

“Nerves and not ink”
Rereading John Cowper Powys’s Dostoievsky

WHAT A STRANGE TASK to re-examine a book I read some thirty years ago for the first time when writing my thesis on John Cowper Powys. And how strange this specific book *Dostoievsky!* My edition is that from Village Press in black letters on yellow ground and this combination reminds me first of all of my local football team *Schwarz-Gelb Oestinghausen*. Village Press did a great job publishing most of Powys’s works, but their æsthetics were rather minimal and the result was sometimes too glaring, as in this case.

While I tried to do my best in the 1980s to set an academic framework for this and other books by Powys, I must make it clear from the start that this essay is indeed an essay, i.e. an attempt and nothing else. An attempt at what? Writing on authors and subjects one has not touched for nearly a generation means two things at least: one is to re-assess the value of the subject for the present time of one’s life, the other is to join up with one’s own past and try to make sense of continuities and discontinuities. This is why the glaring yellow of the cover is like a traffic signal—between green and red, yellow means: inhale, take a respite before you stop or carry on. And there is the third question: what does Powys have to say about Dostoievsky?

I have neglected Powys for a long time, excepting the odd essay or preface

here and there, and I am not sure why. Was it his wordiness that put me off for a while, or the fact that nobody around me ever speaks about him and does not even know him? He was an academic non-entity when I wrote my thesis, now he is admired by some aficionados, *vide* the number of translations into German over the last two decades. But I never meet these people, they seem to live in some quaint castle or deep forest, except for one friend who cherishes all forgotten and neglected authors. So there is not even a club or a secret society, let alone a conspiracy. Powys—in my surroundings—is virtually non-existent. And yet, recently when I revisited Blaenau-Ffestiniog some echos came back of this singular man and writer, some fragments of vision, some smells, strange episodes from *A Glastonbury Romance* that reminded me of *Dostoievsky*, especially when the editor of *la lettre powysienne* commissioned me to write an essay on this book. Meanwhile, over these last two decades, I have been to Russia many times and have learnt some Russian and have discussed Dostoievsky with Russian friends. Often I was confronted with the statement that you have to make your choice: either Dostoievsky or Tolstoy—chaos or order, raving meaninglessness or self-education and social reform, comparable to the choice between Taoism and Confucianism.



Illustration for *Crime and Punishment*, Engel Tevan István, 1967
courtesy Erzsébet Róna

This is not an alternative Powys addresses in his book, I suppose because he had already made his choice long ago or that it had always been in his nature. While Dostoievsky figures largely in his *Autobiography*, Tolstoy is not even mentioned. Dostoievsky attracted him, among other reasons, because the Russian writer overcame the temptations of his evil nerve, as Powys put it in *Autobiography*¹. Thus Dostoievsky's imagination is part and parcel of that

¹ *Autobiography*, London: Macdonald 1967, 8-9.

grandiose scenario of *A Glastonbury Romance*, a novel to which temptation and sacrifice are as central as to Dostoievky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Powys's book on Dostoievsky² was apparently inspired by discussions with James Hanley in the 1940s and is thus dedicated to this writer and friend, who also lived in Wales. As to its origins, a copy of the 1974 edition presented by Hanley to Kenneth Hopkins bore the following inscription: "During the war it distressed me to see J.C.P. smoking Woodbine cigarettes, whereon I rang his agent Pollinger and said 'send Powys £ 300 to-day, and I will persuade him to give you a Short Study of Dostoievsky', of which writer John said, 'Dostoievsky dipped his pen into his nerves and not ink.' Anyhow he obliged me and here is the result. Affectionately James Hanley".³

Powys wrote the book during World War II, and the political and military events of the time have left their traces in it. It also struck me to what extent his argument is concerned with a number of contemporary biographies and studies of Dostoievsky and his references to these books and articles by Gerald Abraham, D.S. Mirsky, E. H. Carr and John Middleton Murry get tedious at times. Dostoievsky, at all events, is one of the greatest of modern writers and of all novelists for him.

