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**THE SHATTERED SKULL:  
A STUDY OF JOHN COWPER POWYS' FICTION**

**JEREMY ROBIN FOX**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF LITERATURE AND  
THEOLOGY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY  
IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS**

**FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

References to the major works of John Cowper Powys are made within the text according to the following table of abbreviations. All other works, including the various collections of Powys' letters, are given full citation in the footnotes on their first appearance, and thereafter are referred to within the text by title and page, e.g. (*The Saturnian Quest*: 96).

The novels of John Cowper Powys:

WAS	<i>Wood and Stone</i>		
ROD	<i>Rodmoor</i>		
DUC	<i>Ducdame</i>		
WS	<i>Wolf Solent</i>		
AGR	<i>A Glastonbury Romance</i>		
WEY	<i>Weymouth Sands</i>		
MAI	<i>Maiden Castle</i>		
MOR	<i>Morwyn</i>		
OG	<i>Owen Glendower</i>		
POR	<i>Porius</i>		
INM	<i>The Inmates</i>		
ATL	<i>Atlantis</i>		
TBH	<i>The Brazen Head</i>		
UP	<i>Up and Out</i>	including: MM	'The Mountains of the Moon'
HOM	<i>Homer and Aether</i>		
ALL	<i>All or Nothing</i>		
YOU	<i>You and Me</i>		
TF	<i>Three Fantasies:</i>	TOP	'Topsy-Turvy'
		AB	'Abertackle'
		CAT	'Cataclysm'

Other works by Powys (autobiography, criticism, philosophy):

CONF	<i>Confessions of Two Brothers</i>
CV	<i>The Complex Vision</i>
AUT	<i>Autobiography</i>
TPL	<i>The Pleasures of Literature</i>
VIS	<i>Visions and Revisions</i>

The many other works of popular philosophy and poetry which Powys wrote are not discussed in the text, and so appear only in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

## PRELUDE

To begin any work on John Cowper Powys without at least a few words of introduction would be a very foolish thing. Although the existence of Powys societies in England and America, both of which publish regular scholarly journals, testifies to the continuing interest in the Powys family, and in spite of the resurgence of critical attention to their work, mention of the name John Cowper Powys in conversation does have a tendency to elicit blank looks and a rapid change of subject. The following is a brief account of his family, his life and work and of the steadily growing corpus of criticism of him, by which I hope to be able to avoid the necessity of continual explanatory diversions from the main text of my thesis.

The eldest of eleven children, John Cowper Powys was born in Shirley, Derbyshire, in 1872. His father, Charles Francis Powys, was an Anglican clergyman from Dorset, one of a long line of country parsons with a tenuous claim to a relationship to the ancient princes of Powys, while his mother, the Norfolk-born Mary Cowper Johnson—also descended from several clergymen—could claim the poets John Donne and William Cowper as ancestors. The long clerical tradition in the family, broken by John Cowper's generation, was restored by his own son, Littleton Alfred, although as a Catholic rather than an Anglican priest. In 1879, after the birth of the next four children, Littleton, Theodore Francis, Gertrude Mary and Eleanor, Rev. Powys returned to his native Dorset, after only seven years away, as a curate at Dorchester, where Albert Reginald, Marian and Llewelyn were born. Wishing to be closer to his ageing mother in Weymouth, he accepted the living at Montacute, near Yeovil, in 1885, and it

was here that Catharine Philippa, William and Lucy, the three youngest children were born. Mary died in 1914 and, on his retirement in 1918, her husband moved to Weymouth, where he remained until his death in 1923.

John Cowper was not the family's sole author. Theodore (T.F. Powys) gained literary repute with such allegorical novels as *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (1927) and *Unclay* (1930), which deal with the interaction of God and humanity. Philippa, in 1930, published a novel, *The Blackthorn Winter*, and *Driftwood*, a volume of poetry. Llewelyn became widely known for his autobiographical writings and essays, notably *Skin for Skin* (1925) and *Love and Death* (1939), with their savagely iconoclastic and anti-religious tone. Littleton, the headmaster of Sherbourne Preparatory School—he, like his brothers and his father, had been a pupil there—also wrote two volumes of autobiography: *The Joy of It* (1937) and *Still the Joy of It* (1956). Away from the literary front, Albert became an architect—although he did publish some books on this subject—and Gertrude an artist.

With the exception of Theodore, who after a short period at Sherbourne Prep was sent to a private school in Aldeburgh, Suffolk—where began the association of Louis Wilkinson, the novelist and biographer, with the Powys family, for he was the headmaster's son—the boys all attended both the Prep and the 'Big' school at Sherbourne. John Cowper, with his loathing of sports and his general physical ungainliness was not happy there, as his long account in *Autobiography* (pp77–156) illustrates. His walks around the surrounding countryside and the discovery that he and Littleton could walk to their father's rectory at Montacute for tea and back on Sunday afternoons were his only real pleasures—aside from his voracious reading, particularly the works of Harrison Ainsworth.

After Sherbourne, John Cowper continued the family tradition of going up to Corpus Christi, Cambridge, here to read history prior to going into the church. During his time there he abandoned the idea of ordination, and made



the acquaintance of Bernie O'Neil, Louis Wilkinson, who was in the same year there as Llewelyn, Harry Lyon, whose sister Margaret he married in 1896, and John William Williams, referred to throughout *Autobiography* as 'the Catholic', who almost persuaded him to become a Roman Catholic.<sup>1</sup> Other than this, his time at Cambridge had no effect upon him:

Take it all in all, the University *as* a university has not the least influence upon my taste, my intelligence, my philosophy or my character! All these things had been created at Shirley, enlarged at Weymouth and Dorchester; and then had been finally branded into me—by harrowing necessity—at Sherbourne. (AUT:182-3)

On leaving Corpus he went to the scholastic employment agency Gabbittas and Thring who, in 1894, found him a post as lecturer in German at the Girls' schools in Hove. It was while working here that he married, that a small collection of poems (*Odes and other Poems*: 1896) was published, that he began working as an Oxford University Extension Lecturer in English and that, in 1902, his only child was born.

His lecturing career became more and more important. At first confined to England, he was soon invited to Germany, and then in 1904 to America. A year later he and Louis Wilkinson formed the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, and soon he was spending every winter in the States, only returning home for the summer.

With the advent of the First World War, John Cowper attempted to enlist in the British Army, but was turned down on medical grounds—*Autobiography* contains fairly graphic details of his painful gastric ulcers, and the various operations by which attempts were made to remove them—and he remained in America. By now he and Wilkinson were 'managed' on their lecture tours by the Yorkshireman G. Arnold Shaw, who remained a close friend of Powys. It was

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<sup>1</sup> A fuller discussion of Powys' relationship to the Roman Catholic Church can be found below in the section on *Autobiography*, and where it is relevant to the novels, such as *Wood and Stone*, *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*.

## Prelude

indeed Shaw who persuaded him to begin publishing, and published his works in America. First came the political pamphlet *The War and Culture*, a reply to the pro-German *The War and America* by Professor Hugo von Münsterberg, followed in 1915 by the collection of essays *Visions and Revisions* and the novel *Wood and Stone*, published in England in 1917, although only in a very limited edition. Next, in 1916, came *Rodmoor*, which remained unpublished in England until 1973. *After my Fashion* was written in 1919, and existed only in manuscript form until its publication in 1980.

