Published in ***la lettre powysienne*** numéro 5, printemps 2003,
see : http://www.powys-lannion.net/Powys/LettrePowysienne/number5.htm

Stonehenge

Leaving the bridge I ascended a gentle declivity, and presently reached what appeared to be a tract of moory undulating ground. It was now tolerably light, but there was a mist or haze abroad which prevented my seeing objects with much precision. I felt chill in the damp air of the early morn, and walked rapidly forward. In about half an hour I arrived where the road divided into two at an angle or tongue of dark green sward. "To the right or the left?" said I, and forthwith took, without knowing why, the left-hand road, along which I proceeded about a hundred yards, when, in the midst of the tongue or sward formed by the two roads, collaterately with myself, I perceived what I at first conceived to be a small grove of blighted trunks of oaks, barked and grey. I stood still for a moment, and then, turning off the road, advanced slowly towards it over the sward; as I drew nearer, I perceived that the objects which had attracted my curiosity, and which formed a kind of circle, were not trees, but immense upright stones. A thrill pervaded my system; just before me were two, the mightiest of the whole, tall as the stems of proud oaks, supporting on their tops a huge transverse stone, and forming a wonderful doorway. I knew now where I was, and laying down my stick and bundle, and taking off my hat, I advanced slowly, and cast myself — it was folly, perhaps, but I could not help what I did — cast myself, with my face on the dewy earth, in the middle of the portal of giants, beneath the transverse stone.

The spirit of Stonehenge was strong upon me! (G. Borrow, *Lavengro*)

Self-Portraiture in George Borrow & the Powys Brothers

IN HIS RECENT analysis of *Autobiography*, Ingemar Algulin conducted his readers through the enchanted world of John Cowper Powys, with its many delights and idiosyncrasies: its rhapsodic descriptions of rural scenes and townscapes, its discrete mythology, and its colourful procession of friends and relations encountered on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a book which, because of its unique resort to self-display (sometimes amounting to self-parody), makes us question the boundaries of our own selfhood.

Autobiographical writing abounds in bewildering variety, mirroring the diversity of humanity itself. Comparison of even a few specimens of the genre will reveal immense divergences in style and structure. In striving to encapsulate their own essence, authors roam across a broad spectrum — from the real to the ideal, from hard data to the wildest fiction, from the curriculum vitae to the romantic icon, from guileless confessions in letters and diaries to portraits carefully posed for public exhibition.

One English writer, now largely though undeservedly forgotten, who like Powys imposed his personality on the autobiographical format, was George Borrow (1803-81)[1]. His works combine, sometimes in uneasy conjunction, the crispness of a travel narrative — where the itinerary itself supplies a hard edge to the narrative flow — with the more ambiguous contours favoured by the romantic narcissist. Tensions thus arise between sober biography and the demands of the imagination. The author (Powys furnishes one such example), discomfited by his own method, then seeks to allay the reader's worries, e.g. by pleading selective amnesia or apologising for the inventions and digressions which threaten to plunge his enterprise into chaos.

There is a simple solution to this problem: ***the author records his life as though it were a novel***. The beauty of this stratagem is that, as in more conventional autobiographies, he can still tell his story in the first person singular; yet as long as he hides behind the mask of the protagonist, he is left to embroider reality in whatever way he chooses. Any new problems so caused will affect not the narrator but the critic, who now finds himself saddled with the task of disentangling the true biographical facts from the illusions inherent in the imaginary circumstances. Much Borrow criticism has been devoted to solving such puzzles.

