

Walking and Rhyming to The Ridge *John Cowper Powys at the Death of God*

FORTY SEVEN YEARS before Powys composed 'The Ridge', he had described Lucifer passing "from the haunts of men" to ascend a "mountain range, / Rough with vast gulfs and clefts and precipices"¹. Living out the advice he gave to others, that God, fate, morality or justice should not determine our lives, Lucifer exclaimed his Nietzschean intent from the mountain's extreme edge:

...Chance and my own
Will have begot this day. My will alone
Will gender what this prosperous day conceives.²

Powys's original title for *Lucifer* was *The Death of God* and, by the end of the poem, God is indeed extinguished as an influence on the hero of the poem. In leaving the "haunts of men" once more to climb the ridge, the older Powys of 'The Ridge' sheds the earlier devilish persona to state openly his avowed intention that "to be at the Death of God is my single quest." The Powys of the earlier Lucifer persona had the new century ahead of him, a hoped-for end to Victorian moralism behind him and the prospect of revolution still to come. Utopia truly seemed to be around the corner. 'The Ridge' is an autobiographical poem and Canto I of the poem reflects this earlier forward-looking and youthful



The path above Cae Cod
courtesy Serguei Kostin

optimism. The older Powys of 'The Ridge', however, had Bolshevik revolution, the horrors of two world wars and totalitarian regimes behind him; his brother Llewelyn, Frances Gregg, Emma Goldman and Aleister Crowley³ were gone, their various ideals of atheism, socialism, anarchism and thelemic liberty unfulfilled. Rebellion against God in 'The Ridge' would become a source of regret rather than hope. Canto II reflects this, ushering in a tone of fear and regret and sliding remorselessly into a nightmare apocalyptic vision; the reflections on a world without God of a world-weary and frightened old man. The poem breaks off abruptly at this point, not to be finished.

The ridge in question is a prominent feature of the misty Berwyn Mountains above Corwen in North-East Wales, approached by a path that leads from

¹ J.C. Powys, *Lucifer*, Macdonal, 1956—Village Press, 1974, p.152.

² *Ibid.*, p.157.

³ See Aleister Crowley's Law of Thelema: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law", inspired of course by Rabelais's Abbey of Theleme and its motto "Fay ce que voudras."

the back of the house in which Powys was living at the time he wrote the poem in 1952. Just as Lucifer had to breach the tree-line all those years before, “clambering up through storm-tost pines” before leaving “the shadowy trees”⁴, to this day a walk to the ridge of the later poem means also passing through the shelter of a band of larch trees before reaching the bracken and whinberry of the wind-blown uplands. To stand on the summit is to be a wilderness away from Powys’s then “haunts of men”, the little gated cul-de-sac of 1930s semi-detached houses where Powys lived, yet the walk takes under two hours. The transition from Powys’s house to the ridge above is all the more dramatic for their proximity and is reflected in the way the poem’s developing mental landscape combines with the unfolding of a geophysical drama.

The walk to the ridge in Canto I is at once the poem’s physical and spiritual goal-centred trajectory and the metaphorical achievement of the summit might be variously interpreted as death, ecstasy, wisdom, utopia, heaven or hell. The upward progress as teleological metaphor is always there as a ground base, overlaid by the walking rhythm of the even-numbered hexameters. Overlaying too the directive principle of the poem are ontological motifs that metamorphose into themes of love and politics, hope and disillusion, states of utopia and dystopia. In Canto II ‘The Ridge’ ends with the death of God and an orgy of Nietzschean creative destruction. There is destruction of all philosophical systems, goal-centred ways of thinking and everything transcendent to man. Only the soul of John Cowper Powys survives the rout and that in a sombre and chastened form.