During the 1920's Powys continued lecturing in America, and after a break of ten years—six counting *After my Fashion*—published *Ducdame* in 1925. 1929 saw both his farewell to England and his wife—he settled at Phudd Bottom, Hillsdale, New York State, without her—and the publication both in England and America of *Wolf Solent*, his first major success as a novelist, and the first of the four so-called 'Dorset Novels'. His lecturing career also was brought to an end in 1929, and writing became his sole occupation. *A Glastonbury Romance* appeared in 1932 (1933 in London), and its descriptions were so vivid, taken as they were from the author's memory, that it occasioned the threat of libel action from a Somerset landowner who fancied himself to be represented within the novel. Consequently the English edition of *Weymouth Sands* (1934; UK 1935) appeared under the title *Jobber Skald*, with all the real place names changed, and was not published in its correct version until 1963.

By the time the first edition of *Weymouth Sands/Jobber Skald* appeared, John Cowper had moved to Corwen in Merionethshire, Wales, accompanied by Phyllis Playter, whose father had been his friend. With them came Phyllis' widowed mother and aunt, who set up house next door to them. They remained at Corwen for over twenty years, and it was here that the Dorset cycle was completed with *Maiden Castle* (USA 1936; UK 1937), before John Cowper moved, via the mythical landscapes of *Morwyn* to the Wales of *Owen Glendower* (USA 1940; UK 1942) and *Porius* (1951).

## Prelude

After this comes a series of increasingly grotesque fantasies which, with the exception of *Atlantis* (1954), are all far shorter than the earlier narratives. They are: *The Inmates* (1952); *The Brazen Head* (1956); *Up and Out* (1957) which also comprises two stories—‘Up and Out’ and ‘The Mountains of the Moon’; *Homer and Aether* (1959) and *All or Nothing* (1960).

In 1955 John Cowper and Phyllis had moved to Blaenau Ffestiniog in order to escape from the world:

For over a year now I haven't gone down into town—no! not even to see my old admired friend John Morgan himself! Yes this is the real secret reason of our move to Blaenau *the most difficult place to reach* within 50 miles! Once there I shall become an *absolute hermit* (with the aid of my American friend Miss Playter who is still an American citizen)<sup>2</sup>

It was here that he died, in June 1963, eight months after his ninetieth birthday, after a long illness. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered on Chesil beach. When he died he left behind several complete manuscripts which were subsequently published. When the Village Press was republishing many of Powys' early works which had gone out of print they also produced editions of *Real Wraiths* (1974) and *You and Me* (1975), while the short stories ‘Topsy-Turvy’, ‘Abertackle’ and ‘Cataclysm’ finally appeared in 1985 under the umbrella title *Three Fantasies*. All of these were written in the last years of Powys' life, and are of very variable quality and importance.

What, then, of biographical and critical considerations of John Cowper Powys? In 1936 Louis Wilkinson, under his usual pseudonym of Louis Marlow, published *Welsh Ambassadors*, his study of the Powys family as a whole, which has remained a standard work on the subject. A year earlier Richard Heron Ward's *The Powys Brothers* had been published, and some thirty years later came Kenneth Hopkin's *The Powys Brothers: A Biographical Appreciation* (1967). Both Hopkins and Wilkinson, to whose memory Hopkins dedicated his

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<sup>2</sup> Iorweth C. Peate, ed., *John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), letter 48, p.90

book, knew the family, and it is perhaps because of the close connection between biographers and subject that these texts have remained so important. A further general biography was added in 1983 with Richard Perceval Grave's *The Bothers Powys*. The idiosyncratic style of both the *Autobiography* and of his letters make it a difficult task to piece together a coherent and accurate account of John Cowper Powys' life, and as yet no individual biography of him exists.

Powys also appeared in Donald Brook's *Writer's Gallery* (1944), a curious conflation of biography, criticism and journalistic interview which is subtitled: 'Biographical Sketches of Prominent British Writers, and their views on Reconstruction.' Powys, who is placed here among such as George Bernard Shaw, J.B. Priestly—who was later to supply an introduction *Autobiography*—Vera Britain and H. G. Wells, restricts his 'views on Reconstruction' largely to the abolition of vivisection and the bloodless world conversion to Socialism.

The history of the publication of Powys' works and of criticism up to 1966 is traced in Derek Langridge's bibliography *John Cowper Powys: A Record of Achievement*. Up to that time, and indeed still, one of the central critical works was Professor G. Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* (1964) which, alongside the essays collected in *Neglected Powers* (1971), treats Powys' work to Wilson Knight's own peculiar brand of almost mystical criticism—as well as linking Powys with James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, this latter work includes an introductory essay on Powys entitled 'Mysticism and Masturbation.'

Since *The Saturnian Quest* there has been a steady increase in the number of books on Powys' work. *John Cowper Powys: Old Earth Man* (1966) by H. P. Collins investigates Powys' interest and link with nature. Belinda Humphrey edited a book entitled *Essays on John Cowper Powys* in 1972, which deals with various aspects of Powys' work. 1973 saw the publication of Glen Cavaliero's *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*—which is one of the clearest evaluations of Powys' work as a whole, tracing themes throughout his fiction—and

John A. Brebner's *The Demon Within*, which attempts much the same thing. Morine Krissdottir's *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, which examines the importance of Mysticism and Mythology, particularly Celtic Mythology, in Powys' work was published in 1980, and C. A. Coates' *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*—again dealing with Powys' natural landscapes and settings—in 1982.

The English 'The Powys Review' and the American 'Powys Notes', both bi-annual publications, with Powys scholars such as Belinda Humphrey, Glen Cavaliero, Denis Lane, Marius Buning and Charles Lock on their editorial committees, publish a number of short articles in each edition, the most recent including transcripts of papers presented at the 1989 Powys Society of North America's conference 'Powys and the Feminine' ('Powys Notes', Spring 1990) and studies of Powys' landscapes and settings ('The Powys Review', no 24, 1989).

Numerous Doctoral and Masters theses have been written on Powys, many of them, such as 'A Descriptive Power: John Cowper Powys and the Visual Arts 1918–1940' (S. Swift, Reading, PhD, 1988) and 'The 'Welsh Mythology' of John Cowper Powys' (R. L. Wood, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, PhD, 1983) coming fairly close in subject matters to works mentioned above. Others, such as "A Certain Spirit of *Liberation*': The Novels of John Cowper Powys' (P. F. M. Smith, Oxford, D. Phil, 1986) which traces the concept of freedom in Powys' novels to its culmination in *Porius* which stresses the importance of the creative imagination and being at peace with oneself, are more individual.

From this brief survey it is obvious that many diverse interpretations of Powys are possible. As such I have elected to refrain from using earlier criticism, except for that of G. Wilson Knight which, by virtue of his friendship with Powys, seems to have some added weight—as well as offering a breath of fresh air by way of its idiosyncrasy—and occasionally of Glen Cavaliero, whose

## *Prelude*

work is helpful when making preliminary reading of Powys' fiction. My own interpretation of Powys' work is, I hope, somewhat different to what has gone before—and is perhaps currently somewhat unfashionable in its close attention to the links between symbolism and characterisation and the general disregarding of the narrative structures—and so there would be little relevance in quoting other Powys critics, hence their presence only in *Prelude* and bibliography rather than in the main text. The same is true of much else that I have read in the course of my research. Ideas that I have encountered, and which form the intellectual background of this work, are to be found more in the bibliography than in the footnotes and citations, for I have attempted to use my own ideas rather than what has gone before.