Borrow, who died when John Cowper Powys was a boy of nine, had established his reputation in 1843 with the publication of *The Bible in Spain*. It is a tumultuous work which belongs to that sub-category of the autobiography

[1] Although there is an active George Borrow Society, which in 2003 aims to celebrate the author's bicentinary, little of his work is currently in print. However, in 2001 the Brynmill Press reprinted *George Borrow: the Dingle Chapters*, i.e. relevant excerpts from the two autobiographical novels *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*.

equally enjoyable as a travel record, rich in picaresque incidents; but it owes its special flavour to Borrow's precarious position in Catholic Spain as an agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Barrie Mencher gives us a vivid impression of the book's attractions:

> Borrow has fixed forever, in English eyes, an image of everyday Spain in the 1830s — an image composed chiefly of ruinous and rowdy wayside inns, volatile mule-drivers, cunning Gypsies, ignorant but pious villagers, dusty towns embellished by magnificent churches or palaces, a vast, often hostile, landscape of deserts and mountain ranges: a country in the grip of civil war, in which a lone English traveller (...) makes his way undaunted by a myriad dangers in the pursuit of his holy mission to spread the Word of God by selling cheap copies of the New Testament in Spanish translation. This traveller, George Borrow himself, emerges as an infinitely resourceful, brave figure — a hero fit to stand by Robinson Crusoe or the pilgrim Christian himself; and the prose which evokes him is as vigorous, vivid and matter-of-fact as that of Bunyan or Defoe.[2]

While *The Bible in Spain* describes, if with certain adornments, Borrow's genuine missionary exploits, his masterpiece *Lavengro* (1851), with its sequel *The Romany Rye* (1857), belongs to that romanticised version of self-portraiture which Mr Mencher terms 'quasi-autobiography'; or, as the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* succinctly puts it, in *Lavengro* "autobiography is inextricably mingled with fiction." As we know from the book's subtitle, Borrow set out to explore his psyche in a threefold aspect — as scholar, gypsy, and priest. His adopted gypsy name, Lavengro[3], points to his extraordinary attainments as a scholar or philologist.

Lavengro is a psychological puzzle. At one level it is a tale of an unpolluted, preindustrial England where, sometimes in raffish company, we enjoy the life of the open road and, in the immortal words of the gypsy Jasper Petulengro, we breathe "the wind on the heath". Yet in his persona as 'priest' Borrow seems haunted by darker thoughts, which have less in common with the world of Defoe than with the angst-ridden characters we meet in Dostoievsky[4] — or Powys:

> Perhaps the first thing that strikes a reader who has just closed his copy of *Lavengro*, after reading it for the first time, is the puzzling little gallery of people suffering from various *maladies d'esprit* — the Welsh preacher who believes that, as a child, he committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost and so is subject to fits of profound depression originating

---

[2] See Barrie Mencher's illuminating Introduction to the Brynmill volume, pp 2-3. His reassessment of Borrow was originally published in *English Studies* in 1998.

[3] "Lavengro" means "master of words" in gypsy language.

[4] In consequence of his work as a translator, Borrow may well have viewed sympathetically Russian writers of an earlier generation than Dostoievski's. In her privately circulated study *George Borrow as a Linguist*, Dr Ann Ridler explores a possible connection with Pushkin, though she also moots parallels with the 18th century Gaelic poet Duncan Ban Macintyre.

in a feeling of remorse; the elderly student of Chinese whose life was blighted by a false accusation of knowingly passing forged banknotes; the famous author who has a morbid dread of innocently receiving stolen goods, who fears that his very thoughts might have been stolen from some other writer and whose malady is evident in the compulsive tic which causes him to touch arbitrary objects so as to ward off the "evil chance"; and the hero himself (another George Borrow *persona*) who suffers for no obvious reason attacks of what he calls "the horrors".[5]

Chapelle de Capel-y-ffin dans les Black Mountains, comté de Powys

An interest in neurotic behaviour was not the only link between Borrow and Powys. Both men had an obsessive relationship with words — were philologists in the true sense. This trait was partly fostered by their joint concern with the art of translation, though no one would claim that, in this regard, Powys was a match for Borrow, whose linguistic abilities were truly astounding: his translations span thirty languages, whereas Powys did not venture beyond Latin, Greek, French and Welsh. Moreover, the impact on their respective styles was very different. Powys, influenced by his particular liking for Rabelais, is apt to mass words exuberantly together in a way which sometimes says more for his enthusiasm than for his powers of discrimination. Borrow, on the other hand, 'shows off' his multi lingual skills by frequently interlarding dialogue with phrases selected from a wide variety of foreign tongues. This mannerism tends to have a seductive effect on the reader, who feels persuaded that, thanks to the author's didactic abilities, he himself suddenly acquires a knowledge of other languages!

