

Spiritual tension: transfer and sublimation of desire in *A Glastonbury Romance*¹

THE SHORT-CIRCUITING of erotic desire and its transformation into spiritual desire is a recurring theme for John Cowper Powys, who has Uryen say in *Maiden Castle* :

“Rampant desire unfulfilled—why, there’s nothing it can’t do. Stir up sex
till it would put out the sun and then keep it sterile! That’s the trick.
That’s the grand trick of all spiritual life.”²

In much the same way, for Sylvanus Cobbold, the mystic preacher in *Weymouth Sands*, women are a means of reaching to the origin of his religious inspiration. Attracted by his magnetism and great charisma they share his bed in a state of supra-sexual harmony.

He had long ago acquired that precious power... of reducing the intensity of his physical desire to a level that lent itself to the prolongation rather than to the culmination of the erotic ecstasy.³

In Powys’s Welsh novels (*Porius* and *Owen Glendower*) there are examples of a concept from Celtic Christianity whereby erotic impulse is used with the intention of bypassing desire and transforming it into the love of God. Monks or holy men would sleep alongside a young girl without touching her, submitting themselves to temptation in order to overcome it and thus absorbing the young virgin’s purity and chastity which are also Our Lady’s divine qualities. Let us see how this desire is oriented towards Christ in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

Two of the main characters, Sam Dekker and Owen Evans illustrate this type of tension. Sam, the parson’s son is very much in love and physically attracted to Nell, a young married woman. He opposes his father who would like to see him read theology by declaring he does not love the same God. However, he tries to read religious works and borrows Augustine’s *Confessions* from Owen Evans, the eccentric Welsh antiquarian. Owen is an expert on Celtic mythology and is working on a life of Merlin, an objective statement of his spiritual values. He is also fascinated by books on sadism, and he has hidden one of them, *The Unpardonable Sin*, among the books on theology. This darker side corresponds to a subjective negation of his personal freedom. Owen marries Cordelia, the daughter of John Geard the Evangelist preacher and Mayor of Glastonbury. John Geard is organising a pageant representing Christ’s Passion as well as other elements of the town’s sacred mythology. All these physical and spiritual tensions meet, interact, increase, decrease and are transformed throughout the novel.

The energy thus produced follows the extent of these tensions and movements which mediate all these interactions. Both Sam’s erotic desire and the eroticisation of Owen’s sadistic urge, under constant restraint, undergo variations in pressure entailing disturbances of an intensity which produces explosions (ecstasies and epiphanies) but also implosions. The energy of carnal desire that is part of human affects changes its intensity and becomes spiritual energy, whether centred on Christ or on elements of Celtic myth.

Owen Evans both enjoys his evil thoughts and suffers from them. He is

¹ Communication presented at the Sorbonne, 28 April 2007 (Tr. M. Henderson-Peal).

² J.C. Powys, *Maiden Castle*, Univ. of Wales Press, 1990, p.242

³ J.C. Powys, *Weymouth Sands*, Rivers Press, 1973, p.380

haunted by an image that comes from his childhood of “a killing blow delivered by an iron bar” which also appears in *The Unpardonable Sin*:

Certain images called up by this particular passage were so seductive that his knees grew weak at the thought of them. The worst of these images had to do with a killing blow delivered by an iron bar.⁴

Owen Evans is erotically aroused by this image and the more he is overpowered by mental tension, the more he feels physically weaker.

... his old fatal temptation began to trouble his mind. It attacked him vaguely, mistily, atmospherically, with a sort of deadly diffused sweetness of indescribable poison.⁵

Currents of eroticism start circulating through his body. He has already wondered about putting thought into action and giving a physical reality to his urge but he is afraid of the consequences. He senses that such an act would lead him to more and more sadistic temptations:

“Why not fling away every scruple?”