## 1. THE SHATTERED SKULL

A Shattered Skull. It is a potent and striking image, and one which I believe to be of central importance in the consideration of the work of John Cowper Powys. As both a physical reality and a highly complex symbol it recurs throughout his fictional output. It is also a symbol for his fiction as a whole, which from the carefully structured early narratives shatters and fragments into the diffuse and violent late fantasies. More generally, the Shattered Skull can be projected beyond Powys himself as a symbol of the world and times in which he lived.

Although his publishing career did not really begin until 1915, and his first major successes came in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, Powys' intellectual background goes further back than this would imply. He was born in 1872 into a world still shaken by Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), and around the time when the three editions of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867; 1885; 1895) were being published. The attraction Powys felt towards Marx's ideas, and their practical application in Russia, is openly acknowledged in *Autobiography* (pp 584; 623), and more obliquely in the economically and politically successful commune of *A Glastonbury Romance*, a novel contemporary with his autobiographical excursion.

One of the few thinkers of the time of whom Powys writes, and who would have relished the use of such an inherently violent and seemingly negative image as the Shattered Skull for a life's work, was Friedrich Nietzsche. Although in his direct addresses to Nietzsche Powys seeks to refute him, trying to counter his nihilism with Rabelais' scatological affirmations of life, he never quite succeeds, and there is an air of Nietzsche's 'transvaluations' and moral inversions about

1. *The Shattered Skull*

much of the fiction. Further, many of Powys evaluations of the German may be quite easily turned back upon himself, notably that at the start of the essay in *The Pleasures of Literature*:

The human race, its ways, its values, its virtues, its religions, its rationalisms, were all repugnant to Nietzsche. They excited disgust in him. They nauseated him. (TPL:540)

Blake suggested that Milton was 'of the Devil's party without knowing it',<sup>1</sup> and this ironic evaluation may also be applied to Powys who, although writing against Nietzsche's assertions does so within Nietzsche's ideology. Thus he never escapes his perceived enemy.

To this religious, scientific, political and philosophical iconoclasm must be added an even greater shattering of skulls. As Powys began his writing career Sigmund Freud was busily taking apart the human brain—a clinical and careful shattering—in his attempts to fathom its secrets. Powys never directly mentions Freud in his writings, nor does he show his influence in fictional form, unlike D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and the American poet H.D., who all absorbed and used his ideas. Even so, Freud's writings cannot have been totally without effect, and an interesting comparison may be drawn between the two. Powys' setting apart of women—consider the number of aged spinsters and lesbian characters in his novels and the almost total absence of women in *Autobiography*—from men seems to indicate a distrust, almost a fear, akin to that which led Freud to treat women as negative men, and to postulate such theories as penis envy and the castration complex.<sup>2</sup> More important is Freud's theory of the urges towards life/sex and destruction, often denoted Eros and Thanatos:

Our hypothesis is that there are two essentially different classes of instinct: the sexual instincts, understood in the widest sense

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<sup>1</sup> W. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of androgynous women in Powys' work is perhaps a further link. By taking on masculine, or at least boyish, characteristics women such as Christine Malakite and Persphone Spear became sexually attractive and are able to take part more fully in the 'man's world' that surrounds them.



## 1. *The Shattered Skull*

—Eros if you prefer that name—and the aggressive instincts, whose aim is destruction... How the two of them are mingled in the process of life, how the death instinct is made to serve the purposes of Eros, especially by being turned outward as aggressiveness—there are tasks which are left to future investigation.<sup>3</sup>

Such ideas echo through Powys' fiction. The entirety of the first novel, *Wood and Stone*, is dominated by the 'Mythology of Sacrifice' and the 'Mythology of Power', forces not far removed from Eros and Thanatos, while the much later *All or Nothing* is centred on the debate between the ideas of emptying the Universe of life (Thanatos) and of filling it (Eros)—a virtual paraphrase of what Freud wrote in *The Ego and The Id* (1923). His linking of violence and sexuality also suggests the basis of the strong sado-masochistic element in Powys' novels, which by turning destructive instincts outwards leads—in a truly Nietzschean transvaluation—to the mistreatment and degrading of the most highly valued thing, hence Owen Evans' masochism in *A Glastonbury Romance* and Lowri's cruelty to Simon in *Owen Glendower*.

The picture is not necessarily always so bleak. In terms of sexuality Edward Carpenter was also shattering skulls, breaking traditionally accepted notions in works such as *Love's Coming-of-Age* (1895) and *The Intermediate Sex* (1908). Carpenter's influence on Lawrence and E.M. Forster is openly acknowledged and, although once again Powys makes no reference to him, parallels can be drawn between Powys and Carpenter. The latter's works deal openly and tolerantly with all aspects of sexuality—Powys was similarly open, and his continual refusal to apply moral standards and judgements leads to an air of tolerance also—with the intermediate, or Uranian sex postulated in *The Intermediate Sex* prefiguring Powys' own Saturnian sex (see *Autobiography*, p 206), and the many perilously attractive androgynes he created.

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<sup>3</sup> James Strachey & Angela Richards, trans. & ed., *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol.2, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), Lecture 32, 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life', pp 136-41

### 1. *The Shattered Skull*

This period of intellectual change and skull shattering, to which should be added the physical shattering of the First World War— one of the most comprehensive outbursts of violence that humanity has ever produced—was the back-ground against which Powys was writing. A certain amount of skull shattering was also going on in contemporary literature. D.H. Lawrence was expanding the novel in its traditional form, introducing sexuality and psychology as overt subjects, while Virginia Woolf to a much greater extent was shattering that traditional form. At the same time William Faulkner in the southern states of the USA was disrupting both the form and content of the novel, with works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—the latter Powys describes as ‘the best novel I’ve read for years—well! to my taste—since Conrad.’<sup>4</sup>

Powys had a tendency to look backwards in literature—to the likes of Rabelais, Melville, Dostoevsky and Hardy, his favourite writers—and although he expresses his respect for Lawrence and —somewhat grudgingly—Eliot in his letters to Louis Wilkinson (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*: Lawrence 323; 327; Eliot 185), the only writer of his age whom he acknowledges as an influence was W.B. Yeats. A poem he dedicated to Yeats in the 1896 collection of poems led to a letter in which Yeats praised Powys for his ‘free imagination’ (AUT:224). Although there appears to have been no further contact between them, they did share a taste for popular philosophy and mythologising—hence Yeats’ *A Vision* (1925) expressing his ideas on time, and Powys’ own philosophical works such as *The Complex Vision*.