[5] Mencher, op. cit. pp 8-9

It may be thought fanciful to suggest any close affinity between Borrow and John Cowper Powys. Powys does not appear to admire Borrow; he ignores him when choosing his *One Hundred Best Books* (1916). It is also true that each page of *Autobiography* bears the unmistakable stamp of its author's personality; yet like every literary masterpiece it is also the product of a complex cultural heritage. As Ingemar Algulin has observed, *Autobiography* is to some degree founded on Romantic tradition. And we may note a more intimate association between Borrow and Powys in that both were Anglo-Celts. In the English dimension the parallels are especially striking since, through the happenstance of family history, both had roots in East Anglia — in particular in the city of Norwich and its environs. As to Celtic influence, Borrow's paternal ancestry was Cornish. Readers of his *Wild Wales* (1862) soon realize that, in his happy exploration of Welsh scenery and Welsh traditions, Borrow was as 'obstinately Cymric' as Powys himself.

It would perhaps be natural to expect far closer associations to emerge when we compare John's autobiography with the self-portraits drawn by his brothers; but shared genes do not necessarily impel siblings along identical paths or imply congruent philosophies. Certainly Theodore Powys, with his hermit-like existence and his lapidary literary style, bears scant resemblance to John and Llewelyn. The essential shyness of his nature would seem to preclude overt autobiographical writing, an exercise which generally favours the exhibitionist. Yet who can doubt that his reclusive temperament is aptly mirrored in several diffident but staunchly independent vicars we meet in his novels and short stories? Obsessed with ethical problems and religious scruples, he scorned the conventions and superficialities of traditional biography, choosing instead modes of self-expression akin to those of medieval mystics. It would be difficult to suggest a more appropriate title for this aberrant type of autobiography than *Soliloquies of a Hermit* (1918). But Theodore does not merely talk to himself. While he gazes inward, communing with his own soul, he also looks outward and addresses his 'dear brothers'. We are indeed continually reminded that T.F. Powys was the son and grandson of parsons — that his enigmatic fables are often also trenchant sermons, wherein Theodore, eager to pursue his priestly duty, confers with God, parleys with the Devil, and exhorts his parishioners (his readers) to mend their ways. At the same time, though his rhythms and cadences may be different, he frequently echoes the elementalism of his oldest brother:

> It is the spring, and the apple-blossom is beautiful because He is there in it. To love Him is the only good thing in this world. It does not matter if He is true; He is beyond all Truth. All things have breath in Him; I feel Him in the earth. When I hammer at the rocks and break away fossils that have been there for millions of years, I am only going a little way into His love. When I look up in the night and see the light that has left a star thousands of years ago, I can only see a little way into His love. His love is a terrible love — terrible and deep, hard for a man to bear; I have lived in it, I know it. I hear people say, "Why did He come here to this little Planet; why did He not leave it out?" I answer, "He leaves nothing out"

> (...)
> A future life is nothing to me; His love is everything. I study the rocks and the stars; I love old, very old history; it gives me a breath of Him. I love to know that matter is infinite, for His love is in all matter. A stone that has never been touched by man is touched by Him.[6]

We may well feel that in seeking to persuade others, Theodore is also seeking to convince himself — to fend off those "terrible moods of God" which darken much of his fiction and which may not be unrelated to the 'horrors' experienced by Borrow in his role as Lavengro.

