

François Rabelais and John Cowper Powys

IN 1896 JOHN COWPER married Margaret Alice Lyon, and on that momentous occasion met Bernard Price O'Neill, who was to become one of his closest friends. This London physician, the quintessence of culture, introduced the Powys brothers¹, as well as Louis Wilkinson, to "Maître François". This was to have significant consequences. For the fount of John Cowper's intellectual life, based on Homer, Dostoievsky, Walt Whitman, Goethe and Wordsworth, will also include Rabelais, often mentioned in his works and to whom a whole book is devoted. It seems to me that his *Rabelais* is not often referred to and not given the attention it deserves. For his interpretation of Rabelais provides an erudite study, offering a vigorous if subjective view of "the greatest genius of the age"². It might even succeed in inoculating us with "acute rabelaisite"³, to quote Catherine Lieutenant. *Rabelais* gives us a key to a better understanding not only of Rabelais, but also of Powys.

For almost four centuries Rabelais was misunderstood and rejected in France, misrepresented as a jolly drunkard, a coarse entertainer writing scatological stories. But Powys goes further: he speaks of a conspiracy which has included for four hundred years all those concerned to protect religion against his libertarian gospel. In spite of the high esteem in which he was held by Chateaubriand, Coleridge, Balzac or Victor Hugo, this biased judgment stuck to him until the beginning of the 20th century when his genius was at last recognised and gave rise to fresh critical perspectives. Let us note that at about the time Powys was writing his book, Mikhaïl Bakhtin in the depths of Russia was busy writing his own challenging thesis⁴. Unfortunately Bakhtin's book only became known much later outside the USSR. It might well have interested Powys.

We are well informed about Rabelais' life, except for his exact date and place of birth. François Rabelais (1494? - 1553) was probably born at La Devinière, near Chinon, in a fairly well-to-do family. He was nevertheless sent away to a monastery at the age of ten. He became a monk, read all he could, taught himself Greek (a language forbidden by the Church) and Latin. Later he had the good fortune to associate in the region of Poitiers with what we would today call "intellectuals", circles of humanists, among them laymen of the legal profession. Keeping such company did not prevent him from becoming interested in ordinary people, their lives, the common use of speech, and he started writing in French, which was unheard of for educated people at that time. At one point he decided to turn his back on religion. At first unfrocked monk, he would later,

¹ Theodore and Bernard O'Neill visited Chinon in May 1903, on a pilgrimage. See below p.40 the postcard he sent his parents. Llewelyn devoted a chapter to Rabelais in *Rats in The Sacristy*. The title of *The Verdict of Bridlegoose* is also inspired by Rabelais' judge Bridoye.

² J.C. Powys, *Rabelais*, Village Press, 1974, p.401. (Hereafter referred to as *Rabelais*.)

³ In Catherine Lieutenant's introduction to her excellent translation of *Rabelais*, with a lengthy Introduction and many notes and addenda which are a great help to better understand many allusions. (*Rabelais*, Editions de la Thalamège, 4800 Verviers, Belgium). A worthy project would be a new English edition of Powys' *Rabelais* with at least the English translation of Catherine's notes.

⁴ Bakhtin M. *Rabelais and His World*, M.I.T. Press, 1968

with the Pope's indult, become a free secular priest. He enrolled as a medical student at different Universities, became a respected physician, as well as an outstanding jurist, a scholar, a diplomat, *in fine* one of the most outstanding men of the Renaissance. Kings protected him, as did the erudite Marguerite de Navarre. He corresponded with the best minds of his time, Erasmus, his "father-mother" as he wrote, who greatly influenced him, the poets Clément Marot and Maurice Scève, Etienne Dolet a well-known publisher, Philibert Delorme the king's architect.

The preface to *Rabelais* starts with Powys wondering why this great mind was so neglected in England. His theory is that Rabelais was "shelved", first of all, because the famous (and extravagant) translation by Thomas Urquhart in the 17th century "got in the way", transforming and submerging the Frenchman's "free-and-easy style". Later, Victorian Puritanism and its humourless way of dealing with taboos in sex matters, was added to this obstacle.