What of the role of the Shattered Skull in Powys’ fiction? From first to last it is present as a physical reality, and I will begin with a brief survey of some of its instances, and the motives behind them:

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Wilkinson, ed., *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-1956* (London: Macdonald, 1958) letter of 20 September, 1937, p 32

## 1. *The Shattered Skull*

He was killed instantaneously, the front of his skull being bashed in so completely, that bits of bone covered with bloody hair surrounded the deep dent which the iron had made (AGR:1051)

Her skull cracked like a floating sea-shell struck by the prow of a powerfully rowed boat. Porius could see the blood and more than the blood. The whole side of her head was cracked, crushed and smitten in. (POR:521)

... it was hardly a minute after the shock of striking this obstacle had broken their fall, and in doing so had crushed the father's skull as the pine tree had crushed the daughter's...(POR:523)

The first blow cracked the man's skull; the second drew a trickle of blood and brains; and by the third Urk groaned and rolled over on his side... John O'Dreams went on hammering at this human skull with his effective weapon till, before three minutes had elapsed, Urk had become a headless giant, with a bleeding neck ending in a mask of bones and brains and blood. (ALL:69)

He struck Bog on the head with such force that the stricken head was splintered in two. (ALL:135)

Then with his right hand Gyges seized Why Ki and with his left hand he seized Ve Zed, each by the hair of his head, and banged their skulls against the skull of Nelly until all three became a congealed mass of blood and bones and brains which the giant swallowed handful after handful until the three friends' heads were reeking in his belly, and the dust of the Wall of the World was scattered, along with their headless bodies, into every corner of space. (TF:'CAT':176)

In the first two examples the motivation is love. It is through her insane passion for him that Mad Bet comes to wish for John's death, and it is Codfin's pseudo-religious awe of her—a perversion of love—which makes him her tool of destruction, and it is finally Tom Barter's love for his friend which leads him to interpose himself between the iron bar and John's unprotected skull, thus occasioning his own death. Similarly Porius and the Gawr are fighting because of the love they both bear for Creiddylad, and it is because of her love for Porius that she rather than her lover receives the fatal blow. The second example from *Porius* is unique, for this is suicide rather than homicide—only James Andersen's accidental death in *Wood and Stone* comes close to this. The violence which the Gawr failed to release in his attack on Porius is, in a reversal of Freud's theory expressed above, turned inwards, carrying himself and his daughter beyond the world. The image of their Shattered Skulls, which returns to haunt Porius, now takes on a tone of regret rather than violence.

### 1. *The Shattered Skull*

Both Shattered Skulls from *All or Nothing* are brought about by the will to freedom and a general love for life, rather than of one particular person. The violence of John O'Dream's attack on Urk is unpleasantly gratuitous, and it is one of the most emotionally involved attacks Powys ever describes. In his study of Powys' works, after recalling Owen Evans' attempts to rid himself of his sadistic lusts in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Glen Cavaliero suggests that 'here in this final act of violence Powys exorcises the evil impulse by putting it to a good end'.<sup>5</sup> However, the impulse is far from exorcised, for just as the reading of perverse and sadistic books brought Owen no relief, so the writing of them offers Powys no escape from his fascination with the act of violence, even when it is justified in this fashion. Shortly after this the Cerne Giant dispatches his oppressor, Bog, in the same manner.

The final example, taken from one of the three final stories, is an extraordinarily dispassionate account of violence, even for Powys. There is no attempt to justify the attack, nor is any personal animosity involved. Gyges appears for the first and last time in that final half-page chapter to perform his acts of destruction and leave us with headless bodies and a shower of dust.

A course has been traced from acts of violence motivated by intense personal emotions to mindless acts occurring on a cosmic scale. The examples I used earlier of Freud's Eros/Thanatos pulsions in Powys' fiction are again applicable—the conflicting 'mythologies' of *Wood and Stone*, with their strong associations of masochism and sadism, are undeniable human concerns, whereas the opposition at the heart of *All or Nothing* is conducted on a cosmic, universal scale. The physical Shattered Skull and the course of Powys' fiction are thus intimately and disturbingly linked.

If the physical reality of the Shattered Skull is disturbing, then its symbolic role is more so. As a symbol it has an immediately obvious function as a

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<sup>5</sup> Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford University Press, 1973), pp150-

### 1. *The Shattered Skull*

representation of death and of the extreme, often sadistic violence that is to be found in Powys' works, whether it appears as an actuality or an image in a character's imagination, and this function is maintained throughout. And yet this is not a simple image. The Skull intact has long been the accepted symbol of death—Webster, as Eliot pointed out, 'was much possessed by death, /and saw the skull beneath the skin'; the action of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, one of the most death-laden plays in the English language, hinges upon the skull of its hero's lover; Yorick's skull is a central and abiding image in *Hamlet*; the traditional, if clichéd, personification of Death is a black-robed, scythe-toting skeleton—and now this symbol has been shattered.<sup>6</sup> In this Shattering the defeat of death is implied, and a way is opened into what lies beyond. It is to this—the eternity devoid of suffering and death—that many of Powys' characters aspire in their search for the Golden Age.

Resonances of the central Christian image, the Cross, are obvious. A symbol of violence and death is transformed, through Christ's passion and death, into a symbol of hope and eternal life, and death is defeated. But Powys was not in the business of writing a paraphrase of the Christian apocalypse. The transformation of the Cross through Christ's 'once for all' sacrifice of himself is a permanent, one way transformation—the cross can now only lead to life, never to destruction. The Shattered Skull, as I stated above, always maintains its destructive nature, even when it is pointing towards the Golden Age.

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<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Waugh's black comedy set in the human and animal graveyards of Southern California, *The Loved One* (1948), in which one would expect to find a fair number of skulls, actually employs the Shattered Skull in its dealings with death, first as the cremation of a barbary goat is hurried along by the crushing of its skull (p38), then as the 'hero' awaits the final combustion of his fiancée Aimée Thanatogenos:

The fire roared in the brick oven. Dennis must wait until all was consumed. He must take out the glowing ashes, pound up the skull and pelvis, perhaps and disperse the fragments. (Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1948), p 127

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And what of the Golden Age? This has nothing to do with the Garden of Eden or the Christian Heaven. Rather, it harks back to the ancient Golden Age described by Hesiod in his *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, which was created by Kronos the son of Ovranos, and which was destroyed by Zeus when he sent Pandora, the first woman, to earth as a punishment to men, before which 'the tribes of men lived on earth apart from evil and grievous toil and sore diseases that bring the fates of death to man'.<sup>7</sup> It is this Golden Age where men lived like the gods, that Myrddin Wylt—the latest incarnation of Cronos—is seeking to recreate in *Porius* when he demands that all wielders of authority and power 'learn to unmake themselves as I did' (POR:276). An anti-female element may be detected here, with the Golden Age, according to Hesiod, being ended by the first woman, but it is the unmaking of authority—which is in itself a turning inward of the Shattering of Skulls—which is of central importance. What Myrddin Wylt advocates is a reversal of the process postulated by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, by which man rose to civilization out of the state of Nature. This state, at least in Hobbes' version, has little to do with the paradisaical notions associated with the term 'Golden Age':

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth: no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea: no commodious buildings; no Instruments of moving, and removing things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>8</sup>

The dystopian worlds of the later fantasies, where figures of authority such as God and the Devil welcome their own dissolution (*Up and Out*), do indeed

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<sup>7</sup> A.W. Mair, trans. & ed., *Hesiod: The Poems and Fragments* (Oxford University Press, 1908), 'Works and Days', p 4

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909—reprinted from edition of 1651) 'Of Man', ch 13, pp 96-7 (p 62 original pagination)

### 1. *The Shattered Skull*

show signs of being in this state of Nature. But the struggle against authority and 'normality'—whether this is expressed religiously, politically or sexually—is a constant force in Powys, and is consistently linked to the struggle towards, and the attainment of, the Golden Age.

The Shattered Skull is, then, a symbol of huge complexity, and it is as well to bear in mind Patrick Murray's comment on symbolism, that it gains its power from imaginative rather than intellectual connections: 'The symbol...has only *one* fixed meaning: its literal one. Its other meanings are far too elusive for us to be able to fix'.<sup>9</sup> Thus with its continually shifting meaning, ranging from violence and destruction through the hope of freedom and a Golden Age into the actually attained Golden Age of the last books, the Shattered Skull is the master-symbol of Powys' work. On some occasions, notably *Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle*, it is wholly absent—although in *Weymouth Sands* the Jobber's threat on Dogberry Cattistock's life, and his Chesil Beach stone maintain it as a vague, unrealised presence—and elsewhere its division against itself—life against death, the Eros/Thanatos split—leads to the use of secondary symbols, such as the Grail in *A Glastonbury Romance*. Yet it always remains.

