

John Cowper Powys and the Resacralization of the Secular

“MAKE IT NEW” said the father of modernism, Ezra Pound. “Make it old”, Powys might have replied. Even his dog was called The Old, and the name he gave to his own self, ichthyosaurus, was of an ancient and extinct species. He let himself reach past middle age before he started his great works, he loved old places, old legends and cursed the new, yet he was as much a modernist as Pound—who hated him.

Perhaps it is true that those who reject modern civilization are simply rejecting life itself and the inevitable suffering of any existence, but the case against the modern world is frequently made on religious grounds, a retelling of the Biblical story, where we were all in the mediaeval Eden but tasting scientific knowledge fell into anomie and despair. Or perhaps God who had once walked in the cool of the cathedral cloister had simply gone away, like Joyce’s god, to pare his fingernails.

If we look at the arch-modernist James Joyce, the beginning of his *Ulysses* is a religious parody—Buck Mulligan raises a shaving bowl and intones a verse from the Latin Mass. Cool irony and distance. Joyce patterns his book on the *Odyssey*, but the reference is ironic and no one is called on to believe in the mythic world which is just a literary conceit, a conceit which reaches a frenetic peak in *Finnegans Wake* constructed out of fragments of old myths and legends, and yet remaining a firmly verbal, stylistic construct—we are not required to believe in the reality of that other world. Similar and quite different is Powys. If we cannot enter into his magical, mystical world we have literally lost the plot, for Powys is remaking the world and asks us to identify with it as sacred fact not secular fiction.

The thesis that modernization equals secularization has been widely discussed recently in best-selling works such as Taylor’s *A Secular Age*¹ and has taken on added urgency since the rise of Islamism and fundamentalist right-wing religion in America. The thesis roughly states that sometime between the

¹ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Harvard, 2007.

Renaissance (according to Frithjof Schuon²), or the 17th century dissociation of sensibility (Eliot), or the “Glorious Revolution”³ and the French Revolution (de Maistre), Western Society moved from a basically theocentric and theocratic view of the world to a secularist, humanist state in which religion becomes in the words of process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead “what the individual does with his own solitariness”. Or, as Thomas Nydahl puts it in ‘On Reading John Cowper Powys’s *A Philosophy of Solitude*’: “Reading Powys one finds no belief, no system of dogmas or doctrines. He is in the best meaning of the word a walking philosopher, who ... formulates his words out of an inner development, not from a set of dogmas taken from others.”⁴ If the public world is now secular only the private can re-sacralise it—the church is now the individual.

Perhaps no artist felt as strongly as JCP felt a mandate to re-sacralise the world from the point of view of the individual consciousness and not of any organised religion. As both institutional religion and personal piety have faded from the world many artists felt that it was their duty, in their secular art, to be as priests (Theodore) or magicians (John Cowper) of invisible powers that can be called sacred, which involves a wholesale rejection of much of what passes for modernity. JCP seems to bewilderingly float between faith in invisible powers incarnate in land or persons, and (in the introduction to *Wolf Solent* or *Obstinate Cymric*) outright scepticism. Yet the title of Morine Krissdóttir’s book, *The Magical Quest*, is absolutely right. Powys is a spiritual guide both to the world of the senses and the world beyond, a world of pure consciousness and mystic force that can be summoned out of inanimate objects and then released by the power of his word, a world of the fourth dimension as Powys calls it in *Dostoievsky*.

One of the reasons for JCP’s relative lack of success in the world of literary fame must be the presence of that sacred cosmos that always supports his stories. One can appreciate Hardy without believing in his pessimistic fatalism, or Joyce without his word-centric universe but Powys characters cannot be detached from the magical-mystical milieu of consciousness in which Powys embeds them. We have to accept that world or leave it and his characters make little sense outside all that spiritual interface, which one feels is the real subject of his writing rather than the human characters themselves. As a Tibetan text puts it, the spirits become nothing more than the fluttering winds of heaven.

Of course many other writers have created surreal worlds of their own—Bulgakov for instance—but one can call these moral allegories or fantasies of style and word-making. In Powys, however, he describes the interaction of the spirit world on ours as absolutely central to the story, just as in Homer, whose tale he retells in his own way. For Powys the other worlds are the real subject of his writing.