His mind seemed at that second absolutely balanced on a taut and twanging wire between two terrible eternities, an eternity of wilful horror, and an eternity of bleached, arid futility, devoid of all life-sap.⁶

And also

He saw himself obsessed again with the old bite, the old itch, the old sting, the old insatiable torture of desire—“The thing has no end”—he thought. (...) “*This goes on . . . and on . . . and on . . . without an end. The struggle to renounce is pain. Each day new pain.*”

(...) He saw his soul in the form of an unspeakable worm, writhing in pursuit of new and ever new mental victims, drinking new, and ever new innocent blood.⁷

A sadistic deed proper could lead this worm to an awful feeling of remorse and to ... a doom [that] was no crashing annihilation, but a death as slow as the disintegration of certain mineral deposits which under chemical pressure gradually lose their identity and are converted into amorphous dust.⁸

Owen sees the management of remorse as work in progress. He believes that studying occult Celtic myths will enable him to divert the flux of his obsessions. He is torn between sadistic and masochistic impulses, but cannot and will not resist their attraction because of the erotic sensations he derives from them. The intensity of his desire is both constant and alternating, triggered by remorse and desire. He believes that if he were to see the Magic Cauldron—an earlier Celtic version of the Holy Grail—his madness would disappear.

If only I could see it once . . . just once . . . with my own eyes . . . what Merlin hid . . . what Joseph found . . . the Cauldron of Yr Echwyd . . . the undying grail . . . this madness would pass from me . . .⁹

When he imagines his future married and sexual life with plain Cordelia, he is overcome by “an expectation of such withering dullness that it made him groan to think of it”¹⁰. Owen Evans is not physically attracted to women, let alone to his wife, but believes that “he might be permitted to indulge his pity—this pity

⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, Simon & Schuster, NY, 1932, p.254 [Penguin 1999, p.250]

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.167 [176]

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.254 [251]

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.255 [251]

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.256 [252]

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.139-40 [151]

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.167 [176]

[that] was the magnetism of his love” and in order to make things easier and more acceptable

... he began to dally with with the ghastly idea that apart from *some* element of sadistic feeling it would be impossible for him not to shrink away with infinite loathing from any physical contact with Cordelia.¹¹

He wishes to use his disgust for physical promiscuity as a form of atonement. However, when he marries Cordelia:

To his surprise he found himself completely spared those shocks of physical disgust and sick aversion which he had been expecting and which indeed—in his fantastic self-punishment—he had assumed as the essence of this new adventure.¹²

He discovers physical harmony and pleasure rather than atonement. Meanwhile, Owen is surprised at the temporary deflation of the eroticisation of his sadistic urge:

... for until the time of his living with Cordelia every vestige of sensuality in his nature had been absorbed in his weird and monstrous vice.

Now there occurred a reversion of this; and his sadistic tendency fell into the background for a period.¹³

A spiritual opportunity to divest himself of the weight of his sadistic tendencies arises during the preparation for Geard’s pageant. A most singular idea, playing the part of the Crucified, occurs to him, and when at this thought he stretches out his arms, he is

... startled by the magnetic wave of emotion that poured through him as he made this sudden gesture.¹⁴

He accepts when the role is proposed to him, but asks in a hoarse voice “Only you’ll have to make it as real as you can”. As for Sam, he refuses to play the part of Saint Peter in what he considers to be a blasphemous scene and a “Circus”.

Owen tells Cordelia how being tied to the Cross is going to be unbearably painful but that he is looking for forgiveness since

“... It [Evil] has holes . . . that go down . . . beyond the mind . . . beyond the reason . . . beyond all we can think of! (...) you (...) Do Things” (...) “which nothing in Nature can forgive!”¹⁵

Evil is a dark hole that swallows and absorbs the erotic mental energy that it spawns. During the scene of Christ’s Passion, Owen experiences acute pain while exulting in his agony, feeling “extreme pain and ecstatic triumph embracing each other in dark mystic copulation”¹⁶. His “triumphant ecstasy” pours down his body like blood sweat. He faints, vomiting blood, losing his life fluid, thus initiating an emptying process. Before fainting he takes on the guilt and pain of all those who have lived and suffered in Glastonbury, thereby operating a cosmic transfer of pain with exponential intensity. The voices of both victims and executioners become one, the voice of Christ sacrificed that accusingly turns against Evans. The ceremony of atonement fails but Owen plays out the Janus-like aspects of his personality illustrated by the paroxysmal pleasure he gets out of this sadistic and masochistic orgy. He is placed in a situation of constant tension, stretched

¹¹ *Glastonbury*, p.167 [177]