Alongside this ever-present symbol are the recurring character-types of the novels. The androgynous women I have already mentioned, and they are joined by mystics/magicians, giants, madmen and heros/anti-heros. It is the character-types most closely aligned with the Shattered Skull—mainly the androgynes and the magicians—who, by accepting the contradictions and the collapse of structures and normalities within and around them, are survivors and are able to attain the Golden Age. The 'heros', however, are usually caught between various structures and value-systems as they collapse, reducing them to wavering in-action, as in the cases of Adrian Sorio, Wolf Solent and Jobber Skald.

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<sup>9</sup> Patrick Murray, *Literary Criticism: A Glossary of Major Terms* (Dublin: Smurfit Books Ltd. Harlow: Longman Group Ltd., 1978), p 157)

### 1. *The Shattered Skull*

It is my intention to trace the course of this symbol, along with its associated motivating forces and character-types, through Powys' fiction, showing how *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius* are the two greatest expositions of them, and how the fiction collapses after *Porius* into the terrifying Golden Age which is overshadowed by the inherent violence of the Shattered Skull.



## 2: FLOWERS OF SILENCE:

### *WOOD AND STONE TO WOLF SOLENT*

The obvious place to make a division between novels when writing about Powys would appear to be after the first three works, before the more famous cycle of the four 'Dorset novels' begins, for that is the point where Powys' real abilities as a novelist become clear, and where his public recognition began. For the purposes of this study, however, a more natural break comes after rather than before *Wolf Solent*, as this enables the development of Powys' themes and ideas to be traced up to the writing of *A Glastonbury Romance*. In these first novels there exist early forms of much that is to come later. The genesis of the character-types that recur so many times—at this stage the most clearly drawn are the dark androgynous women and the indecisive hero/anti-hero figures—can be seen. Out of the conflict of forces a nihilistic philosophy of violence and self-destruction (Thanatos) begins to emerge. Symbols are used and experimented with to various extents, and connections between symbols, forces and characters begin to emerge.

It is not simply because they see the birth of so many of Powys' long-term concerns that I have grouped these novels together. They are also united, despite their widely divergent plots, by an overwhelming tone of futility and silence. Even when, as in *Wood and Stone*, Powys is at pains to bring all the various strands of the plot to a satisfactory ending no real resolution is achieved. We are left only with a slow collapse incomprehending silence and isolation.

## 2.1: THE EARLY NOVELS

Can the Will to Power and the Will to Sacrifice ever enter into an open conflict which may lead to a conclusive victory for either, or are they too intimately linked? Any victory gained by the Will to Power must of necessity involve some degree of sacrifice on the part of its victim—Sacrifice has fulfilled its purpose and both have triumphed. Conversely, Sacrifice betrays its essential nature in imposing itself upon others—in defeating Power, Sacrifice also defeats itself. It is in this ambiguous relationship that Freud's life and death instincts emerge in Powys' first novel *Wood and Stone*, and it is the twisting of the two together that lies behind its failure to reach a resolution.

The entire work is overshadowed by the 'Mythology of Sacrifice' and the 'Mythology of Power'—even to the extent of two chapters bearing their names—in what amounts to Powys' most blatant use of such motivating forces. This blatancy does not mean that this is a simplistic treatment. A complex network of symbolism and relationships is built around these forces, growing out of the basic opposition of wood and stone. Stone in its enduring solidity is used as the symbol of Power while Wood, with its connotations of change, growth and subversion—indeed at one stage it is stated that 'ash-tree roots can undermine anything' (WAS:463), even the malign power of stone—symbolises Sacrifice.

The landscape of the novel is dominated by two hills—the thickly wooded Nevilton Mount where a fragment of the True Cross, an archetypal symbol of Sacrifice, was found, and Leo's Hill, the source of Nevilton Sandstone and thus of economic power. In his short introductory chapter Powys makes clear the ceaseless antagonism and conflict of these symbolic hills, and shows how the lives of the inhabitants of Nevilton are affected by them:

It was on the apex of Nevilton Mount that the Holy Rood of Waltham was first found; but with whatever spiritual influence this event may have endowed the gentler summit, it is not to it, but to Leo's Hill, that the lives and destinies of the people of Nevilton have come

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

to gravitate. One might indeed without difficulty conceive of a strange supernatural conflict going on between the consecrated repository of Christian tradition guarding its little flock, and the impious heathen fortress to which day by day that flock is driven, to seek their material sustenance.(WAS:1-2)

By selecting such basic materials as wood and stone for his symbols Powys has implicated the landscape and the people. The influence of wood and stone over the people goes deeper than where they live and work. The Romer family, principle proponents of the Will to Power, own the quarries on Leo's Hill, while one of the chief victims of the embodiment of Sacrifice, Maurice Quincunx, lives on the slopes of Nevilton Mount, on the outskirts of Nevilton Village.

It is in James Andersen that this personal form of symbolism is at its most complex and powerful. Like his brother and their father before them, James is a stonemason, and is thus powerfully associated with both Stone and Power. His own perception of his relationship with Stone begins to obsess and unbalance his mind, especially when the love he feels for Lacrima Traffio—the second major Sacrifice/Wood character—leads him to believe that he has betrayed his native element:

'Every stone I touch is angry and keeps talking to me and upbraiding me...But they needn't fret themselves. The end will surprise even them. *They* do not know...that I shall very soon be, even as they are!...It'll be me...he'll turn into stone!'(WAS:442-3)

The first of a long series of mad-men, James' insanity is both disturbing and touching. His growing conviction that in death he will be united with the stone that has dominated his life finds its fulfilment when he plunges to his death in a quarry, although the circumstances of his death dispel his belief that 'I can't help her [Lacrima]. I have worked too long at stone. I am too near stone.'(p463), for it is his appearance on the edge of the quarry that prevents the farmer John Goring molesting Lacrima. His death, as well as his madness, is at the start of a series:

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The height of his fall would, in any case, have probably killed him, but as it was 'he dashed his head' in the language of the Bible, 'against a stone'; and in less than a second after his last cry, his soul, to use the expression of a more pagan scripture, 'was driven, murmuring, into the shades.' (WAS:570)

James thus becomes Powys' first Shattered Skull, although his death is accidental rather than the more usual murder. The manner of his death further illustrates the dualistic nature of the Shattered Skull's symbolism. James' stonemason father, who had, according to rumour, virtually tormented his wife into madness and death—leading witch-Bessie to equate the mother and son in their torment—is symbolised in the novel by his memorial stone, which is carved into a huge human skull. In shattering his own skull James symbolically breaks his father's domination, escaping at last the malign influence of the stone.

In this complex, personal working out of the conflicting forces James is an early version of Owen Evans, in whom the lust for violence and the desperate urge to escape from it into the Golden Age meet so disastrously, and in his inner turmoil a forerunner of many of the later 'hero' figures.