This magical world reaches its peak in *Porius* but is also present in the Wessex novels. The transition from Wessex to Wales can be measured by the progress of *Wolf Solent*’s and Powys’s secret ‘mythology’. What is in *Wolf Solent* a private vice, indulged in an orgy of solitude and destroyed once the ‘real’ world

² Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), philosopher who discussed the spiritual tradition, disciple of René Guénon.

³ Referring to the Revolution of 1688 which saw the overthrow of King James II of England by a union of Parliamentarians with an invading army led by William III of Orange-Nassau.

⁴ See *lettre powysienne* n° 9, Spring 2005, pp.28-30.

claims the hero's attention, in *Porius* and *Owen Glendower*, becomes the vibrational medium in which the entire story moves. But to accomplish this Powys has to leave the present and modern completely behind and enter a mythical universe which is basically the inside of Powys's head. The later fantasies, *Brazen Head*, *Atlantis* are even more mythical and religious and therefore even more divorced from the contemporary world and in the sacred realm Powys set up for himself.

Following on from the Dostoievsky connection, what is a Britisher to do when he wants to be a Slavophile, like Dostoievsky—a follower of the Greek way, of Dionysian mysticism and neoplatonic ecstasy, a Platonic idealist and philosophical realist opposed to Roman law and order and the whole political realm? He or she must become a Celt, for it is in the Celtic tradition that all these mythical, mystical-pagan, telluric and cosmic states of universal Being are found. And so Powys had to become a Celt to be a Slav and to re-enchant the despoiled world with Spirit, like those ancient desert saints of whom he speaks in *Dostoievsky*.

The Welsh phase of Powys's existence, the sudden move to Corwen and later Blaenau can be seen in the light of trying to find a religious milieu in which to situate himself where he could draw on the deep well of the sacred past but without bondage to any dogma or actual religion—which bondage he gently mocks in the character of "Bloody Johnny" Geard in *A Glastonbury Romance*. It represents his rejection of any Christian solution to problems of anomie and the victory of the waters of cosmic consciousness over man-centred dogma. Given the current interest in 'Celtic Spirituality' we may regard Powys as one of its pioneers. In this context it is also worth quoting his *Blake*: "... Blake by some premonitory inspiration of the world-spirit ... anticipated ... the dreams that were to dominate the earth"⁵—although he disclaims interest in the occult or Blake's symbolism, he is definitely here identifying himself precisely with that revival of the mystical that he senses in our times. In *Dostoievsky* he cites "*elemental empathy*"⁶ as part of the fabric of his tales.

The sense of the sacred is something he found in Blake but also Dostoievsky and he was well aware of the neoplatonic, mystical tradition represented in Orthodoxy. He calls it the "diffused magic and mystic sorcery of the orthodox Greek Church", which might well describe the atmosphere of his own books. The *lettre powysienne* n°20 pursued Powys's relationship to Dostoievsky and this forms a convenient starting point for my pursuit of the theme of sacralization. The model for Elder Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* is St Seraphim of Sarov, an absolute solitary who managed to live through 1812 without apparently knowing his country had been invaded by the forces of progress in the shape of Napoleon. St Seraphim is one of the few representatives in the 19th century entirely belonging to the realm of the sacred that was expiring in Europe. Yet in his solitariness he conforms absolutely to Whitehead's conception of the modern religious sensibility.

However, Powys's assumption of a bardic role, giving voice to the unseen and the future, links him to another Slav nation opposed to (and hated by) the Russian Slavophiles, yet deeply congruent with them in their basic world-vision. I mean the Polish Messianists, the Polish Romantic philosophers and poets who

⁵ JCP, *William Blake*, Village Press, 1974, p.4.

⁶ JCP, *Dostoievsky*, Village Press, 1974, p. 25.

between the two insurrections of 1830 and 1863 formulated a religious-mystical national theology of Spirit. That art is a substitute for faded religion and the artist a new prophet, priest and king is a cliché of romanticism. But no one took that sacred task more seriously than the Polish Messianists, and John Cowper Powys was their spiritual brother.