But today in France who reads Rabelais? In 1994 there were 500th anniversary celebrations, books and articles were published, but it is doubtful if this commemoration did much to improve his readership. His exuberant and archaic language, his esoterism, the wealth of subjects to be found in his works⁵, his ravings, are so many obstacles. But it is easy to retort that many modern versions of his works can be found today, some copiously annotated. The truth is that Rabelais provides too rich a fare for our meager intellectual appetite. To read Rabelais today is a challenge. For we have to take in our stride the scope of his amazing culture, his knowledge in many matters from jurisprudence to botany, his immense culture, his knowledge of Greek and Latin, enabling him to read the classics in the original. To enter his world is to be captured in a whirl of events, fascinated by his skill in weighing the pros and cons of any question, puzzled by his contradictions, astounded by the luxuriance of his imagination, by his



La Devinière

⁵ His works comprise *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel*, *Le Tiers Livre*, *Le Quart Livre* and *Le Cinquième Livre*, which last Powys refused, mistakenly it now seems, to attribute to Rabelais.

inventive style which helped to shape the French language... He knows all the things a man ought to know, he is a living encyclopedia⁶. As one French critic wrote

In order to understand Rabelais one would have to know everything, and if we knew everything, we would still have to question ourselves, as he does, about the respective blessings and evils of knowledge.⁷

Bewildered by the energy of his characters, the wealth of information provided, we follow these tales describing the adventures of the debonair giants, Grandgousier, Gargantua and Pantagruel in the strange world around them, and we go from surprise to surprise. How are we to interpret this mass of fantastic adventures, the anxiety of Panurge about marrying⁸, the episode of the “frozen words”⁹, the disputation by signs between the English scholar Thaumaste — a name meaning Admirable — (Thomas More?) and Panurge¹⁰, the Priestess of the Oracle¹¹? And what indeed causes such gigantic merriment, resounding throughout the *Five Books*? It might become more clear to us if we lend an ear to what Powys is ready to divulge about “the supreme pioneer”. Following him in his lavish and stimulating study of this most irrepressible mind in French literature will help us understand Rabelais’ deep influence on the most unprejudiced mind of 20th century English literature.

Powys on Rabelais before the 1948 Rabelais

An early indication of John Cowper’s interest in Rabelais appears in *Autobiography* where he tells us about one of the last lectures he gave before he left for the United States in 1908 :

At Oxford, however, it was upon Rabelais I lectured. (...) But my lecture was as much of a failure as my public one at Cambridge had been. It was not outspoken enough for my friends, and it was too outspoken for the authorities!¹²

He included Rabelais in *One Hundred Best Books* (1916), defining him as “the greatest intellect in literature” and devoted two essays to him before *Rabelais*. The first essay appeared in *Visions and Revisions* in 1915. In a few pages Powys displays the same courage he praises in Rabelais, for he boldly centers his analysis on four elements which were not usually discussed at that time: wine, sex, food and excrement.

“Rabelais uses Wine, and every kind of wanton liquor, as symbols of the intoxication he would produce.”¹³ It is spiritual thirst which is meant, not vulgar drunkenness. “We must be drunk but not mad”. Wine is more than a symbol, “it

⁶ It was Rabelais who introduced the word “encyclopédie” in the French language, as well as many others, such as *sympathie*, *perpendiculaire*, *catastrophe*, *atome* and *pyramide*.

⁷ *La leçon de Rabelais*, Pierre Lepape, “Le Monde des Livres”, March 25, 1994

⁸ *Rabelais*, p.203

⁹ *Rabelais*, *Fourth book*, chap.56

¹⁰ *Rabelais.*, p.177

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.276

¹² *Autobiography*, p.342

¹³ *Visions and Revisions*, G. Arnold Shaw, 1915, p.26

is a sacrament and an initiation". Rabelais invites us to drink of the cup of life which brings spiritual satisfaction¹⁴. The same attitude is extolled for the "noble pleasures" of meat, or sex for that matter, and Powys concurs. Rabelais shows due reverence for the stomach, for the body as a whole, which is both a sacred vessel and a grotesque absurdity.