Another early 'hero' who is caught up in the Power/Sacrifice duality is Maurice Quincunx. He—along with Lacrima—is, in Powys' terminology, a 'pariah', an outcast, a principle representative of Sacrifice, continually persecuted by his relatives, the Romers. Here masochism begins to surface—he is strongly attracted to the power that persecutes him. He is eventually motivated into taking decisive action by his encounter with the orphaned circus-girl, Dolores, whom he 'rescues'.<sup>1</sup> Quincunx has finally found someone weaker and more helpless than himself—his fellow Pariah, Lacrima, is throughout presented as a more vital and active character than her lover—and although the three of them eventually escape to the continent, we are left in little doubt that he has now become a wielder of Power, illustrating how Power and Sacrifice are twisted together, while Lacrima and Dolores remain victims. The poisoned

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<sup>1</sup> The plot here anticipates Dud No-man and Wizzie Ravelston in *Maiden Castle*

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

nature of their escape is further highlighted by the suggestions of Quicunx's sexual feelings towards the twelve year old girl, and by his wish that Lacrima were dead.(chxxviii, p701)

Although the Power/Sacrifice duality and its related symbolism runs so deeply through the text they can be defeated, or even side-stepped. Luke Andersen transcends the struggle which destroys his brother James. He fulfils, perhaps, the symbolic potential of the stonemason, the man who manipulates Stone, and thus Power. Largely unconcerned with the events in Nevilton, moved only by his brother's death, he lives his life for pleasure. He is most free when he visits Weymouth, particularly when swimming in the sea, as the later salvific nature of the town is forecast:

Wave after wave splashed against his face. Pieces of floating sea-weed and wisps of surf clung to his arms and hair. But he held resolutely on, breathing deep breaths of liberty and exultation, and drinking in, as if from a vast wide-brimmed cup, the thrilling spaciousness of air and sky.(WAS:589)

Another character who frequently visits Weymouth is the artist Ralph Dangelis. Although he is a wielder of Power, through his money if nothing else, and becomes caught up with the Romer family—he is engaged to Gladys for a time—he is also an outsider, an American, and so stands apart from the Nevilton Power/Sacrifice struggle. It is his money which eventually enables Quicunx and his charges to flee the country.

Vennie Seldom also side-steps the struggle. During the novel's course she becomes a convert to Roman Catholicism—a conversion to which Powys himself was tempted, as he tells us in *Autobiography*; even though he remained an Anglican, however increasingly unorthodox, he retained a great respect for his friend J.W. Williams, the Roman Catholic theologian—with the intention of entering a convent, and it is through the strength of her faith that she transcends both Power and Sacrifice. She and the theologian Francis Taxater are portrayed as the most noble and virtuous characters in the novel, motivated

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by philanthropy and love. Unfortunately, our respect for them can only be lessened by their obvious assumption of their superiority to others, particularly the misguided—i.e. Anglican—priest Hugh Clavering. Noble, perhaps, but distinctly unsympathetic.<sup>2</sup>

One of the major consistent forces in Powys' work is sex, and although this is perhaps emphasised less in the early novels than later, it still fulfils an important role. As I have already mentioned, there is a measure of sexual attraction in Quicunx's concern for Dolores, but the main focus of sexuality is Gladys Romer. Although she becomes engaged to Dangelis, she is involved in a relationship with Luke Andersen, which results in her pregnancy, and continually torments Clavering with her flirtation. Despite its vibrancy and power, it is her sexuality which is eventually her downfall. Once she is pregnant Luke abandons her, and her obvious infidelity gives Dangelis the excuse he sought to break the engagement, leaving marriage to Clavering—who is desperately in love with her, although she does not love him—as her only option. Gladys' fertility is matched by that of the rich landscape. In the course of the late spring and summer during which the novel is set the countryside teems with life—although there are strong hints of unnaturalness, for the lateness of spring and the intense summer heat compress the plants of spring, summer and autumn into one strange season, which inevitably reflects back onto Gladys' own chaotic sexuality.

Gladys is also the first of Powys' androgynous women, and she is perhaps the most self-consciously cruel of all of them. Her relationship with her 'companion' Lacrima is a good example of this, and also provides a detailed account of the inter-relation of Power and Sacrifice. Her androgyny is most strongly pointed when Dangelis is painting her as Ariadne (pp236–246), where her combination of 'boyish sandals' and continual darting around and through the conservatory windows contrast sharply with her 'girlish figure'.

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<sup>2</sup> Powys' attitude to Roman Catholicism is explored more fully below in the discussion of *Autobiography*

The novel, which in terms of its plot and many of its characters looks forward to *A Glastonbury Romance*, ends with a long conversation between Luke and Taxater, in a late October rainstorm, which offers no explanations and reveals only the incomprehension that remains between people. Its final words look forward both to the drowning which ends *Rodmoor* and the flood of *A Glastonbury Romance*:

The rain increased in violence. It seemed as though the room where they sat was isolated from the whole world by a flood of down-pouring waves. The gods of the immense Spaces were weeping, and man, in his petty preoccupation, could only mutter and stare.

Luke rose to his feet. 'To Romer and his stone-works,' he said, emptying his glass at one gulp down his throat, 'and may he make me their manager!'

Mr. Taxater also rose. 'To the tears that wash away all these things,' he said, 'and the Necessity that was before them and will be after them.'

They went out of the house together, and the silence that fell between them was like the silence at the bottom of deep waters.(WAS:722)

The rich and sunlit verdancy of this first novel is dispelled as Powys moves to the barren Norfolk fens of *Rodmoor*, an altogether darker novel than its predecessor. The forces at work here are never as clearly defined as they were in *Wood and Stone*, and it only gradually becomes clear that the conflict here is a far more basic one between the urges of life and death. Suggestions of Freud's theories of Eros and Thanatos are obvious especially as, like his two pulsions, Powys' unnamed forces remain largely subconscious.

The immediate and concrete symbolism of *Wood and Stone* is also gone—with perhaps the exception of the sea, which takes on different meanings at different times, the symbols of *Rodmoor* are strange and abstract things. The philosophy of destruction propounded by Adrian Sorio is symbolised by a brilliant radiance, which at on stage he sees in the light of the sun on the sea:

Pure destruction—destruction for its own sake—such as I see it—is no thick, heavy, muddy, perverted impulse such as the cruel

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are obsessed by. It's a burning and devouring flame. It's a mad, splendid revel of glaring whiteness like this which hurts our eyes now. I'm going to show in my book how the ultimate essence of life, as we find it, purest and most purged in the ecstasies of the saints, is nothing but an insanity of destruction.(ROD:111)

This savage yet strangely beautiful vision, which later finds a forceful advocate in Medrawd in *Porius*—who would relish Adrian's 'happiness of seeing world after world turned into oblivion'(p113)—is countered by Brand Renshaw's vision. Like Adrian he senses a tendency towards self-destruction, but for him it is symbolised by darkness and decay and he seeks desperately—largely through his relationships with girls, in this case Linda Herrick—to drag himself back from this verge of madness:

'When you're dealing with me, you're dealing with someone who's lost the power of being frightened by words, someone who's seen the black pools—did you guess there were black pools in this world?—and has seen the red stains in them and who knows what caused these stains?...I tell you *I've seen bats in the dawn*—and seen them too, with images in memory that only *that sound*—do you hear it still?—could equal for horror...Linda and I understand each other...we understand each other. She does me good. She distracts me. She keeps those black pools out of my mind. She keeps Philippa's eyes from following me about. She takes the taste of funguses out of my mouth.'(ROD:191)

Brand's startling vision of dissolution is linked also to the sea, and the unreasoning fear that he and Linda feel for it. At Weymouth the sea washed away the troubles of Nevilton. Here it erodes the land, and as old buildings and old graveyards are washed away so is the past. The stability of both place and people is under threat, and the old Renshaw family is the chief victim of this instability. The sea is both a symbol and an instrument of the drift towards destruction.