Llewelyn Powys, with his self-indulgent hedonism, his anguished cries of *carpe diem*, and his unrelenting hostility to institutionalised religion, leads his readers into yet another world, where awareness of man's mortality tends both to dim and enhance immediate pleasures. Beginning his literary career as John's satellite (*Confessions of Two Brothers,* 1916), Llewelyn soon chose to follow an independent path, though contrasts in their later writings are sometimes found to be a matter of form rather than substance. Occasionally Llewelyn even chides John for his helter-skelter style, as opposed to his own elaborately chiselled sentences. He also voices more serious misgivings about his brother's autobiography: "I think there is something neurotic and masochistic in the book and this is responsible for singularly unpleasant passages."[7] He was however unhappy when others dared to attack John — as when Compton Mackenzie derided *Autobiography* from his own "limited man of the world point of view".

In one broad aspect Llewelyn's self-portraiture resembles Borrow's, since his skills embrace both the clear vision of the seasoned traveller and the inventive talent of the novelist. Like John, Llewelyn shares with us his love of Dorset, Somerset and America; but wider travels, prompted by his ill-health, also provided him with more exotic settings in the West Indies, Palestine, Kenya — where he spent five years on his brother Willie's farm — and Switzerland, his final refuge against tuberculosis. The title of his book about Palestine, *A Pagan's Pilgrimage*, emphasizes his anti-clerical stance; but it was his experience of Africa, reflected in pioneering works like *Ebony and Ivory* (1923) and *Black Laughter* (1924), which deepened his sensibilities and led to some of his most disturbing conclusions on man's role in the universe.

Llewelyn made two experiments in the field of enhanced autobiography: *Apples Be Ripe* (1930) and *Love and Death* (1939). While the former might be described as an immature *Bildungsroman*[8], the latter, published only months before Llewelyn's death, has that special poignancy which invests the thoughts of a dying man. In *Apples Be Ripe* Llewelyn, mildly disguised as 'Chris Holbech', heralds the 'angry young men' of a later decade. Flouting the conventions of a

---

[6] *Soliloquies of a Hermit*, Village Press edition, 1975, pp 51-2

[7] *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, ed. Louis Wilkinson, 1943, pp 191-2

[8] i.e. the apprenticeship of life, such as for instance Goethe's *Wilhem Meister* (editor's note)

society still adhering to Victorian conventions, especially in regard to sexual behaviour, Chris is bound to come to grief. Considered as an exercise in self-revelation and family history, the book is uneven in quality. There are however some well-drawn vignettes, as in the opening chapter, with its vivid glimpses of the patriarch in the Powys household; but the psychological development of the compound character, Chris-Llewelyn, is unsatisfactory, perhaps because the novel was over-hastily written.

In *Love and Death* Llewelyn probes his early unhappy love affair with his cousin Marion Linton, who forsook him to enter a Roman Catholic nunnery. It is a book which delights some and infuriates others. Llewelyn's vision of Marion, romanticised as 'Dittany Stone', is both mawkish and tragic. When Alyse Gregory, Llewelyn's wife, came to write an introduction to 'an imaginary autobiography' — such is the book's subtitle — she faced a perplexing task. In the perspective of literary art, the problem of fusing what was real with what was feigned had proved insoluble. And Alyse was understandably censorious of Dittany, in phrases which sometimes sound like a parody of her husband's style:

> It is not the authenticity of his feelings that we doubt, there are cries that spring directly from his pages to us, but it is the implications of his own experience, and of the experience of the romantic girl of his choice, that we fancy have not been plumbed to their full depth; and what countryside, let alone one that lies within the chalky ramparts of the decorous sea-girt island of his birth, has ever harboured, particularly in the era of which he writes, and in such provincial circles, so scholarly and emancipated a young lady of eighteen?
>
> And yet this novel that is not a novel can hardly be judged by the ordinary standards of fiction writing. Its stately dialogue, so grave, ceremonious, and ingenuous, resembles the conversations that might have taken place between Nicolette and Aucassin if they had left off their delicate dalliance to enter into sober moods of conference.[9]

The progress of the story was not helped by Llewelyn's mannerism of lavishly quoting poetry to reinforce his sentimental moods. He culled passages from over forty authors, from Homer to Thomas Hardy, not forgetting his erstwhile mentor John (nine excerpts!), his sister Philippa, and his mistress Gamel Woolsey.