‘The Ridge’ is crammed with a polyphony of ideas and impressions that could only find expression through the medium of a poem. This is a highly wrought work consisting of the multi-layered ideas, allusions and references that the individual reader must uncover and discover in order to fully appreciate the extent of Powys’s philosophical struggle. The fact that the linear momentum of the poem is constantly challenged and finally overcome is reflective of Powys’s thinking at the time. If Powys had held a settled core philosophy, idea or theme to express, this would surely have been expressed as prose. As it is, the complexity and intertwining of ideas and the perpetual debate within his tortured mind emerge in a rhythmic representation of thoughts, counter-thoughts and doubts during this walk to the ridge. If true religion for Powys was to be expressed as ‘a struggle with the ultimate angel’⁵, then this is where Powys comes closest to this ideal in his own writings.

The “true love” in the poem offers one way into the allusion-soaked text. Well into the first canto, Powys says

I had a true love once but they took her away for thinking
Thoughts against God and for making me think the same.

I believe he is referring to Frances Gregg, friend and lover of Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (HD) respectively before she met Powys, the woman whose influence lay behind the relatively late flowering of Powys’s literary career. It was Frances who said of his early work that it had “no philosophical centre” and who

⁴ *Lucifer*, p.153.

⁵ J.C. Powys, *Suspended Judgments*, New York, G.A. Shaw, 1916, p.54.

encouraged him to find that centre in the writing of *The Complex Vision* (1920) with its final chapter about a future utopia, “the realisation of the ideas of truth and beauty and nobility in a world-wide communistic state”⁶. She was the Sadista of their shared Swinburnian fantasies, who challenged his conventional commitments to ‘home’ and his class-limited preconceptions of self. Simply put, Frances changed his life and was the Muse to whom he refers near the beginning of Canto 1. She died in 1941, aged 56, a victim of the Blitz.

Powys opens ‘The Ridge’ with the passing of a utopia and a dictator who was rigid, stiff, and unyielding in disposition, “the passing of Cronos”. This leader of the first generation of Titans ruled during the mythological Golden Age, until his son, Zeus, overthrew him. The Greek poet Hesiod, around the 8th century BC, in his compilation of the mythological tradition in *Works and Days*, explained that, prior to the present era, there were four other progressively more perfect ones, the oldest of which was called the Age of Gold and next was the Age of Bronze. In this Age of Gold, Hesiod wrote, men and women lived in absolute peace, carefree like the gods because they never aged and death was a falling asleep. The main characteristic of this age, according to Hesiod, was that the earth produced food in abundance, so that agriculture was rendered superfluous. With “the passing of Cronos” and the resultant dystopia, Powys tells us how humankind was left “all alone” by the Gods who left the “fields un-furrowed” and the “corn-shocks unbinded”.

Powys’s Swinburne-inspired allusions to the Persephone, or Proserpine myth in his early poetry were, in themselves, not only suggestive of the prospect of Spring and the birth of the New Age, but also intended to convey the notion of re-birth. In later life, as Powys imbibed Welshness to the point where he could write “we Aboriginal Welsh People are the proudest people in the world”, he increasingly associated the freedoms of the former pagan era with the ‘Golden’ or ‘Saturnian Age’. The customs and ways of this ancient Welsh race still retained for him “memories of the Golden Age when Saturn, or some megalithic philosopher under that name, ruled in Crete, and the Great Mother was worshipped without the shedding of blood”⁷. Whilst the Golden Age became the dominant metaphor in ‘The Ridge’, the hoped-for New Age of Powys’s early poems remained the same.

For the older Powys, repression was less directly attributable to the all-conquering ‘commonplace morality’ of the modernists and the meaning of the term God became more ambiguous. The days of simple rebellion against the religion of his father and Victorian piety generally were over and the target of his disdain less clear. Instead, loss of a utopian past, or a medievalism of the spirit, became focused metaphorically on the passing of the Golden Age, the Saturnian Age. The upheaval of the Titanomachy, after which the Olympians succeeded the chthonic gods, brought an end to the utopian Golden Age and ushered in the dictatorship of Zeus. In this metaphorical context Zeus is the modernists’ God, the Anglican God of Powys’s father against whom he railed in his youthful poetry. God is symbolic of a post-Golden Age, one of an ephemeral trinity, “Matter and Life and God”, that influences the minds of men and women. God is

⁶ J.C. Powys, *The Complex Vision*, New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920, p. 326.