Another strong advocate, however coincidentally, of the philosophy of self-destruction, is Adrian's friend Baltazar Stork. On Adrian's announcement of his engagement and his committal to a lunatic asylum shortly afterwards, Baltazar



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carefully ties up his affairs before 'without haste or violence, and with his brain supernaturally clear' (p429) he commits suicide.

If the functioning and symbolism of the will to death is obscure and tenuous, that of life is even more so. The principle proponent of life is Nance Herrick, although many of her friends, such as Dr Raughty and the priest Hamish Traherne, fall roughly into the same bracket. Abandoned by both her sister Linda and her fiancé Adrian at various points, it is largely left to Nance to be the symbol of life. In need of some such symbol herself she turns to Adrian's son Baptiste, whom she summons to his now insane father's side at the novel's conclusion. Although Baptiste never arrives, he becomes a powerful symbol of hope for Nance:

But every night before she slept, she would see through her closed eyelids that longed-for boy, standing—that was how she always conceived him—at the bows of the ship, standing tall and fair like a young god; borne forward over the starlit ocean to bring help to them all.

In her dreams, night after night, the boy came to her, and she found him then of an unearthly beauty and endowed with a mysterious supernatural power. In her dreams, the wild impossible hope, that somehow, somewhere, he would be the one to save Linda from the ruin of her youthful life, took to itself sweet, immediate fulfilment.(ROD:433)

Yet even Baptiste is of uncertain symbolism, for he seems to be linked to the vision of an androgynous figure which Adrian has in London, and which inspires him to move to Rodmoor, a vision which is unsettlingly double-edged: 'It was the very embodiment of tragic supplication, and yet, in the look it fixed on me, there was a cold, merciless mockery.'(p18)

The sterile and deathly nature of Rodmoor finds adequate symbolism in the yellow-horned poppy, the flower claimed by Mrs Renshaw to be the most characteristic of the place, for which Nance feels an immediate revulsion:

What struck the girl more vividly than either the bluish tint or the threatening spikes were the large, limply-drooping flowers of a pallid sulphurous yellow which the plant displayed. They were

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flowers that bore but small resemblance to the flowers of other poppies. They had a peculiar, melancholy air, even before they began to fade, an air as though the taste of their petals would induce a sleep of a deeper, more obliterating kind than any 'drowsy syrups' or 'mandragora'. (ROD:246-7)

What, then, of Powys' master-symbol the Shattered Skull amid this sterility? At the onset of his madness, Adrian launches a savage attack on Brand Renshaw:

It was not long before Brand's other arm was rendered as useless as the first, and the blows falling now on his unprotected head, soon felled him to the ground.(ROD:402)

The attack fails. Adrian, the advocate of destruction, is unable to smash his opponents skull. The Shattered Skull, and its symbolism of destruction, is denied for its disciple is too weak to bring it to fulfilment. Many of his actions, particularly his rescue of fish stuck in nets on the sea-shore (p116), cast doubt on how strong this faith in obliteration really is.<sup>3</sup>

An ambiguous power is once again wielded by sex in this novel. Like Gladys before her, Linda becomes pregnant through an illicit affair, but there all similarity ends. Gladys' pregnancy was in many ways a mark of fertility and a celebration of life—for Luke if not for Gladys—while Linda's is a dead and unnatural state growing out of a relationship based rather on a mutual fear of the sea and Brand's need to escape his inner darkness than on love.

Philippa Renshaw is the second of Powys' androgynous women and, although far less self-consciously cruel than Gladys, she is much more strongly perceived in her role than her forerunner, with the 'boyish outlines of her body'(p49), and her desire to 'throw off every vestige and token of her human imprisonment and to pass forth free and unfettered into the embrace of

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian's failure to kill Brand is later echoed in the Jobber's unfulfilled threats on Dogberry Cattistock's life in *Weymouth Sands*, but whereas the Jobber's 'failure' leads him into a new life with Perdita, Adrian's leads only to dissolution and eventually death.

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

the primeval powers'(p51)—a dissatisfaction with humanity that emerges more strongly in the later androgyne, Persephone Spear.

Philippa is also involved in two relationships which are the prototypes of many Powys wrote of. Firstly there is the implied incestuous relationship with her brother—the short chapter 'Oakguard'(pp49–57) details the relationship as well as containing many references to her androgyny—and then her involvement with Adrian and Nance, one of the tortured three-way relationships which seem to have fascinated Powys.

Other character-types are not so clearly represented. Adrian is approaching the standard dithering hero/anti-hero—even to the extent of habitually carrying a stick, as many of his successors do—who is paralysed by the collapse of order in his life, and Baltazar is the first of a series of homosexual characters. Rachel Doorm is a vague follower of Witch-Bessie in the line of wise old women, as is Mrs Renshaw.

The end of the novel, with Philippa using Adrian's dead body—the cause of his death is never explained, he collapsed while trying to reach the sea, crying out to Baptiste and Nance—as a weight to drag her below the waves again, brings us back to isolation and silence:

Far from land it carried them—under the misty unseeing sky— far from misery and madness, and when the dawn came trembling at last over the restless expanse of water, it found only the white sea-horses and the white sea-birds. Those two had sunk together; out of the reach of humanity, out of the reach of Rodmoor.(ROD:460)

Over the whole text, as indeed over all these early novels, hang the ominous lines of poetry which Adrian quotes to Nance—and which arouses in her an 'unaccountable foreboding'(p17)—from Remy de Gourmont's *Le Livre des Litanies*:

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

'Rose au regard saphique, plus pâle que les lys, rose au regard saphique, offre-nous le parfum de ton illusoire virginité, fleur hypocrite, fleur de silence.' (ROD:17)<sup>4</sup>

The silence and deception suggested in these lines are rife in these works, and the disturbance that Nance feels having them thus highlighted by one so caught up in them is unsurprising.

Many of the themes of *Rodmoor* are taken further in *Ducdame*. Like Adrian before him, the priest William Hastings is writing a book concerned with the centrality of destruction, but where Adrian was consumed by his own destruction before his philosophy was complete, Hastings finishes his work. The result, however, is a triumph for the will to life, for the heavily pregnant Lady Ann Ashover, one of Powys' strongest life-affirming characters, throws the book into a bonfire.

### 2.2: *WOLF SOLENT*

*Wolf Solent* is a novel about love and history—although this is not to suggest that it is a nostalgic, pastoral idyll. Wolf's life, and the lives of those around him are dominated and bounded by these two forces. It is from the past that Wolf earns his living, as a history teacher in both London and Ramsgard, and as literary assistant to Squire Urquhart, where he is engaged in writing up a scabrous 'history' of Dorset. The time not spent working is consumed in crises of love, arising from his attempts to maintain a physical relationship with one woman and a cerebral one with another. Although these are the dominant forces of the novel they are not in conflict with one another. The past clashes with the present and love with either hatred or indifference in an increasingly complex narrative.