Llewelyn's indebtedness to Romantic tradition — and in particular to Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is manifest throughout the book. In one revealing episode he identifies himself with the forlorn Heathcliff, and Dittany with the deceased Catherine Linton, who by coincidence even shared her name with Llewelyn's cousin. For many readers however the attraction of *Love and Death* lies less in the supercharged atmosphere of the central love affair than in the nostalgic reveries where Llewelyn recalls family life in the vicarage at Montacute:

> The old French drawing-room clock beat out the minutes as the long hand rose in scarcely visible jerks towards the midnight hour. I remained

---

[9] *Love and Death*, Introduction by Alyse Gregory, p. xiii

> dumb. It was as though the wings of time were brushing across that sheltered parlour of the Victorian age. I thought of my father sitting in his armchair (...) while my mother read to him, one after the other, the Waverley Novels, and I knew that his days would pass. I thought of Littleton looking over his camphor-smelling drawers of bright butterflies or when older reading *Endymion*, and of little Lucy, and I knew that their days would pass. I thought of John in summer weather with his long fingers stained with ink (...) and how I had once run up to him as a small boy saying, 'How can you sit writing all morning and not come out into the garden to play?' and I knew that his days would pass. And yet how permanent the room looked that evening, every picture, every print, every ornament part of my very conception of home —[10]

Mention of Littleton introduces us to a fourth autobiographer in the Powys family. As the second son he was slightly younger than John, somewhat older than Theodore and much older than 'Lulu'. He was perhaps the least Powysian of the quartet, remaining in no way afflicted by the many neuroses and eccentricities which plagued his more celebrated brothers, though he also lacked their intellectual brilliance. As head master of the junior school at Sherborne he displayed both the virtues and limitations of a Victorian dominie. His two volumes of autobiography are sober and sometimes pedestrian accounts of his education and career; but because he is more inclined to stick to the facts, it is instructive to compare his version of events with John's, e.g. in his description of student life at Cambridge. He was, after all, in the privileged position of being able to observe his family at close quarters. Unencumbered by high-flown theories, he at times passed shrewd judgments on his brothers, much in the manner of writing school reports:

> Llewelyn is by far the most careful, industrious and meticulous writer of the three; round him you will always find books of reference, dictionaries, and all manner of aids to composition, aids which will help to get just the right word. The result is so superb that all credit is his; but there is much deliberate craftsmanship in this.
>
> Compare this method with John Cowper's; never a book is near him, pouring forth, as he does, a constant flow of words that deal with every subject from a reservoir which is ever full. He is often abominably careless, quotations introduced which have not been verified, split infinitives, mistakes in grammar. When I first read his *Philosophy of Solitude*, that wonderful book — I noticed at once two mistakes in quotations from Matthew Arnold (a poet I know well) and I wrote to him about it; 'Deary me,' he replied, 'and a Matthew Arnold was in a bookshelf just above me all the time!' but the rapidity of the flow of his thoughts and his desire to get them on paper allow no pause for correction or for verification.[11]

Littleton had composed the first volume of his reminiscences, *The Joy of It* (1937), under the impact of three recent publications: John's own autobiography,

[10] *Love and Death*, pp. 172-3

[11] *The Joy of It*, p. 269

Richard Heron Ward's *The Powys Brothers* (1935), and Louis Marlow's ***Welsh Ambassadors*** (1936). He was thus well placed to refute what he held to be the shortcomings in the two latter works, e.g. the view that the Rev. Charles Francis Powys had been a tyrannical father and that Theodore was a man without humour, obsessed with his own lugubrious cogitations.