On the subject of sex, Powys shows unusual sternness in his condemnation of "base and inhuman people" with their "lechery", "a cold dead Saurian thing, a thing with the gravity of a slow-worm"¹⁵ and he sides with Rabelais, seeing sex as no more and no less than pleasurable and natural. They are both already in complete agreement when they advise using both imagination *and* humour to come to terms with "every phase of our earthly condition" *including* the excremental, which, Powys writes, is "a path of initiation" (and we know how he made use of this in his own romances). Powys was already sufficiently conversant with the works of Rabelais to know they were kindred spirits. But during those years he was also busy writing his self-analysis for *Confessions of Two Brothers*, (1916), which, however, is still far from displaying a Rabelaisian view of life.

Twenty three years were to elapse before the second essay on Rabelais but Maître François was always much present in his thoughts. 1937 saw the publication of *Morwyn*, a dark novel, full of anguish. Towards the end of the book, which takes place *below* Hell, the narrator, tortured with remorse, wonders if he was guilty for having loved young Morwyn. Suddenly "Frank" appears and Powys puts in his mouth words of physical as well as mental appeasement, showing clearly Rabelais' antagonism to Christian chastity but which at the same time recall Pantagruel's consolatory words when evoking the death of the thrice-godlike Pan, the great Shepherd¹⁶ :

"O most honest", gasped the great Doctor, "but most deluded of Captains; let me tell you once and for all (...) that there is no sensual pleasure, as long as it contains no scurvy and one-sided cruelty, whose joy and rapture and ecstasy in our brief and troubled pilgrimage through this mortal life is not allowed, encouraged, indulged, confirmed, and more than blest, by the most bountiful and all-wise God, who is the great shepherd of us all!

(...)

Therefore take heart, dear cod, and keep the divine spirit within you unperturbed."¹⁷

In the second important essay on Rabelais, included in *Pleasures of Literature* (1938), it is obvious that his understanding of Rabelais' intentions has deepened, his thoughts are more profound and his admiration greater still. Each new reading brought richer perspectives and, as he writes, "we are only beginning to understand him."¹⁸ Powys in a few evocative pages seems to fall into a *rêverie*, musing on the character and personality of this extraordinary Curé de Meudon. Powys sees his works as a kind of apostolic epistle.

¹⁴ *Rabelais*, p.191, for instance

¹⁵ *Visions and Revisions*, p.28

¹⁶ *Rabelais*, p.269

¹⁷ *Morwyn*, (1937), here Village Press, 1974, pp.313-315

¹⁸ *The Pleasures of Literature*, 1938, p.102

His humour is *in itself* a complete philosophy. It is the essence of his doctrine diffused through his style, not a disguise to hide his thought. And it is humour of a very special and peculiar kind. It is not a mere playing with the comic or the ludicrous. It is more than merry fooling. Its scale is too stupendous. The laughter in it sinks down too deep. It is mystic humour, thaumaturgic humour, revolutionary humour. It is erotic and excremental; but with something over and above. It is evangelical, superhuman, cosmogonic; but its orgiastic revelry in the atrocious whimsies of life is not soured because of the enormous reformations it suggests, nor debased into mere satire because of the monstrous rascalities it exposes.¹⁹

Powys underlines two main elements in him which arouse his admiration: magnanimity and perfect good sense. Rabelais offered “a mingling of Pauline charity with Homeric laughter”²⁰, which struck a similar cord in Powys. As he writes, who knows if, at the bottom of our darkness, beyond the “grand Peut-être” there lies not “le bon espoir”, possibly that of “a joyful Resurrection from the Dead.” Reading Rabelais he experiences an indefinable and curious feeling of ...some redeeming dimension of super-planetary force, not quite beyond human attainment, from which if we could only tap its occult resources, a living assurance of immortality would flood our feeble and faltering lives.²¹

But Rabelais’ faith is mystical and personal, even containing pagan currents and does not belong to traditional religion. This point will be reiterated in *Rabelais*.

The 1948 Rabelais

In 1942 The Bodley Head asked Powys to write a book “Introducing Rabelais”²². Powys at that time had great financial problems. He is thrilled “by this piece of pure unbelievable good luck” and in January 1943 starts writing, on alternate days, both *Rabelais* and *Porius*. His friend Louis Wilkinson was kept informed of the progression of the book, undertaken “for the hack-work pay of 30£”²³

You wait — you’ll like this work of brother John’s best of all he’s done — you’ll say “Well! *that* was a hole in English Culture that wanted filling, & though, as we know, what Jack’s got to fill it with is none of the erectest or sturdiest — still, I warrant it’ll hit the mark!”²⁴

In February 1946 he was still busy correcting the proofs, and *Rabelais* was finally published in 1948.