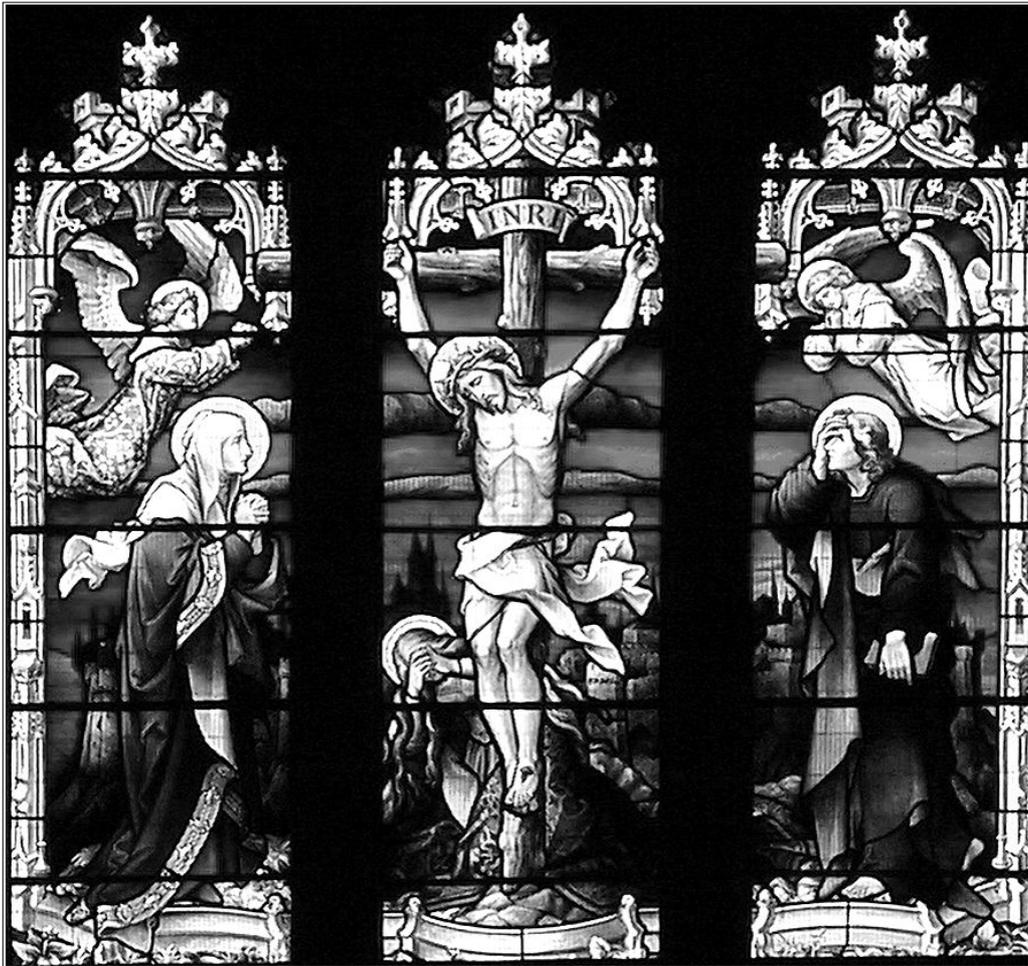
¹² *Ibid.*, p.816 [782]

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.816-7 [782]

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.261 [257]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.362 [352]

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.639 [614]



The Crucifixion (Tewkesbury West window, John Hardman, 1886)
courtesy Mathé Shepherd

between the equal and opposite forces of remorse and desire. His body becomes a giant organ of cosmic feeling and the locus of the transfer of energy and states.

Owen, however, is not entirely rid of his secret vice. The sublimation of erotic sadistic desire into spiritual tension and redemption fails as it is converted into morose delectation which is the sin of negative contrition. Owen Evans enjoys the pain and suffering he experiences under the false pretence of doing penance. Straying between a libertarian discourse and an obsessive urge for self-punishment, he has submitted himself to crucifixion under the pretence of mortification in order to escape from his confusion. It is in fact a subterfuge. He experiences Jesus's sufferings as a perverted source of pleasure and may feel what the French psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony calls "the immature pleasure of cherishing the fantasy of being approved by the law one is transgressing"¹⁷. This is a subtle form of negative self-pride—since it bestows a spectacular aura to his sin—that stems from the thwarted wish to be perfect. Sublimation, which can be defined as the transposition of an urge into a superior feeling, is here aborted, his pulsions are only kept at bay.

