) Truth is therefore accessible to the senses, in spite of what modern science, suspicious of them, says. One finds in Powys a real cult of the senses. The characters of his novels give themselves up to them like children and seek in them the significance of their lives, Wolf Solent as well as Sylvanus Cobbold, John Geard as well as John Crow, and many others. In *Mortal Strife*, he writes: “Sensations are the purest essences of our planetary life.” Powys is perhaps considering a planetary alchemy in such admissions. Just as alchemists collected morning dew to prepare essences for distillation, Powys and his characters are destined to suffer a transmutation of their being beyond the perception of essences. One must “accept our sense impressions of the world as the world's true reality, against all electronic reduction.”¹² Written in the thirties, this judgment has since gained in meaning. Phenomena have become calculations which reappear on our computer screens. Electronic reduction is in full flight. Goethe was already wary of any optical instrument which could distort objects, whether seen through microscopes, field-glasses or telescopes. That is why he also disliked mathematics. When Powys devotes himself to his “sensation-thoughts”, he puts into practice such sifting as found in Husserl's

¹² “My own feeling is — it may be a rooted insanity but I do not think so — that the only profoundly philosophical way of taking life is a threefold act of the intellect. First to accept our sense impressions of the world as the world's true reality, against all electronic reduction. Secondly, to accept what interiorly we feel of our consciousness and will as our deepest hint as to what causes the nature of this reality to be as it is. Thirdly, to force ourselves to enjoy in a particular way this self-made universe that we are for ever destroying and recreating.” (*Autobiography*. p.56)

phenomenological method. In *Autobiography* he writes that when at night he looks at the sky, he gets rid of all astronomical or mathematical calculations so as to better make out the reality of a star.¹³ In this way the human eye and the light of the sky seal their affinity. Goethe never said otherwise when in his theory of colour he affirmed that the eye and the light strengthen themselves mutually, the eye being the interior light recognizing its equivalent outside it. If the eye were not similar to the sun, it could never see the sun.

Complicity of eyes with light and of light with darkness produces colours which could be apprehended as the surface of surfaces. For Powys as for Goethe colours are at the same time spiritual and physical beings. Powys speaks of fragrances which have grown visible, likening them to a human body with which one is infatuated; colours are something which are absorbed “like the revelation of an erotic Fourth Dimension.”¹⁴

When he was a child, Powys used to provoke ecstasies, “pre-cosmic panoramas”¹⁵ by pressing his knuckles against his closed eyelids. At one time in hospital he developed the habit of imagining *variously-coloured angels*¹⁶, set in legions which he could send according to his will to some of the patients near him. For him, colours were supernatural beings insofar as they have a reality far beyond electro-magnetic waves. It is possible to link them to his concept of “life-illusion”, which is an energy enabling us to live and giving meaning to terrestrial life. John Geard, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, is speaking of a similar phenomenon when he praises miracles and vital lies. Goethe, in the same way, dismisses the idea of visual deception because it produces its own reality.

If Goethe and Powys still signify something, it is because they try to find the principles of life beyond the positivist and analytical research of science.¹⁷ The latter has been based these last three centuries upon the analysis of what is dead. It is for this reason that Powys hated vivisection. Goethe was looking for the divine in the living, as Eckermann relates in his *Conversations with the Sage of Weimar*. And the living is, according to Goethe, what transforms itself and becomes; it is never what is stiffened and petrified, which is what rootless reason studies in isolation.

To conclude, the living is, for the two writers, before all else, earth itself. In 1827, at the age of 78 and five years before his death, Goethe asserted that he saw the earth as a huge breathing organism. The beginning of *A Glastonbury Romance* is full of such intuitions. And it seems that recently, after cosmonauts had seen our planet from space, even science has begun to acknowledge this vision.

Elmar Schenkel (written in French, tr. J.P.)

Dr Elmar Schenkel is Prof. Dr. habil.; Ph.D. dissertation on J.C. Powys; post-doctoral dissertation on *Sense of place in modern poetry*; taught English and American Literature at the Universities of Freiburg, Tübingen and Konstanz;

¹³ *Autobiography*, p.171

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.73

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.40

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.373

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.626

visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; since 1993 chair of English Literature at the University of Leipzig. Together with Stefan Welz, he is the editor of the *Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture*. His most recent publication is a book-length essay on H.G. Wells (*H.G. Wells: Der Prophet im Labyrinth*, 2001).

Further reading :

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Goethe, *Faust II*, acte 1

FAUST

Un sang plus frais vient battre aux veines de la vie
En saluant l'aube éthérée avec douceur;
Ton œuvre, cette nuit, Terre, s'est poursuivie,
Tu respires sous moi d'une neuve vigueur
Et la joie alentour à ruisseler commence;
A mon âme tu rends le courage et l'ardeur
De m'élaner vers vous, cimes de l'existence.
Le monde s'est ouvert dès les premiers rayons;

Mille chants dans les bois disent sa renaissance;
La nappe du brouillard recouvrant les vallons
S'éclaircit lentement sous la clarté sublime.
Branches, rameaux, tirés de leurs rêves profonds,
Surgissent, rafraîchis, du vapoureux abîme;
Couleurs après couleurs émergent du fond gris,
Feuille ou fleur d'une perle hésitante s'anime
Et tout, autour de moi, devient un paradis.

Levons les yeux! Les pics géants de la montagne
Annoncent le grand jour au monde encor surpris;
L'éternelle clarté d'abord les accompagne
Avant de s'abaisser jusqu'à notre univers.
Puis son éclat nouveau va baigner la campagne,
A mi-pente des monts dessinant les prés verts.
Peu à peu jusqu'au sol la voilà descendue,
Elle arrive et, je dois, voilant mes yeux ouverts,
Me détourner du jour qui me blesse la vue.

Ainsi quand l'espérance ardente a pu grandir,
A ses vœux les plus hauts se pense parvenue,
Que s'ouvre à deux battants la porte du désir,
Pour mieux nous accabler, des sources souterraines
On voit soudainement des flots de feu jaillir,
Les torches de la vie, en flammes inhumaines
S'embrasent dans nos mains au lieu de s'allumer.
Cette fournaise immense, est-ce amours, est-ce haines?
Joie ou douleur, lequel va mieux nous consumer?
Et l'on cherche, à nouveau se tournant vers la terre,
Un voile juvénile afin de s'enfermer.

Eh bien! que le soleil demeure en arrière!
La cascade en rumeur que l'on voit s'épancher,
Je la contemple avec une allégresse entière
Lorsque, de chute en chute et de roc en rocher,
En mille et mille cours son torrent se divise
Et bien haut dans les airs l'écume va cracher.
Avec quelle splendeur, de ce flot qui se brise,
Jaillit l'arc irisé, là fixe, ici changeant,
Parfois dessein précis, là fuyant sous la brise,
Vapeur dans un frisson léger se dégageant!
C'est l'homme et son effort que l'arc personnifie.
Songes-y bien, penseur qui vas l'interrogeant:
Ce reflet coloré n'est autre que la vie.

(*Faust I et II*, Goethe, traduction Jean Malaplate, avec l'aimable autorisation des Editions Flammarion)