The outcome of these four years of work, undertaken more for love than for lucre²⁵, is remarkable. It contains a preface, a short biography, a summary of the

¹⁹ *The Pleasures of Literature*, p.103

²⁰ G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, The Harvester Press, 1978, p.85

²¹ *The Pleasures of Literature*, p.112

²² *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p.121, Jan. 18th, 1943

²³ *Ibid.*, p.133, Xmas Day 1943

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.121

²⁵ Although it is true the book was commissioned, I venture the opinion that it seems derogatory to call it a “pot-boiler”.

tales, large selections translated from the *Five Books*, and it culminates with Powys' interpretation. Powys immersed himself in this task with humility and set himself to redefining Rabelais more thoroughly, even though he was already quite familiar with his books. He got hold of the latest (1929) modern French edition of Rabelais' complete works, read the books of the best specialists he could find. These 'Rabelaisants' were French, English, American and he paid studious attention to each.

He always claimed that he hated French and had no gift for languages. However he acquired the four folio volumes of Littré's *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* to help him in his task, and in his preface defined the problems of translation which confronted him. According to him, the ideal translator

...is aiming at the evocation, out of his own absorbing love of his subject, of as much of the thing's inmost essence in all its alien and foreign atmosphere as he can manage to catch (...) and the sharing of it with those among us who are, like himself, anxious to fill a gap in our personal culture that can *only* be filled by a scrupulously literal translation, supplemented, if possible, by at least the *look of the words* of the original, and otherwise left unfilled. Nor does such a translation answer its purpose unless we get the kind of bewildering shock that we commonly receive when first landing at a foreign port.²⁶

He scrupulously included passages previously omitted by squeamish translators. In spite of his undeniable efforts, when we compare his translations to the original, we cannot but realise that he did not manage to remain "literal" and took some liberties with the text. On the other hand the passages he translated show the hand of a great writer, for they give the reader a genuine and vivid impression of Rabelais' style. It is quite an impressive feat.

His familiarity with his subject is by now total, as is his empathy with the various facets of the great man he is presenting. In a notable essay on *Rabelais* published in a French Review, an English critic remarks

The book offers reflections matching post-war austerity: it affirms the necessity, and extols the freedom given at the heart of our culture by the act of reading. The tone adopted towards the reader together with the book's structure demonstrate the surprisingly dynamic notion of the freedom Powys allows his reader.²⁷

The complexity of the Rabelaisian opus irresistibly evokes the world of Bruegel and Hieronimus Bosch, but a certain folly in it reminds us of our own complex world, in spite of the lapse of 400 years. Powys focuses his analysis on Rabelais' use of nonsense and his anarchical innocence leading to wisdom. His study unfolds a rich tapestry of meditative reflections on Rabelais, mingling references to other writers dear to him, such as Walt Whitman, in his opinion another kindred spirit to Rabelais.

There are many ingredients in Rabelais' tales that must have inspired Powys and made him feel on familiar ground, as for exemple the presence of giants, these "supermen", as an allegory of man humiliated by the Church, to whom

²⁶ *Rabelais*, p.15

²⁷ P. Easingwood, *Powys émule de Rabelais*, Plein Chant, 42-43 (French translation by B. Stassen, re-translated in English)

Rabelais gave back his true stature, the many representations of Breton and Welsh²⁸ mythology, including Merlin the Prophet and Morgan Le Fay and the Holy Bottle of Bacbus evoking for Powys the Cauldron of Ceridwen, the quotations from Homer, “the father of philosophy”²⁹. Some of Rabelais’ modes of expression will be adopted by Powys, as for instance the use of synonymy and the accumulation of words. More important still, in Rabelais he recognises the same urge for an escape from logic. He is at ease with the “*Herculean Infantilism*”³⁰ shown by Pantagruel or Gargantua. For both writers the mystery of life, just as it is, makes all philosophical and scientific explanations of it laughable, and all religious ones mad.³¹ The sanest reaction man can have when confronting the absurdity of our world is to react by humour, laughter, burlesque, madness.

