

Instead of a Review

Descents of Memory by Morine Krissdóttir

I do not like biographies – never did. When last year I noticed the publication of Morine Krissdóttir's *Descents of Memory – The Life of John Cowper Powys* I did not feel the faintest urge to read it. It was only when I saw the rather heated reviews in the March 2008 issue of *The Powys Society Newsletter* and the obviously offended author's answer in the next issue that my curiosity overcame my firm conviction of futility and premonition of disappointment. Michael Kowalewski's passionate critique, Susan Rands's objective "review of reviews" and Tony Atmore's description of *Descents of Memory* practically in terms of a revelation posed a mystery for me: what could there be in a biography that provoked such controversial and emotionally charged reaction? It is *only* a biography, after all. Needless to say, because I was so strongly biased against the book, my misgivings were bound to come true. Consequently, I am obviously not the person to write an objective review of *Descents of Memory*. Instead, let me try to probe into the reasons why I still cannot resist the temptation to publicise my opinion about it.

First and foremost, because the debate about Krissdóttir's book seems to be centred around the very issues that have hitherto mostly discouraged me from reading my favourite authors' biography/biographies. For a start, working with

psychoanalytic and myth criticism, and brought up on notions like “intentional fallacy”, I have always felt an aversion to the reduction of textual analysis to the author’s psychoanalysis or to the identification of the real-life prototypes of fictional characters and events. And most biographies—including *Descents of Memory*—are not really helpful beyond these. From this basic standpoint the second issue, whether Morine Krissdóttir gives a bad name to Powys or not, is rather irrelevant. For my part, I am rather accustomed to the curiosities of my favourites—Dostoevsky’s gambling, Virginia Woolf’s mental breakdowns, Andrey Bely’s and James Joyce’s fascination with occult studies. Probably rather simplistically I imagine that biographers in such cases have two choices: to pose as strict revealers of the truth, however disillusioning it seems, or to come up with white lies to save face. Ultimately, these two boil down to one: creating different fictions and interpretations of a life. This inevitable fictionality and interpretative nature of all stories is the factor—one cannot ignore the tell-tale definite article in the subtitle at this point—that Morine Krissdóttir seems to forget in *The Life of John Cowper Powys*.



Eszterházy College, Eger (Hungary)

Thus, the other real choice remains silence, and one actually cannot stop wondering why *Descents of Memory* had to be written at all. My second major concern lies here because Krissdóttir’s often quoted answer to this question is deeply disquieting at two levels. Her self-therapeutic attempt to exorcise John Cowper Powys from her system and to find the way out from the maze that his writing presents for her by confining him within the magic circle of the biography is disheartening for me both as a reader of Powys’s works and as a young researcher. This approach suggests for me—and probably for any ‘lay’ reader—that Powys’s texts can become an utterly destructive obsession. Fixing their meaning, i.e. finding one’s way out of the maze, therefore is a question of madness or sanity, death or life. But what if the question is asked in the wrong way? Jacques Lacan, Francois Lyotard, Harold Bloom, Peter Brooks and Paul de Man—a whole era of psychoanalysis and literary criticism (with which Krissdóttir

is conversant) has started out from the vantage point that all reading is misreading and only death can put an end to interpretation. And what if the blame is put on the wrong culprit? The creator of the 'maze' for all these theoreticians is not the individual writer, but language itself, with its inevitably figurative nature and ever elusive signified. These assumptions are part of the 'postmodern condition' that researchers have had to live with for quite a couple of decades, even if not so happily. *Descents to Memory*, however, is truly disturbing from a researcher's perspective, as well. Krissdóttir's 1980 *Magical Quest* shows her as an excellent Powys scholar and her immense knowledge of Powysiana is absolutely humbling for any novice. The amount of work that putting together *Descents of Memory* (2007) must have required is a subject for sacred horror. The publication dates of these two books in themselves, without the detailed explications of Krissdóttir's above-mentioned letter, testify to decades, in fact, half a life-time devoted to research on John Cowper Powys. The culmination of such devotion in a book like *Descents of Memory*, which is all about distancing the object of examination from the researcher for the sheer self-preservation of the latter, is like a terrible warning about the fundamental traps of the profession. While the interpretative process is infinite, analytical texts must be finite—writing, though it cannot be completed, must be stopped, even if it means accepting that no literary texts (and lives) can be fully contained in any interpretation.

Thus, of course, *Descents of Memory* is at its best for me when "it knows not what it is"¹. Not when it discovers, for example, that the *Autobiography* is a bunch of consciously self-deceptive lies, that Phyllis Playter's image is grossly falsified in Powys's journals, not even in its quasi-feminist attempts to recreate Frances Gregg's and Phyllis Playter's 'muted' version of the Powys legend, and definitely not in the truly "excremental vision" à la Norman O. Brown² and Julia Kristeva³ of Powys's relation to his own body. For me the only relief in this long tour de force is the presentation and myth critical analysis of Powys's works. But that is the point where *Descents of Memory* ceases to be a biography in the narrow sense of the word and the voice of the critical and often refreshingly objective (though disillusioned) Powys scholar can be heard.

All in all, on the one hand I have learnt about John Cowper Powys a lot of things from Morine Krissdóttir's book that I am not sure I ever wanted to know. Not because they shatter an idol—I have never been prone to looking at writers as idols—but because by confining Powys in the bounds of his body and manias they seem to impose limitations on my reading of his literary texts about which I am rather uneasy. On the other hand, my expectations were unfulfilled in some

¹ Yeats, William Butler "Sailing to Byzantium." *The Tower. Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*.

² See Brown, Norman O. 'The Excremental Vision.' in *Swift—A Collection of Essays*, ed. Ernest Tuveson, Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp.31-54. Norman Oliver Brown (1913-2002), was an American philosopher who identified the importance of desire as opposed to knowledge in our relation to others and in finding our place in the world. He underlined the central place of the body and the need to understand in terms of the body Freudian mechanisms such as repression and sublimation. He attached the greatest importance to Freudian notions such as the castration complex, anality and the death instinct. [Ed]

³ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror —An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

respects, notably in terms of clarifying cultural and literary contexts, which would open up new vistas for intertextual analyses of Powys's works. With the obvious exception of psychoanalytic and mythological contexts, these do not fall into the scope of Krissdóttir's study. The book has left me fatigued and thoroughly disheartened both as a researcher and a reader. I had to realise that just like for Krissdóttir, writing—naming my concerns—can also be therapeutic for me if I want to recover from this reading experience. Luckily, it is not my only antidote: I know my Powys—and I know him as playful, many-sided, ironic, indulging himself in the manifold visions of his multiverse. Luckily, because neither Powys's image as an egotistic pervert, nor the interpretation of his novels as alchemic sacred scripts legible only for the initiated would encourage me to get acquainted with his oeuvre. I do not like biographies—judging by my impressions of *Descents of Memory*, I never will.

Angelika Reichman

Angelika Reichmann is senior lecturer in the Department of English Studies at Eszterházy College, Eger (Hungary). She became interested in the works of JCP about ten years ago, when, as a PhD student, she specialised in Dostoevsky's influence on English and Russian Modernist novelists.