Adam Mickiewicz
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The Messianists' leading lights were the poets Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1849), and Adam Krasinski (1714-1800). All were at an angle to Catholicism, especially to the papacy (although Slowacki seemed to foretell the arrival of a Slav Pope) and Mickiewicz and Slowacki—bitter rivals—were at one stage both followers of a mystical sect dedicated to world redemption founded by Andrzej Towianski (1799-1878). Their motto was that all things were made for the fulfilment of Spirit and one of Slowacki's main works was called *Genesis from Spirit*, a reading of evolution in a religious way which would have pleased Powys (it has never been translated into English nor to the best of my knowledge, French),

The core of Polish Messianism involved one other key notion Powys shared: a nation is made by its literature, because a nation is the vehicle of the Word and is therefore ruled by its poets. Mickiewicz made of the Poles such a sacred nation, because of its Christ-like suffering in the Partitions, and because it had become a new Israel, a pilgrim nation bearing testimony to a foundational divine compact. Also in his Paris Lectures, Mickiewicz emphasised the close connection between the Slav world and the invisible realm of spirits. JCP found an equivalent to all this by his engagement with his largely mythicised Celtic roots. Mickiewicz's great rival Slowacki composed a vast epic, *King Spirit*, in which the genius of the nation was personified in its kings; in much the same way as Glendower takes on the sacral king function so does Popiel, the eponymous King Spirit, a reincarnation of Er the Armenian in Plato's *Republic*⁷ who has seen the world of the Dead and returned (Powys also mentions the legend of Er). The spiritual world and the material endlessly mingle in Slowacki who was also the first Western writer to invoke the shaman (in *Anhelli*⁸) with which JCP has often been identified. The pagan intercourse of a shaman with the other world is definitional for the whole Powys world and defies the secular orthodoxies of our age.

It has often been noted by those who witnessed his performances as lecturer that he was like a shaman possessed in trance and the spirits of departed literary ancestors would almost come alive in his vatic effusions—unscripted and mesmeric in effect. Like the Poles he was treating secular literature as a sacred task or mission. The apparently strange decision of JCP to recast himself as a Welsh bard rather than a Wessex writer showed his development of the vatic ideal he had set himself. Perhaps he found the deeply Protestantised Wessex and

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, tr. F.M. Cornford, Oxford University Press, 1945.

⁸ J. Slowacki, *Anhelli*, tr. Dorothea Prall Radin, Greenwood Press, 1979.

its Roman heritage too alien. Besides, Hardy had already defined the role of the Wessex writer and Powys wanted to escape that shadow.

In his *Autobiography* Powys confesses to his shaman-like trances, his fetishism of stones and rocks, his sensitivity to psychic currents impressed upon ancient ruins, his finding of animal familiars, his obsession with walking sticks—cudgels of the Cerne Giant and magician's wands. On his walks he builds cairns, just like Tibetans do (and Icelanders as we discover in the works of Halldor Laxness⁹, the only contemporary writer with whom Powys may be compared). He hugs trees and fills his works with sacred or demonic waters (a favourite feature again of the Slav and Tibetan worlds). Above all the "mythology" of his hero, Wolf Solent, demonstrates his being imbued with a cosmic magic. (We may note the coincidence in the wolf-named titles of the books in which appear the two mystical heroes of 20th Century literature —Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* being the other. Identification with a wolf familiar is a well-attested shamanic practice—especially among Native Americans where it features as a totem, and *Wolf Solent* was written in America).

The religious history of the last century can be taken to be the isolation of the religious essence, apart from any dogmas, in the mystical, the sacred, the holy—a religion which does not centre on the monotheistic idea, and which rejects organised priesthoods or creeds. In the sixties the mystical dimension of religion shot to prominence, with young people going on pilgrimages to India, adopting Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. JCP died like Moses before the Promised Land just as the sixties were beginning and this was the era of his rediscovery and second birth. Against this conception of religion, represented by such writers as Schleiermacher, Schelling, Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade, authoritarian literalist religion has made an unwelcome comeback in the 21st century. Powys is scathing about this type of religion—the "thrice accursed weight of Protestant Puritanism"—which he could have studied at first hand in the USA, and contrasts this with "...one of the happiest signs of the time ... the double renaissance of Catholicism and Pagan Freedom"¹⁰. Powys's *Blake* booklet is a hymn of praise to the profound religion of symbols that he identifies with, and sees in conventional religion a greater enemy than avowed atheism—as in Nietzsche, a figure who fascinates also his brother Theodore whose religious inspiration is currently being brilliantly pursued by Stephen Batty¹¹. Blake is clearly a model for him of someone whose religious inspiration expressed itself in highly unorthodox fashion. One of the seminal books of the mystical revival of the sixties was poet Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition*¹² and she follows in spirit Powys's vision of the author.