⁷ J.C. Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, Carmarthen, The Druid Press, 1947, p.83.

interchangeable in this holy trinity with “home”, suggesting that the death of God will accompany the passing of other objects of fetishised veneration.

Near the beginning of ‘The Ridge’ Powys recounts the legend of how intimations of the Age of Gold were put into Hesiod’s head by a Muse whom the Greek poet refused to name. “What was that Age of Gold?” asks Powys. We are offered no answers, but the mythic memory acquires a metaphoric significance representative of the passing of political utopia, or belief in utopia, or the passing of a golden time in his life—a guilt-free time, or all of these. “She comes to me too”, says Powys as he climbs the hill, and she brings news of another utopia. Like Hesiod, Powys refuses to yield the name of his Muse, just as he remained silent about Frances Gregg in the *Autobiography* (1933).

She comes to me too this Muse who found Hesiod sleeping
To me as I climb this hill and leave the wood for the wold,
But like that old farmer-sailor her name I am keeping
Locked in the bin of my heart, shut in the keel of my hold.

Powys climbs the hill in solitude and he “can talk aloud” (to himself, like a madman), without heed to others, “Caring not if my voice has the major-tone or the minor”. The poem does indeed alternate between major and minor keys of hope and despair, change often preceded by one of the many ‘buts’, such as the critical “But” of the final stanza of the poem. Powys ends the first stanza by saying his utopian state of mind is open to all, to men under bowlers in garden suburbs, i.e. the readers of his popular philosophies, not just to exotic peoples in the furthest corners of the earth. Gone are the days when he would countenance revolution and conflict as a means to achieve utopia. In his solitude, his madness, he can talk to himself, “think aloud without rousing the fury” of the solipsists and totalitarians who would deny a multiverse of individuals. Contrary to those who would pass such a judgement, Powys asserts that each man is self-contained, “a judge and jury” and that we all share a common bond in this respect. Contrary to those who would have otherwise, he is not openly aggressive. He knows himself as a toad, midge or slow worm, not a dragon, wasp or asp. Yet despite his silent passivity, he carries a confident, concealed and cruel strength that he describes as a “horror within me that few can withstand”, a horror that becomes apparent at the end of the poem.

His thoughts are intertwined with the scenery on his walk, “the sheddings of larches” and “the greenness of spruce” serve as genuine herbal cures to soothe his fear and the wounds he acquired when he “burst from Bedlam to come up here”, escaping the confines of society and the suicide of gregariousness, as he would have it in his philosophy. These plants suit his “saurian nature”, connecting this poem with his reptilian, or ichthyosaurus ego that he described elsewhere. As if to emphasise the utopian nature of his experience, a connection is made between his walk through the woodland on the lower slopes and the Age of Gold.

Gold the rent ceiling through which the azure emerges
A floor of gold is the ground—on gold I am setting my foot.

There is a Golden Age affirmation of life over death in the rising sap and burst of emerald dew of the larch, whereas death-dot faced fungi are dissolved and done.

After asserting his saurian nature, his solitary, utopian state, he questions the very possibility of an “I am I” or a soul. But first the answer to “What’s left ... that nothing erases” prompts the hideous prophesy of a world-destroying convulsion as a prelude to nothingness.

‘What’s left’, all cry as I leave the wood, ‘that nothing erases?’
And the bog-moss groans to the gorse: ‘Only the earth and the sun.’
But surely at last there’ll reach us some world-destroying convulsion
With fire roaring above, with fire roaring below,
Systole and diastole, in fatal embrace and repulsion
Till, through a burnt-out void...