If there hadn't been two wars, Powys with his extraordinary enthusiasm for the Russian writer might have been easily part of the enemy's culture. For in the 1920s there was a great German Dostoievsky cult. Thomas Mann reacted to this—was part of it—and one can trace this fascination for Dostoievsky, which is mixed with abhorrence, in his preface to an American collection of Dostoievsky's stories in 1945. In an essay⁴, Mann stresses the dangers of Dostoievsky, the alliance of genius, insanity and crime, the sexual roots of his guilt-complex and his affinity with Nietzsche. We still see here the aftermath of degeneration theories à la Lombroso and Nordau. Indeed, Nietzsche and Dostoievsky represent for Mann one side of his own early personality which he then counterbalanced with readings and studies of Goethe and Tolstoy. While the latter writers represent calm, order and a search for stability, Nietzsche and Dostoievsky personify the irrational forces in humans and this is why they are taken up by anti-intellectual intellectuals such as the early Mann and D.H. Lawrence—and Powys. In a letter to the mythologist Karl Kerényi, Mann comments on Lawrence and Powys and sees them as representatives of a "snobbish and silly form" of denying human reason.⁵ Thomas Mann is not only arguing from a personal history that made an inner balance paramount to psychic stability, but he is also arguing within a historico-political context that permitted Nazi philosophers like Heidegger and lesser-known specimens to denounce intellect and reason and to replace these values with shady concepts like "life", "being", "vitality", or "power".

Therefore it is interesting to see that Powys, who certainly sides with

² *Dostoievsky*, London: Village Press 1974. Quotations are referred to by numbers in brackets.

³ This quote is taken from an antiquarian bookseller's catalogue. Unfortunately, the page has been torn out of this catalogue and I cannot identify its source.

⁴ Thomas Mann 'Dostoevsky—With Moderation' in *Essays of Three Decades*, Knopf, New York: 1947. ('Dostojewski—mit Maßen.' Thomas Mann, *Adel des Geistes. Zwanzig Versuche zum Problem der Humanität*. Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau Verlag 1965, pp.617-635.)

⁵ Letter dated 20 November 1934, in Thomas Mann, *Briefe 1889-1936*, Frankfurt: S. Fischer 1961, p.353.

Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, argues for these writers in spite of his alliance with Western values and with the combat against the Nazis during the war. Obviously, with Dostoevsky this was not too difficult since he was a Russian, but Powys makes some effort to see the writer's work as a preliminary to the Russian Revolution. The reason is that he thinks Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and even the Bolsheviks are on the side of Nature (a malleable concept, since, obviously, the Nazis also thought about themselves in these terms). Like Thomas Mann, Powys finds Nietzsche close to Dostoevsky, as Nietzsche did himself, incidentally. Nietzsche discovered Dostoevsky in 1887, a year before he became mentally insane, and praised this discovery as one of affinity and closeness of instincts.⁶ To take up Nietzsche during the war years, when this philosopher was appropriated by the Nazis and his works manipulated by his own sister, is quite a feat. But Powys sees Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in an even wider context: that of Greece and the Byzantine Church, and ultimately the Dionysian spirit, Greek drama, and especially his favourite Euripides (D 99, 109).

Interestingly, Powys refers to a number of German language writers, thinkers and philosophers. Besides Nietzsche, he mentions Oswald Spengler, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Sigmund Freud and Franz Kafka, whereas the Russian context is slightly less developed. There is a mention of Gogol, Turgeniev and Tolstoy, if I am not mistaken, but not much else. We are thus confronted with a very Westernised reading of Dostoevsky. But this is one of the problems Powys himself thematizes. Western nature worship is, according to him, very different from Russian, or Dostoevskian worship of the elemental forces. Wordsworth's elementalism is 'Anglo-Celtic', or, with Powys, even 'Iberian' (D 171) and as such it is a medium for the inanimate, whereas Dostoevsky's Dionysian mediumship is of a different mettle and Powys confesses his own "constitutional inability to do him full justice." (Ibid.) This racial cocktail reminds me of the 1920s in Germany, when writers like Jakob Wassermann or Thomas Mann himself referred to the ethnic qualities of authors such as Joseph Conrad. They saw him as a Slav, which he always had repudiated. I can only detect a metaphorical value in such ascriptions, a short cut, as it were, by which each word is meant to connote a cluster of feelings and values which have been attributed to certain nations in the past but bear no relation to reality.

Very often Powys stresses the impossibility of understanding Dostoevsky and sees this barrier present not only in the mentioned critical works and biographies, but also in himself. His attempts at circumventing this with some Welsh phrases have more the character of an incantation or mantra than leading to an actual understanding.

At other times, he tries to circumnavigate these difficulties by resorting to an alien, modern or pseudo-scientific language. Time and again he uses 'electricity' as a metaphor. This makes sense since he ponders about the nerves, but then he extends it to whole peoples and suggests a kind of occult *Völkerpsychologie*: "In France and Great Britain the individual person [...] is surrounded by several protective circles" (D 133), whereas in Russia and America these "non-conducting 'auras'" (ibid.) are less developed so that people are more exposed to "psychic winds", and these "psychic winds are about fifty times more powerful, and fifty times less easy to turn aside, than those experienced in

⁶ Hans Proll, Afterword to the German edition of Dostoevsky *Notes from the Underground* (*Aufzeichnungen aus dem Kellerloch*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1984, 149f.).