Littleton's second volume of autobiography, *Still the Joy of It*, was published posthumously in 1956. It is more discursive than the first, including such chapters as "The Importance of Field Natural History", "Broadcasting" and "Arizona"; but it is primarily a tribute to his second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Myers who, though much his junior, had predeceased him. He also edited her collected letters. Despite his acknowledged lesser status, Littleton at times seems to rise above himself and speak with the authentic voice of his elder brother:

> The very insistence of pain or misfortune compels the distraught ego to turn and wring from somewhere peace and self-forgetting, and that escape can be found in seizing upon the sky, the stars, in the snow, the rain at the window; the bit of groundsel growing in the window-box; the fire in the grate; the cup, the kettle, and the chair... comforting and friendly. In learning to be positively aware of these things, in concentrating upon them, the tortured or anxious mind begins to wrinkle with surprise, is slowly drawn out of the net of its pain and worry, and all at once is catapulted from the slavish trance of its far-flung disposition in space and time, into a thrilling state of liberation — a dimension of true reality.[12]

The influence of John's dominant personality, his peculiar empathy with inorganic no less than living substance, has left many such traces in his brother's writings.

Should our appetite for autobiography still be unsated, we may wish to switch our enquiry from the Powys family to the Powys circle, where a further rich harvest awaits us. Llewelyn's disciple Kenneth Hopkins may tempt us with *The Corruption of a Poet* (1954), though he is of course better known for his multiple contributions to Powys studies. Naomi Mitchison in *Among You Taking Notes* (1985) prefers the all-embracing method enjoined by the once fashionable theory of Mass Observation. It is a formula which holds little attraction for the true egoist, since the Self becomes overshadowed by the welter of public events.

Of all members of the Powys circle, it is perhaps Louis Wilkinson (writing under the pseudonym of 'Louis Marlow') who has most claim on our attention, because his own career was so closely intertwined with the lives of the Powys brothers. As an insider in the Powys family he could report truth; but by temperament he often preferred legend to reality — hence his repeated resort to fiction as his mode of autobiographical expression, as in *The Buffoon* (1916), *Swan's Milk* (1934) and *Forth, Beast!* (1946). Guided, in this instance, less by his

[12] *The Letters of Elizabeth Myers*, ed. Littleton C. Powys, 1951, pp. 54-5

usual sound judgment than by his friendship for Louis, Llewelyn lavished extravagant praise on *Swan's Milk*: "I think it is the most scandalous, dangerous, daring autobiography that has been written this century." Moreover he found the work unmatched as "an excellent stroke for freedom and civilization." If *Swan's Milk* is remembered today, it is certainly less as a self-portrait than for its entertaining, if at times ungenerous, portrayal of John. *The Buffoon* similarly targets John in the character of 'Jack Welsh', though the more malicious touches may well have been prompted, or even written, by Louis' wife Frances Gregg, with whom John was himself infatuated. While *The Buffoon* is an absorbing *roman à clef*, *Welsh Ambassadors*, with its marked reliance on original correspondence, remains a valuable group portrait of the Powys family.

Doubts may arise regarding the boundaries of this brief *tour d'horizon*, since our theme is vast and elastic; but if in conclusion we return to the starting-point of our investigation, we may note that John Cowper Powys, like Byron, bequeathed to posterity *an alternative autobiography* in the shape of his copious diaries and letters. Diaries tend to be repetitive and may sink into triviality, but such daily records, like the multiple images superimposed on a cinema screen, may pulse with life in a way which eludes more deliberate attempts at self-portraiture. Diaries however form part of an even larger picture, for in a sense *all* literary endeavour is coloured by autobiography. It was Goethe who beheld the totality of his *œuvre* as fragments of a great confession. It was Goethe too who defined the central problem of self-delineation as the tensions occurring between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*. In so doing he also came close to the core of much Powysian philosophy — to the liberating recognition that reality becomes more palatable if, following the example set by Borrow and his successors, we adorn it with the fruits of our imagination.

Cedric Hentschel

Dr Cedric Hentschel lectured in the universities of London, Innsbruck, Breslau and Uppsala before joining the overseas service of the British Council. A specialist of German Literature and of Byronic studies, he has also written many articles on JCP, and edited *Powys to Eric the Red*, 'The Letters of Powys to Sven Eric Täckmark', Cecil Woolf, 1983, as well as *Powys on Keats*, C. Woolf, 1993.