Powys was writing at a time when the eventuality of nuclear war seemed not unlikely, when Soviet Russia, once holding for Frances and him the promise of a future utopia, now held the threat of future destruction. In the poem the winds take up the role of exemplars of the “vividest reality we know”—as Powys once described the awareness of “I am I” or the soul in *The Complex Vision*. The winds’ positing of an existence without reference to anything else expresses Powys’s own belief in the indestructible integrity of the soul. The winds are not the “slaves to a something”, nor are they defined by reference to a “something”, they “aren’t the same as air that projects them”. Like the winds he asserts a non-referential existence, asserts “I am I”, asserts the existential fact of his soul.

... ‘Yourself and the air and the motion
That whistled you out of her depths to trouble the land and the sea
Are no more really the same than I am the same as the potion
Of electrons and photons and mesons that make up the body of me!’

This he could easily boast—but he could not maintain a non-referential freedom from matter as a state of mind for long. Like all other living things, his resolve is soon worn down by the inevitability of physical decay in the post-Golden Age. Such is the burden of mortality, matter and life that the living can only exclaim in despair “curse it—and die!” and “happy the dead!” Powys’s era, our era, is the post-utopian state of modern life, a dystopia in which the fate of all matter is subject to “Jupiter’s nod”, i.e. the nod of God. The dictatorship of Zeus is akin to the dictatorship of the God of Heaven as depicted by Powys in part one of *Lucifer*, except that here the dictator’s writ extends over the former Utopia of Lucifer and of Pan also, making His victory complete.

Yet the hope of the poem is that this reign of Zeus—this “nephelegeretay” Zeus, lord of the thunder clouds—might still be swept away. This dictator God is the modernists’ God; an arbiter of order and social control in a single universe, demanding social conformity. He is the totalitarian God who denies plurality and the multiverse. He is the abstract tyrant of social conformity to whom the individual is beholden. Yet rebellion stirs. The hour will come when the “quenchless hate” for “Matter and Life and God” will lead to their overthrow, despite the way that Zeus has “fooled and enslaved” us and “Matter and Life and Home” are fetishised in this our alienated state—where “shrines” are devoted to the “sacred three”. Powys’s vision, at this point in the poem, is of a new utopia arising, bringing to an end this age of enslavement. There is a conspiracy amongst all living things and whisperings about a wave of revolution that will sweep away Zeus’s hated regime and with it “God’s love and God’s hate and God’s unnatural

law!” There will be a return to the Golden Age, symbolic of the New Age, in which the unnaturally repressive law will be swept aside and the very sort of magical and sublime experience, for which the modernists and moralists no longer had time, will be restored.

Frances and the ridge conflate like Beatrice and Heaven did for Dante. Powys anticipates something akin to a beatific vision of truth that will be made possible by the physical and mental completeness brought to him by Frances. She is his Sadista, without whom he is unfulfilled; his other, his love, his Muse who will determine his philosophical and personal centre without which he is incomplete. Frances will be his guide to the Golden Age ahead, symbolised by the ridge. He also knows he must aim at the crest “to be at the Death of God”, the end of Zeus’s domination and the restoration of the Golden Age as promised by his unnamed Muse. Frances was taken away for her defiance of God and for leading him too into blasphemy. She will return to him when the triumph of “commonplace morality” is ended.

I had a true love once but they took her away for thinking
Thoughts against God and for making me think the same.
But in my dreams she comes back and now life is sinking
Perhaps she’ll come back for good...

Like Hesiod, he will not reveal the name of his Muse; however, “born of an ash tree she was...” Frances is likened to the Meliae⁸, the nymphs of the ash tree whose name they shared. Hesiod wrote that they appeared from the drops of blood spilled when Cronos castrated Uranus and that they fed the infant Zeus on honey. This made them both the product of Cronos’s victory and the harbingers of his fall. From the Meliae also sprang the race of mankind from the era that followed the Age of Gold, that of Bronze. The ash tree⁹ exudes a sugary substance that the ancient Greeks thought of as a honey called Meli. Knowing this sheds light on the idea of a Golden Age of abundance, when men and women ate acorns and honey that dripped from the trees.