countries like Britain and France.” (D 134) “Magnetism” and “vibrations” are similarly borrowed terms applied to a sort of psychic geography in which to place the great novelist. Whether there is a truth to these psychic winds or not, it is certainly an interesting concept. If it had been worded more scientifically, e.g. sociologically, it would have been easier for Powys to gain the serious reader. Another concept he borrowed has an equally mottled past: the fourth dimension. It is curious to see it again in a book of the 1940s that is not SF pulp fiction, where one might still find it. It had been a serious idea in literature, art and geometry between 1880 and 1900.⁷ From a non-Euclidean geometry certain thinkers had deduced the possibility of further dimensions. This was taken over as a fertile concept by writers such as H.G. Wells and Abbott E. Abbott or artists such as Malevich, Kupka and Kandinsky. For Powys, the fourth dimension is a metaphysical image indicating a world beyond the senses and even beyond concepts like the unconscious. While the great realists like Balzac, Hugo, Turgeniev, Tolstoy or Thomas Hardy are master-craftsmen of the three-dimensional reality, Dostoievsky’s inspiration goes beyond them into another dimension (D 175). His psychology is vaster than Freudianism. For Powys, psychoanalysis is not broad enough and thus it may have misrepresented the “‘real reality’ of human nature” (D 183). Thus a great modern novel ought to include everything,

a whole philosophy of life, an unmistakable attitude to the political, moral, social, economic questions of the day, at least a couple of memorable characters, a series of magical impressions of the inanimate as a background [...] and finally a mysterious atmosphere of ‘real reality’ fusing and blending all these together, and itself magnetically charged with an indefinable influence that, *at least apparently*, comes from some other dimension of the multiverse. (D 184)

This totality even includes the future (“They predict the future”, *ibid.*). Hence, the fourth dimension is both spatial and temporal in Powys.

Powys’ claims on the modern novel are borne out by some practitioners from Joyce and Musil to Woolf and Proust, but also by Powys himself. Whether he achieved his aims with *A Glastonbury Romance* or *Weymouth Sands* is another question; he certainly attempted to realise his ideas about the novel. This goes to show that in writing about Dostoievsky Powys was more or less writing about himself. As David Gervais puts it,

The tragic vitality that John Cowper found in Dostoievsky was not something he could have found in the English novel, even in Dickens.⁸

Dostoievsky rather serves him as a catalyst who not only helps define the challenge of the modern novel but also serves as a foil to a self-portrait. Dostoievsky for him is the *vates*, the shamanistic medium, the psychic bridge to other worlds only reached through trance and inspiration. For some forty years, Powys had been not simply a student, but a “passionate disciple” of Dostoievsky and this is his sole authority since he does not know a sentence of Russian (D 122). Looking at Powys’s own works and at his interpretation of Dostoievsky one detects a kind of osmosis. As does Powys, he sides with Nature, though in a very

⁷ Cf. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1983.

⁸ David Gervais, ‘J.C. Powys’s Dostoievsky’, *The Powys Journal* XV (2005), 29-44, this quote p. 36.

different way than an English writer ever could. Like Powys, he is said to have had “much of the feminine nature” (D 62).

All in all, after rereading this strange book I have a feeling it is a desperate and heroic attempt to describe a failure: the failure to come to terms with one’s most beloved and admired author, who in this case is Dostoievsky. He remains strange and Russian, though from his works an endless number of inspiring sparks keep coming to the English writer. Sometimes Powys sees himself reflected as in glass darkly, at other times the Russian presents to Powys an opacity no Western reader can really cope with. A whole army of concepts, metaphors, similes, of geographical and racial, psychological and political terms is not sufficient to assess an author who has such a great power over oneself. This lack is due to a deficit in language itself. Powys’s inflationary superlatives and his convolutions can become tiresome, yet they are a symptom of somebody trying to grasp something that cannot entirely be comprehended or expressed. No coincidence, then, that in the final chapters of the book he resorts to a metaphor involving a famous detective:

We’ve got to act, it seems to me, like the good Maigret, in Simenon’s famous French detective stories; that is to say we’ve got to avoid facile deductions and material clues, and just simply drink up, absorb, imbibe, impregnate ourselves with, and soak ourselves in, the chemical and elemental atmosphere of the man’s soul [...] (D 177)

And this is not enough. It seems to me Powys is describing his own method of constructing and then deconstructing, of piling up criticism and comment only in order to demolish everything and to lead the readers back to their own Dostoievsky: “... and then and even then the best critical estimate we could make of Dostoievsky’s genius would probably not be reached until we set fire to the whole pile and half-choked ourselves in inhaling its smoke.” (Ibid.) As such an experiment in criticism and its demolition Powys’s study of Dostoievsky remains unique.

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