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Visions and Revisions[1]

THREE TIMES in my life I have experienced odd hallucinations. They have come to me when I have been sleeping out of doors and under conditions which one would have thought especially unfavourable to fallacies of vision. One would not expect to be distracted by apparitions on the open downs with no living things abroad but rabbits and sensible berry-eating badgers. However, on three occasions, on bright moonlight nights, I have sat up wide awake and had time before the eidolons vanished to say to myself "Here and now the testimony of your sense is invalidated."

Llewelyn Powys by L. Kirchner, 1938

My first vision was certainly a simple and homely one and miraculous only to a man who knew the locality. I saw three hedgehogs soberly walking up a bank opposite to where I was lying. My second vision was not so reassuring. With utter clearness I watched a skeleton with its head bowed, in the attitude of a traveller facing a storm, walking with rapid strides along a ridge of ground some twenty yards away.

This was two years ago in the month of April. My third vision happened only last week. This time a faery about six inches high suddenly rose from the grass and floated away over the gorse bushes. All these quaint appearances I judge to have been unreal projections from the thistledown folly contained in my own mind—the three grave urchins betokening my indurate love for the earth; the skeleton under the moon associated with my preoccupation with death; the faery suggestive perhaps of my life-long suspicion that the solid common earth of our experience possesses an airy, dreamlike shadow dimension of which we know little.

If I were a priest in a pulpit, with an hourglass at my lawned elbow, and my

[1] Originally published in *The American Spectator*, 1933. Every effort has been made to obtain necessary permission with regard to the portrait of Llewelyn Powys by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The Editor apologises if inadvertently the holder of the rights remains unacknowledged and would be glad to make the necessary arrangements at the earliest opportunity.

body, my habitation of bones, covered up in so many yards of good black broadcloth, I could I think preach a brave homily on these three false visual impressions. For myself, I did derive from them a kind of instruction, certain hints, as it were, that went to confirm the philosophic conclusions native to the hints, as it were, that went to confirm the philosophic conclusions native to the temper of my mind. These unreliable visions seemed to emphasize the unreliable quality of life, to strengthen my belief that we have no decisive scot or lot in the riot of the astral universe, but are merely inconsequent shadows, transitory foam wraiths that have been cast up by the restless ocean of matter.

If it was not for the singular sense of self-importance that is the predominant obsession of the human race this very obvious deduction would have been universally acknowledged. And it will be the first step to wisdom when our minds are mature enough to accept this fact. It would be a hard matter to estimate the amount of time and energy that is every year wasted in “drumming up” directly and indirectly the importance of our God-like race, a race in reality no better than the bastard progeny of a bundle of bastard apes, scratching, sneezing, skiting, deft to play pranks with iron, and at pains to dress themselves up in sheep’s clothing, and to talk big about God.

We would do much better if we could accept our case as it is and give up these fine flights of fancy. As soon as ever men and women have achieved sufficient firmness of spirit, sufficient intellectual integrity to relinquish their three great illusions, the Golden Age will be approaching. Then and only then will individuals and nations be willing to inaugurate seriously a civilization of good sense, justice, and hedonism.

What then are the three great illusions of the human race? Quick as three hops of a grasshopper I will tell them off on my fingers. 1) God. 2) Immortality. 3) Morality. To the honest mind these are the three incomprehensibles that have done untold mischief. An examination of any acre of ground upon the earth’s surface proves conclusively that nature is under the surveillance of no sensitive, conscientious deity. A quite cursory review of human records reveals the fact that there is no evidence whatever to support a belief in life after death. A half hour’s study of the science of human ethics shows that these much vaunted accredited manners vary in every clime, and in every age, and have nothing whatever to do with supernatural mandates.

If once we could get our minds clear of these primitive misjudgements an enormous reservoir of dammed up energy, both spiritual and intellectual, would be released against the only sins that really do matter, the sin of stupidity and the sin of cruelty. At this epoch-interlude between the reign of superstition and the approaching regimen of science many magnanimous people expend their vital resources in trying to protect, to justify these three favoured fancies, as though to abandon them would involve the loss of all that is delicate and heroic in man’s life. On the contrary if these egg shell dogmas were discarded as infantile wish-fulfillments deriving out of a naive past the exact opposite would actually take place. When once our minds are riddled through and through with scepticism, when once our minds are rid of emotional prejudice, rid entirely of sanctified fear, then we shall find intolerable the gross transgressions of civilized conduct conspicuous everywhere today.

There is no doubt that if our brains were once free of these vapours we would soon have society organized with some show of seemliness, just as we

have done in our war with external nature, where, unrestricted by the impediments of sentiment, we have subjected to our wills the most subtle, the most dark, the most monstrous forces.

As Freud so wisely delivers, how much better if those burdensome sacrifices that each one of us is called upon to make for the sake of the social contract were recognized as ultimately dependent upon reason, and not upon an arbitrary divine will of dubious authenticity. How much saner, how much sounder, all human relationships would become if we were free of the last trace of "Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo" governance. Why cannot we get rid of this canting talk and acknowledge the human predicament to be what it is—a herd of animals greedy of gain, envious of spiritual values, marooned upon an isolated planet, and too silly and conceited to set the affairs of their tumbling island in any kind of gentle order?