..... I’ve forgotten her name.
Born of an ash-root she was, a tree-elemental,
But her soul went deeper down than the tree-sap goes

Frances Gregg spent her childhood in and around the towns of the American mid-west. She is the nymph of the ash tree rooted in the “rock occidental”, in the West where the River Kaw winds its way through the mid-western states.

Into the rock it went, the rock occidental,
Where deep in a mineral bed the River Kaw flows.

The descent of Frances’s soul is suggestive of the Persephone myth. When Powys talks of how “in my dreams she comes back” and how “perhaps she’ll come back for good”, he offers these thoughts as portents of renewal. Frances is conflated now in his mind with Persephone, and her impending return with that of the Age of Gold.

Just as in *Lucifer* where, as Powys’ persona-hero neared the mountain-top,

⁸ The Meliai (or Meliae) were Oread nymphs of the mountain ash.

⁹ Manna-ash (*Fraxinus ornus*).

“a pale amber lustre tinged the West”¹⁰, so too the Powys of ‘The Ridge’ is bemused by a cloud formation of similar hue as colour and meli images start to combine. “A cloud-chain like a cincture” connects chain and cincture to suggest enclosure and constraint. The earlier reference to the “nephelegeretay Zeus” links the cloud-chain with Zeus and all the constraint and restriction of his despotic reign. The cloud chain, described as “brown as a blade of bronze”, becomes symbolic of Zeus’s post-utopian Age of Bronze. It is then described as having “gluey shadows encrusted: / Like tar-beads in fir-bark”. Powys then asks “was a sword plunged there to its hilt?” It is as though the blade has penetrated into the honey-sap of the ash tree, the meli or golden honey, so symbolic of the Golden Age, beyond the symbolic constraint of Zeus’s cincture. The obsession with the colour of the cloud chain continues.

But this colour’s not hearing or smelling or feeling either, mein lieber,
It’s the sight, it’s the sight of the stain that covers the bung,
That covers the mouth of the bung, the bung of super-submersion,
The bung of a golden drop that’s beyond all the hope of man.

The stain about the “bung of a golden drop” is the meli of the tapped ash tree, nothing less than a sign from the Golden Age beyond the cincture, beyond the constraints imposed by Zeus; constraints and the forlorn hopes of our own imperfect age. The “golden drop” is, for now, “beyond all the hope of man”, but the stain is evidence of a utopia that will not be constrained. It will not be stopped by the bung and seeps out. Powys then asks:

And what if the colour up there should mean an utter reversion
Of all the illusions of life and the whole of God’s plan?

An utter reversion of all the illusions of life and the whole of God’s plan would mean a return from the present state of alienation to the Golden Age, which would be an unalienated state without need of God. Then the colour of the stain would be “the colour of God’s extinction”. This is the Nietzschean meaning of the stain ‘mein lieber’.

What if it were the colour of God’s extinction,
The colour of Matter’s end and the final sweep
Of all we know to a vortex of indistinction
Of all we are to a sleep within a sleep?

A reversion of the illusions of life would mean that what was once considered mad will be sane. The fools and madmen will have their day. Madness will triumph “and all the sane proved wrong!” The mad and the eccentric will triumph. What if the “Night-Mare Life” was in the charge of Sancho? asks Powys, and he imagines the fiends that possessed poor Tom from *King Lear*, Hobdance, Mahu and Modo¹¹, released in a fit of exuberance. Mad John, “silly old John” continues on to the ridge “come what may”, quoting Homer “Alla kai empes! ‘All the same for that!’”

Life within the cincture is like a play within a play, like the dumb show in *Hamlet*. “Let all the gods like Puppet-Players play dumb!” commands Powys, and

¹⁰ *Lucifer*, p.155.

¹¹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III, iv, 149.

then misquotes¹² Hamlet's words, exclaiming 'Dead—for a ducat, dead!—a rat! a rat!' These are Hamlet's words as he plunges his dagger into the arras (or wall tapestry) behind which he believes hides the king, only to find it is Polonius, the character who had once questioned his mental state. Madness triumphs over the sane. The mad Hamlet's dagger, thrust into the tapestry, the world within a world, the world depicted on the tapestry, is as a sword plunged into the cloud chain, into the cincture, into the ash tree bark. "For a ducat"—Hamlet plunges his dagger in for gold. The cincture is penetrated and Powys is through to the meli, the gold, a new Age of Gold.