Owen Evans transposes magnified perverted desire into an inferior feeling. He falls into the abysmal "holes of Evil", his exhaustion is such that he faints, crying out unconsciously the last words of Christ: "Eloi, Eloi, Lama, Sabachthani!". Owen Evans is both a Christ-like figure and a fake Christ. He is a pagan, fascinated by ritual, but even his paganism is superficial. Evans's experience of

¹⁷ From an article in *Le Figaro*, 18 August 2004

the Cross has no consequences, he cannot give it any personal meaning. The energy spent is misspent and leads to nothing. It just fades out, disintegrated. He returns to Celtic Myths in his attempt to rid himself of his desire for Evil. He tries to find within the sacred powers that surround Glastonbury—he believes them to protect the Welsh kingdom of the dead (the land of *Annwn*)—a mental system that would bring peace to the warring elements of his personality. He hopes to free himself of all that is personal in order to purify himself and in order to do so places himself on the same plane as the dead.

He will in fact be able to resolve his tragedy by other means than treading the sacred Celtic path. Having overheard an old madwoman plotting the murder of John Crow, one of his friends, Owen cannot resist the urge to be there himself. His determination is to save his friend, or otherwise even more, in the event, to see the crime committed since it is supposed to be carried out with an iron bar, as in his darkest fantasies.

On the day itself, Cordelia who is pregnant senses something amiss in Owen's excited anxiety to immediately go out again at sunset. To forestall this, she instinctively resorts to amorous devices and erotic enticements. Sexual eroticism overpowers for a while the eroticism of cerebral sadism, but one hour later it only remains for her to accompany him. They rush to the scene but get there too late. The victim has had his head crushed by the iron bar. Evans's fantasy is now reality and he immediately examines the iron bar. When he actually sees the crushed head of the victim he experiences the complete opposite of paroxysmal excitement. He is in a state of shock, as if electrocuted, having received a violent dose of his own poison, and is sick, "vomiting with cataclysmic heaving"¹⁸. The draining process initiated on the Cross resumes its course, his body and mind are undergoing a phase of rejection. Implosion creates emptiness. There will be very little left of Owen Evans. The transformation of his perverted fantasy into reality has an exorcising effect. The disappearance of his sadistic urges goes with a disintegration process. His hair goes white overnight, he ages prematurely. Cordelia's premature baby dies. Even Welsh Myth loses its life force.

Things are quite different for Sam Dekker. He has an affair with Nell, a married woman. They are united in a great physical attraction and the consummation of their love arouses deep emotion. "Sensual pleasure goes beyond the possibilities sensed by desire."¹⁹ Nell becomes pregnant. A few days before Sam is told he has fathered a child, he had a revelation. He had seen Jesus Christ's body floating over the city, suffering for the redemption of the sins of Glastonbury's inhabitants. When told about his child, Sam realises he must choose between possessing Nell and being possessed by Christ, and decides then to share Christ's sufferings:

A month old conception, a year-old love, what were these beside the ecstasy, the blind exultation of sharing the sufferings of God?²⁰

He tries to explain this to Nell:

"Christ has got me by the throat, by the hair of my head. If you made me come to you tonight He would pull me back to Him.... He's going to hold me tighter and tighter all my life."

¹⁸ *Glastonbury*, p.1103 [1054]

¹⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*

²⁰ *Glastonbury*, p.485 [469]

(...) “You don’t know Him, Nell, He’s a lover, I tell you—a lover . . . a lover!”²¹

Nell feels rejected and is very angry. This is what William Blake calls “the dark economy of amorous expense”. Passion is a transgressive force which echoes the Stoics’ notion of expense. Nell and Cordelia are—according to Roland Barthes²²—representatives of a bourgeois economy of satiety with its attitude of storing up and compensation where Good and Happiness are stockpiled. To Owen and Sam, it would equate more with a perverse economy of dispersion and prodigality. Nell is overcome by being solicited both by the amorous bondage that links her to Sam and by the latter’s love for Christ and His sufferings.

Sam transcends his desire for Nell into love for Christ and for his neighbour. He transforms Eros into *Agape*, into a form of caring that expects nothing in return. The closed loop of the couple’s love evolves into an open loop. Sam’s lust is the necessary condition for the spiritualising of his instinctive urges that find an outlet in religious feeling. According to Gilles Deleuze²³ desire is not centred on a lack but on a development. It is an amplification of desire’s intensity. The erotic desire Sam sacrifices in the name of Christ is a sort of inverted *tsimtsoum*²⁴. Christ, through offering up his life as a God made man, temporarily loses his divinity in order to save the soul of mankind. Sam withdraws his human love and sexual desire for Nell in order to gain a more divine dimension in uniting with Christ. This is only possible if Sam is no longer lusting and in a state of sin.