The priests and the politicians have had their opportunity and have failed. It is time for more practical measures. Nothing is of greater importance at the present day than that the rising generation should keep their minds accessible to ideas and their emotions under the vigilant subjection of their intellects.

Last night I stood watching the clouds fly by against a full moon. In a flash these driven storm racks taught me the truth. Homeless and unherded they rushed across the night, their forlorn ghostly existence for a moment visible in that same Godless reality that was present at the earth's creation, at the creation of this strange planet where upon swerving aggregates of unpredictable atoms outlandish dream-shadows stalk like skeleton wayfarers.

Llewelyn Powys

Afterword

VISIONS AND REVISIONS was the first of three essays that Llewelyn Powys published in *The American Spectator*, a monthly literary newspaper launched in New York in 1932 under the joint editorship of George Jean Nathan, Ernest Boyd, James Branch Cabell, Eugene O'Neill and Theodore Dreiser. It was Dreiser who solicited these essays from Llewelyn.

They had first met in California in 1921 and continued to see each other after Dreiser's return to New York the following year. But they lost contact from around the latter part of the 1920s, when Llewelyn was living again in Dorset. Shortly after *The American Spectator* was launched, Dreiser wrote to Llewelyn on 4 Oct. 1932 (sending the letter via John Cowper Powys at Hillsdale) asking for one of his "graceful meditations". Llewelyn replied from Chydyok on 17 Oct. delighted to be in touch again "after so many years of silence". He enclosed an essay which he said had been written "especially for St. John of the Catskills, for the Witch Doctor of Hillsdale, for the Right Reverend Archdeacon of PHUDD BOTTOM."

Dreiser replied on 5 Dec. praising the essay and saying it would be used very soon, and it appeared in the March 1933 issue under the title Llewelyn had provocatively given it. For he was at this time writing many of the essays that were later collected in *Damnable Opinions* (1935), and was obviously encouraged to do so by a sibling rivalry with John, whose quirky polytheism and mystical brand of metaphysics acted as a goad to the rationalist Llewelyn. Dreiser added in his

letter: “I sent your article to Jack, and had a letter from him the other day explaining what I already knew—that is, how wide is the gulf between your respective approaches to life. It makes me laugh.”

Dreiser also asked for some more pieces, and Llewelyn, responding on 20 Jan. 1933, sent him four more essays with the comment: “four more sling shots—Good luck to them! Take it, Old Man of Phudd for they are meant for thee.”[2]

In his reply of 11 March 1933, Dreiser said of these essays that “everybody who read them applauded them heartily” but they could only take two of them. One of the returned essays was *God* which later appeared in the *New English Weekly* of 13 July 1933, as Llewelyn later informed him, but there are no clues as to what the other returned essay was. The two that were accepted, however, were obviously those that were later published—*Morality* in August 1933 and *Reformation* in August 1934, both of which were collected in *Damnable Opinions*.

In May 1933, however, Llewelyn, having earlier complained about the *American Spectator*’s rates for contributors of one cent per word, wrote to Dreiser about these essays in his curmudgeonly vein: “But what absolute buggers these editors of yours are. They chip and clip at my essays, return them today and recover them tomorrow. I hope to God they will publish these last two essays in some kind of form, or perhaps they have again changed their minds. Well, let ‘em go. I must, I suppose, be content with a dollar a shy ...”[3] It obviously rankled with him, for he returned to the subject in June: “I confess I do feel a certain chagrin when I contemplate your colleagues and how they have played the bugger with me. They want essays; they don’t want essays. They will accept two turned into one by the infallible literary skill of George G. Nathan! *(sic)*—and then they will postpone its publication, or indeed not publish it at all. At the same time they will be wishing to HIRE me as a penny-a-liner—a kind of street-corner whistler, but I must sing only at the approved moment and then get a turd for my pay as I stand outside the Algonquin dinner table of these roisterers whose raucous clamour is more rude and ephemeral than the crass ejaculations of so many caged blue jays!!!”[4]

By the time the last essay appeared, however, Dreiser was no longer at the journal. In a letter to Llewelyn in January 1934 he said: “As you will see from the enclosed clipping, I have resigned from the Spectator, the reason being too much work, some other work which I wish to do, but mostly the difficulty of getting into the paper the type of material which I prefer.”

This is, as far as I know, the first reprinting of *Visions and Revisions* since it appeared 77 years ago.

Anthony Head

Anthony Head is the editor of *Powys to Sea Eagle*, JCP's letters to his sister Philippa and of his *Diary for 1929* (both published by Cecil Woolf). He is also

[2] In *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys* (John Lane the Bodley Head, London: 1943) this letter is dated 20 Jan. 1932 [p.163], and positioned accordingly, and indeed Llewelyn himself incorrectly dated it as 1932—that mistake we commonly make in the early days of a new year.

[3] Ibid., p.171

[4] Ibid., p.172

editor of the “Powys Heritage” series of booklets (by the same publisher). He is currently working, with Christopher Wilkinson, on the correspondence between Llewelyn Powys and Louis Wilkinson. He has worked as a writer and editor for Kyodo News in Tokyo since 1985.