We can compare JCP's religious modernism with that of his spiritual neighbour T.S. Eliot (whose ashes are interred in East Coker, four miles from Powys's childhood home of Montacute; "in his beginning is my end", Eliot might have said). In *The Wasteland* Eliot rejects the whole religious phenomenology of

⁹ Halldor Laxness (1902-1998), Nobel Prize of Literature in 1955.

¹⁰ *Blake*, op. cit. p.5.

¹¹ A researcher on Theodore and religion who will lecture this summer at the UK Powys Conference.

¹² Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 volumes, Routledge, 1968. Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) was a major English poet and novelist. See for example *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine*, ed. Brian Keeble, Golgonooza Press, 2000.

idealism (imbibed from his mentor Josiah Royce (1855-1916) and thesis subject Bradley¹³), Hinduism (the sacred syllable OM is part of the waste of the wasteland), neo-Paganism (which Eliot finds is the worst thing about Nazism) and adopts a narrow orthodoxy to set against the empty secularism he detests.

A mystery recently pursued by our editor, Jacqueline Peltier, is that of JCP's attraction for Communism. Partly of course because he identified it with the sacred Russia mother of his beloved Dostoievsky. But also because, as the Polish demythologiser of Marxism, Leszek Kolakowski¹⁴ (like all Poles steeped in the Messianic tendency of their literature) pointed out, Marxism was the modern inheritor of the Messianic current proceeding from the Gospel Apocalypse, via Millenarian movements and Joachim of Fiore¹⁵, who prophesied a coming age of pure Spirit following the ages of the Father and Son, in which sacred hopes for God's Kingdom were to be realised in the paradise of the common man, a New Adam. Powys would have felt a current of sympathy with this religious core of Marxism fitting in with the Cronian vision (discussed by G. Wilson Knight¹⁶) of the Realm of Saturn renewed. Powys's resolute refusal to define himself politically is part of his strategy of resacralization, as he felt that collectivities and political agendas were resolutely anti-sacred in his sense of the idea. His vague sympathies with communism were far weaker than those of his fellow-travelling friends, and his real philosophy is if anything reactionary or conservative to an extreme degree in the sharpness of his rejection of the technological, bureaucratic, rational world of progress and puritanical capitalism—symbolised in the Wookey Hole exploiter Philip Crow whose real-life proprietor financially ruined Powys.

Powys's resacralization was undertaken, as Buddhist orthodoxy has it, in body, speech and mind. His mind he trained as a superfine antenna of cosmic energy, an eternal flow from the pure consciousness to all the worlds below in endless space; his words he forged as the soul-bearing expression of this visionary multiverse he found, and the physical world became a depository of consciousness of every kind. Seeing himself as a magician (but not a spiritual terrorist like Crowley) he charged the world with new significance. Like an Aboriginal, in his walking he relives the dreamtime of the ancestors and enters a sacred landscape peopled by presences of the spirit world residing in rocks and rivers, streams and mountains. Like the Russian Theotokos (Mother of God) he identified with, he was the bearer of a new word.

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¹³ 'Knowledge and Experience in the philosophy of F.H. Bradley' was Eliot's 1916 PhD dissertation.

¹⁴ Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009), Polish philosopher whose conversion from Marxism to Catholicism provoked an intellectual crisis among the Polish intelligentsia and led to his definitive work *Main Currents of Marxism* (tr. from the Polish by P.S. Falla, Norton, 2005), the most authoritative survey of Marxist thought ever undertaken. He saw in Marxism a secular reworking of the prophetic, apocalyptic, messianic and chilliast movements in Western religion. He was an inspiration for the formation of the Solidarity movement.

¹⁵ Joachim of Fiore (1130-1202), Italian mystic and theologian, famous for his interpretation of the *Book of Revelations*.

¹⁶ G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1978.



'Fantasy' by Michael Kowalewski

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