Mat Dekker the parson is disgusted by his son’s attitude, but is soon also attracted to Nell and tries to fight his feelings back:

The point had come... when he must either tear the priest’s mask from him... or get away from her . . . leave her . . . get home to his son . . . to his aquarium . . . to his dead wife—to his God . . .²⁵

The Man of the Church fades into the background and gives precedence to human desire. Nell leaves her husband and seeks a home with the Dekkers at the parsonage. Mat is happy to be able to fill his eyes with Nell. His desire is puritan and voyeuristic. It is a static desire. Sam’s desire is dynamic, it is a driving force that is also fully part of his love for Christ. It exists in the negative in his renunciation of carnal joys. It is desexualised and therefore offers his pulsions an outlet other than repression. The love of God, because it is perfect Love, offers the best means for successful sublimation. Sam’s physical passivity leads to spiritual activity. His sexual energy serves his imagination. Thus he erects a personal monument to his own beliefs. Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*: “One of the instinctive tricks of spiritual gestation consists in the Self immuring itself.”

Sam leaves both Nell and his father and finds poor lodgings and a job at a factory. He gives his life up to helping and caring for the poor and lonely and is soon nicknamed “Holy Sam”. After visiting the needy he ponders on the meaning of sharing their deprivations and their suffering. He comes to doubt the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice and therefore his own:

²¹ *Glastonbury*, p.558 [538]

²² R. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, tr. R.Howard, Hill and Wang, 1979 (quote tr. M. Henderson-Peal)

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, quoted by R. Barthes, op. cit.

²⁴ ‘Tsimtsoum’ is the term for withdrawal in Hebrew and describes the partial withdrawal and fading out of the divine in God.

²⁵ *Glastonbury*, p.901 [863]

If Christ had sympathised *to the limit* with the pain of the world it would have been hard for him to have lived until the day of his Crucifixion. But what does that mean? (...) Sympathy with pain kills happiness. There comes a point when to live at all we *must* forget!²⁶

Sam asks Christ to give him a sign of his presence in order to confirm the value of his own sacrifice. Soon after, Sam actually sees the Holy Grail and recognizes it:

He saw a globular chalice that had two circular handles. The substance it was made of was clearer than crystal; and within it there was dark water streaked with blood, and within the water was a shining fish.²⁷

Sam has unwittingly fulfilled one of the legendary conditions of the quest of the Grail. He wonders aloud what type of fish could the one in the holy vessel possibly be. He feels acute pain during the vision

... so overwhelming that it was as if the whole of Sam's consciousness became the hidden darkness of his inmost organism (...) what he felt to be a gigantic spear was struck into his bowels and struck *from below*.²⁸

The purifying impact of this vital force on a passive body must come from inside. This requires a phenomenon of penetration. The phallic symbol is a principle of creation and is the "dark mystic copulation" that Owen Evans was incapable of understanding on the Cross and which gives a feeling of great peace, a long way from orgasmic ecstasy. The Grail is a sign, not of the presence of Christ, but a materialisation of the notion of the sacred and the spiritual. It gives a direction to Sam's mystic quest. Sam infers that Christ is dead—this is a fact, a statement—but that infinite goodness lives on and may be a vitalising principle in the lives of people. The vital, positive and creative energy that really makes sense is the divine goodness that penetrates Man in a descending movement, which corresponds to the descending character of 'agape', God goes towards mankind.

Sam is left alone but, self-confident, he is placed in an ascending current full of the vital forces that he has learnt to derive from the Grail. Owen, however is going through a phase of exhaustion, he has not learnt how to transform and recharge the negative intensity of his desire into positive intensity.

In most of his essays and novels, John Cowper Powys advocated the holding back of erotic energy in order to serve spirituality and the powers of imagination. To illustrate the words of this champion of the creative powers of imagination I will quote Roland Barthes, according to whom transcending this energy could be a "definitive assumption of Imagination towards excess and it is within excess that fulfilment is made possible because it is the self driven regime of the imagination."²⁹

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²⁶ *Glastonbury*, p.974 [932]

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.982 [939]

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.981-2 [939]

²⁹ R. Barthes, *op. cit.*