Penetration of the cincture at the end of Canto I translates into a "sudden" transportation to the top of the ridge in Canto II, as though sucked out of the compression chamber of the present and flung through a vortex into an alien environment where the illusions of life are reversed. To be on that mist-prone ridge is to experience isolation, a solitude that was for Powys a positive experience, a rising out of the herd, apart from the gregarious crowd and the social ant-heap. Obligated to no one, this is anarchist freedom—a utopia at one with the goal-centred metaphorical attainment of the summit. He is alone in the moment with infinite darkness before and after him.

Powys describes his walk to the ridge as "marching in tune with time". The tone of the poem changes at this point. An amble up the hill has been transformed into something sinister. Marching to time's tune, he has given into time. "But what are the things on which this rhythmical marcher marches?" he asks. On "But" (as so often before in this poem) hinges a swing from positive to negative images. This is the point at which the linear momentum of the poem is finally overcome. Now the rhythmical marcher offers a militaristic image of utopia, redolent of a utopia gone wrong like the marching of feet in Red Square. The natural vegetation on the ridge across which he previously trod becomes "bone", "eyeless sockets", "mouldy bread", "exploded rockets", the "curious red" of blood. This is a war zone, a Guernica, the aftermath of "a world destroying convulsion", the "horror within" him that few can withstand. These are images of despair signifying that there is no utopia without destruction; no personal freedom without guilt and a cost in pain to others; no fulfilment (his sadism) without inflicting pain. Here is a nightmare vision of a world without God.

Stalks of heather so old that they look like bone;
Leaves of bracken bent into filigree arches,
Beds of emerald moss and pillows of stone,
And little opaque pebbles like eyeless sockets
And crumbs of gravel the colour of mouldy bread;
And roots of old dead thorns like exploded rockets,
And whinberry leaves that are turning a curious red.
And like cut curls from the beard of an aged Titan
Wisps of lichen under the stalks of ling,
And ferns so green that trampling can only heighten
Their greenness into something beyond the Spring -
But what is this? I climb and in tune with my climbing

The poem ends with images of the brutality of war.

¹² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, iv, 23: "How now? A rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!"

I tread the little mosses beneath my feet -
And I rape the virginal words to round off my rhyming...

Images of walking and rhyming now evoke images of violence and sexual sadism, the “horror within me that few can withstand”. He reconnects with his muse, his Sadista, Persephone, one of the Meliae, harbinger of the Age of Gold, harbinger too of the death of utopia.

Powys once thought of calling the poem “How the War Changed Me” and the poem does indeed express the impact of the war upon his political, philosophical and religious inclinations. With Frances Gregg he had supported the Russian Revolution, but soon came to have doubts about its totalitarian direction. By 1937 his allegiance was with the Spanish anarchists. By 1952, with the fascist dictators of the Second World War consigned to history, but with the Cold War confrontation with Stalin reaching new heights, he had had enough of utopias and dictators, enough of Cronos. The changed Powys on the ridge was finally at the death of God but, with utopia in his grasp, the rhythmical marcher had also seen utopia wither away in the face of creative destruction’s power. Aye! What indeed a thing was the passing of Cronos and all he stood for. In the *Autobiography* he had remarked that he was “not so conceited as to think that life would be tolerable or even possible if left to the Devil”. Here indeed was a vision of an intolerable world after the death of God. This indeed was Hell.

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John’s past academic interests have included MA and PhD studies of Algernon Swinburne and Karl Marx. He has contributed pieces to the *Powys Journal* and has recently published an ebook on Kindle – *John Cowper Powys: Poet*. He is currently working on a book exploring the individualist anarchist writings of Max Stirner and the revolutionary principles underpinning Marx’s work, which emerged dialectically from the latter’s critique of the former.