He is in full agreement with Rabelais’ political convictions. There is in Maître François a natural bent towards anarchism which cannot but delight someone who shares this defiance towards all taboos, be it of religion, sex or nationalism. And Rabelais is a rebel, in spite of being physician and secretary, first to Cardinal du Bellay in Rome and then to his brother Guillaume du Bellay, Governor of Piedmont. During these hectic times when Reformation, with Luther and Calvin, was beginning to threaten the omnipotent Roman Church and people were easily burned at the stake for “heresy”, Rabelais showed courage verging on recklessness when affronting as he did the Faculty of Theology of the College of the Sorbonne (the embodiment of Catholic orthodoxy) with his powerful attacks and hearty mockeries of priests and religion. The hated “Sorbonnicoles” took revenge by never missing an opportunity to condemn or censure his works as soon as they were published. On several occasions he fled the kingdom, to be out of their reach.

His anarchist tendencies are in full play when he describes an egalitarian community of men and women, the Abbey of Theleme (Greek *têlo*: I want) with neither church nor clocks, but which harbours a superb library, and where everybody follows the motto “Fay ce que voudras” (Do as thou wilt). Far from evoking a house of illicit pleasures, the abbey provides a magnificent humanist image of the sovereignty of man and of his free will. Powys will have appreciated the fact that in the world described by Rabelais the notion of social classes has no influence on relations between people: all the characters speak to each other as equals, from king to crook. François Villon, the great poet, who had to take refuge within the criminal underworld to escape prosecution, is often referred to, for Rabelais revered him. And Powys is of course delighted to remark on his sympathy for the proletariat: through Rabelais, for the first time “the common herd became audible”³².

Pitiful clowns, poor snakes, wretched dogs as many of them were, down-and-outs without self-respect, have-nots without pride, encumberers of the earth without home or habitation and like the King of Salem ‘without

²⁸ In November 1943, Powys gave in Corwen a conference on the Welsh Influence on the Works of Rabelais (see *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, B. Rota, 1971, p.59)

²⁹ *Rabelais*, p.207

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.283

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.284

³² *Ibid.*, p.295

father or mother', *Rabelais took their side against the world*.³³

The voices of two champions of all the Have-Nots can be heard here, and this is no surprise. Powys passionately adheres to Rabelais' subversive creed.



The village of Seully seen from the Abbey grounds (*Rabelais* p.97)

Since Powys was writing *Rabelais* during the 1939-45 war, he was conscious of the perils of totalitarian regimes and so paid particular attention to the way Rabelais examined political problems. Through Pantagruel's wise government, Rabelais gives us a taste of the duties of the state towards its citizens, including the obligation to satisfy their desire for freedom, for leisure and the right to use it as they like, but also of having them politically educated. Powys is particularly impressed by "the daring and revolutionary thought", never put into practice by governments up to his time "of introducing honesty, toleration, common sense and humanity (...) in the relation (...) between race and race".³⁴ Rabelais is also severe with respect to their exorbitant powers and the fallacious pretexts they use to start a war. This is clearly shown by the absurd Picrocholine dispute which turns into a bloody war. Guillaume du Bellay as Governor of Turin had shown discernment and good governance, which certainly provided the inspiration for the beginning of the *Third Book*, where Rabelais expounds his ideas about governing newly conquered countries³⁵. We also witness Pantagruel as he

³³ *Rabelais*, p.292

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.334

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.192

considers the fate he will inflict on his prisoner, King Anarchus:

I am going to make an honest man of him. These devils of kings are only so many calves and they know nothing and are worth nothing save to do harm to their poor subjects and to trouble the world with wars, and all for their iniquitous and detestable pleasure. I will put him to a trade and make him a crier of Green Sauce.³⁶

We come now to an essential element in Powys' examination of Rabelais, that of "Pantagruelism", a notion on which Powys expatiates many times before explaining it more clearly towards the end of the book:

Pantagruelism, like its vegetable prototype *Pantagruelion*³⁷, and indeed like most great philosophies that are also practical ways of life, is at once very simple and very complicated. To enjoy the moment of sunshine to the limit, but to be prepared at a pinch to plunge into unfathomable darkness, seems to be the final aspect of it. Not divided, however, from these practical aspects there exists within it and around it and about it, as if penetrating it from another Dimension, what I would like boldly to call a *metaphysical* element. And it is here Rabelais altogether leaves behind his 'father-mother' Erasmus. I refer to the mysterious Platonic element in his life-quest which he loves to symbolize in three ways; in Thirst or Drink; in Voyaging or Travel; in Laughter or Blasphemy.³⁸

Rabelais' vision is totally different from the wisdom humanists had tried until then to teach men. His approach is constantly optimistic and democratic, for he believes in human nature and progress. He distrusts authority from above and believes in authority from below, i.e. the good instincts of common men. What is Pantagruelism? It is Rabelais' "religion". As Powys remarks:

[It] is based upon common sense, which implies a fusion of instinct, intuition and imagination with what reason we have, a trust as well as a distrust of the senses, and a welding of all these together in the unfathomable and unconquerable energy of the individual soul.³⁹

This typically Powysian philosophy is issued from Rabelais, it propounds a reconciliation of reason and instinct. Powys, like Rabelais, has hopes that this new wisdom will encourage man to live fully, relying on his own intelligence and humour. He insists on the healing powers of humour, because "this sort of humour is a philosophy; it is wisdom diffused through the whole circus of our life."⁴⁰ When he writes that Rabelais exerted "a poetical and imaginative scepticism in the presence of *all systems*"⁴¹ he undoubtedly describes his own tendencies towards philosophical doubt. In a letter to Dr Lowerth Peate in 1945 he confides :

My pluralism is a temperamental intuitive preference for the Many over the One — and for a certain Anarchy in things over One Cosmos and one

³⁶ *Rabelais*, p.335

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.288. Rabelais devotes the three last chapters of *Pantagruel* to a long description of the herb Pantagruelion, which has miraculous properties. It is no other in fact than hemp, later named *Cannabis sativa*. For Powys this herb is a symbol of purification.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.368-9

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.384

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.388

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.374

God & One Christ. I like absolutely free speculation in these things...⁴²

In the sixteenth century which “went from Columbus to Copernicus, from Copernicus to Galileo, from the discovery of the earth to that of the heavens”⁴³, offering new lands and new techniques, called the Renaissance, Rabelais swept his readers to a quest for new territories, with imagination as compass. As Pantagruel replied to Macrobius, his host, inquiring on the reason of his voyage, “one sole purpose and one alone they had in putting to sea, namely, an intense craving for knowledge and new experience and an overpowering longing to see and learn.”⁴⁴

In our own troubled times, this hopeful message which survived four centuries of pitiless wars and religious intolerance has still not been properly heard. But our two Giants, John Cowper Powys and Rabelais, cherish the same vision for man: that he may have the upper hand in his own destiny, choose the duties he is ready to accept, and above all *that he live with joy*. It is for man to create his own kingdom. And whatever magic properties he may possess lie in the mysterious power arising from human imagination, which will provide him with the only reality he really needs. For power is of the mind.

At the end of the *Fifth Book* the priestess Bacbuc advises: “Be yourself the interpreter of your enterprise.”⁴⁵ By this formula, Rabelais gives his readers full freedom to act. He wishes men and women to be able to embark without fear on a voyage through the unfathomable Multiverse. And Powys concludes:

So far from being caught by any ‘circle’, visible or invisible, human or divine, this great terraqueous Adventurer teaches us to navigate by all the stars of life, stars baptized or stars unbaptized, stars Magian or stars Pelagian, stars Semitic or stars Hamitic; and to steer straight for Utopia even though its shores recede as we advance.⁴⁶

J. Peltier



The castle at Chinon on the hill over the Vienne

⁴² John Cowper Powys, *Letters*, 1937-1954, Cardiff UOWP, 1974, p.54

⁴³ Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 1855, quoted by W.K. Ferguson in *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, Cambridge, 1948

⁴⁴ *Rabelais*, p.266

⁴⁵ Rabelais, *Fifth Book*, chap. 45

⁴⁶ *Rabelais*, p.415