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<sup>4</sup> Rose with a Sapphic eye, paler than lilies, rose with a sapphic eye, give us the fragrance of your illusory virginity, hypocritical flower, flower of silence.(My translation)

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

As Wolf journeys from London to Blacksod he is journeying into the past, for he is returning to the place of his birth, a place full of old memories and acquaintances, both living and dead which assure that the past cannot be avoided.<sup>5</sup>

In the preceding novels the past has been a somewhat vague and unrealised force. A shadow was partially cast across *Wood and Stone* by the Andersens' dead father, and a number of incidents and important conversations took place in graveyards—places pregnant with the past. *Rodmoor*, thanks to the physical and symbolic erosions by the sea, lacked the stability provided by the past. Here we have the first instance of the past as a strongly active force.

The major representative of the past is William Solent, Wolf's dead father. In his frequently apostrophised grave and skeleton we come closest to the type of symbolism that has gone before. The conflict here is obvious and personal. When attracted by a woman William Solent did not hesitate to act—hence the presence in the text of his wife Ann, his 'mistress' Selena and his illegitimate daughter Mattie, and also explaining his fall from grace, from Ramsgard schoolmaster to workhouse inmate. His son is more inhibited, to the extent of being paralysed by his doubts and fears. Once he has succeeded in seducing and marrying Gerda he refuses to enter into a sexual relationship with Christie, despite her obvious willingness (see ch.20) and Gerda's infidelity. Instead he attempts to obey his self-imposed strictures by keeping the relationship 'platonic'—a term for which he and Christie both express an intense dislike—and recreating the Ann-William-Selena relationship. Gerda, however, is no Ann Solent with a deep and abiding love for her husband, nor is Christie a Selena Gault, content with

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<sup>5</sup> Powys seems to journey into the past along with Wolf, for in Dorset we enter a world of candle-light and horse-drawn traps, creating an odd sense of anachronism. As Glen Cavaliero puts it:

Instead of boldly declaiming that his book was set in the late nineteenth century he blended with the manners and customs of the time other attitudes and attributes belonging to the present day—the world of 1929. (*John Cowper Powys: Novelist*: 44)

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

intellectual companionship—the love that both once felt subsides into indifference. More importantly, perhaps, Wolf is not his father—there is little doubt that William would have acted, happily seducing both women, where Wolf, the hero-type, remains paralysed.<sup>6</sup>

Although he is thus in opposition with the past, Wolf is also inextricably linked with it. He is the first of many characters—later notable examples are the Welsh heroes Owen Glendower and Porius—with the trick of distancing himself from events by ‘shrinking into his soul’(p19). The various practitioners of this art know it by different names, and Wolf terms it ‘mythology’—a naming with obvious links with the past, while his own account of its genesis and function strengthens these links:

This was a certain trick he had of doing what he called ‘sinking into his soul’. This trick had been a furtive custom of his from very early days. In his childhood his mother had often rallied him about it in her own light-hearted way... His father, on the other hand, had encouraged him in these moods, taking them very gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of infant magician. This ‘sinking into his soul’—this sensation which he called ‘mythology’—consisted of a certain summoning-up, to the surface of his mind, of a subconscious magnetic power which from those very early Weymouth days, as he watched the glitter of sun and moon upon these waters from that bow-window, had seemed prepared to answer such a summons.(WS:19–20)

Thus rooted in the past, and uniting him with his father against his mother, this ‘mythology’ which has ‘no outlet in any sort of action’ and is ‘limited entirely to a secret sensation in his own mind’(p20) is largely what paralyzes Wolf. Taking significant actions, particularly those which transgress his ‘moral code’—Wolf perceives his ‘mythology’ as entering, on the side of good, into a cosmic struggle between good and evil—such as continuing to work for Urquhart or succumbing to his desire for Christie may damage or even destroy his ‘mythology’. Indeed, when he returns to Urquhart’s employ and accepts money from him Wolf feels a ‘spiritual wedge...driven into his disordered life

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that while Ann’s love for William abides she leaves him—the opposite occurs in the case of Gerda and Wolf.

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

illusion'(p49). Although, in rejecting Christie, he seeks to maintain this avatar of the past by denying the present and its possibilities, Wolf finally accepts the loss of his 'mythology'. Shortly after this he finally rejects his father and all his associations of the past—being particularly cruel to his one-time friend Selena Gault who is still tormented by an undying love for William—and sides with his mother, who lives more consciously for the moment and in the present than anyone but Gerda, and who is happily making a new life for herself:

Would it be with his mother or father that he would range himself now, were this accusing creature with the pendulous lip and the vast black lap the very judgement of God? With which of them? With which of them?

With his mother! Out of that hard, ironic flesh he had been torn. Good or bad, he would be judged with her!(WS:524)

Although too late to prevent the wreck of his relationships with Gerda and Christie, Wolf finally resolves the past/present conflict in favour of the present.

As may be expected when love is one of the major motivating forces of the novel sexuality takes on a more central role than in the previous works. Beyond the circle of love and indifference that turns upon Wolf there is a complex cycle of homosexual attraction and repulsion. Squire Urquhart, the poet Jason Otter and the priest T. E., or 'Tilly', Valley—the novel's overtly homosexual figures—are all obsessed with Wolf's predecessor in Urquhart's employ, Jimmy Redfern, and particularly with his death. They persist in blaming one another for his attempted suicide in Lenty Pond—a suicide Wolf is at one point tempted to repeat as the past exerts its influence on him (see ch.23 'Lenty Pond')—and his eventual death from pneumonia. Urquhart's obsession extends to attempts to exhume the body, with Wolf and Gerda finding holes burrowed into the boy's grave during Valley's school treat. Later, Wolf and Valley witness the grave being tampered with late at night. Despite these vague hints of necrophilia, and Valley's assertion that by failing to intervene he has 'betrayed the Sacrament'(p552), the quarrel between Urquhart and the priest is resolved

## 2. *Flowers of Silence*

into friendship, as Wolf's final encounter with Urquhart's servant, Roger Monk, one of the men who tampered with Redfern's grave, illustrates. This time Monk is carefully tending the grave:

'Squire ain't, and never has been, what you might call religious,' he said, 'but he's got fixed in his mind, since his sleep returned to him, that our parson has worked a miracle. 'Twould be all my place is worth if he knew I knew what he was up to... He've a-been over there three times this week already!'... 'Probably' [Wolf] thought, 'he's begging Tilly Valley to let him take the sacrament!'(WS:623-4)

A similar reconciliation seems to have occurred between Urquhart and Jason, for, although they remain on very distant terms afterwards, Wolf at one stage finds them getting drunk together(ch.21 'Slate').<sup>7</sup>

Also caught up in this cycle of attraction and repulsion by their association with Urquhart and Redfern's grave are Monk and Thomas Round. Round appears to be even more affected than the others, for numerous hints are dropped that his mentally unbalanced state is partly due to Redfern's death—although as no-one ever explains this to Wolf we are left in the dark.

The cycle of sexual deviance is taken further in Round's niece, Bess, whose mechanical blankness puzzles Wolf until he sees her with another girl:

But what was this? The look he captured upon her face was a look of unmistakable emotion, such as a boy would have displayed when he was caressing the object of his desire. Like a flash it came over Wolf, as he wavered there for a second, that he was in the presence of a passionate perversity, kindred to that he had discovered elsewhere in this Dorsetshire village; and he was a little startled to find how the presence of it set his heart beating and his pulses throbbing.(WS:400-1)

Although all other references to Bess's lesbianism are even more oblique than this 'passionate perversity,' and although Wolf finds himself strangely attracted to her, she is given a sympathetic portrayal and is not judged. The same

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<sup>7</sup> The exact details of these reconciliations are never made clear. Wolf is the sole focus of attention in the narrative, supplying unity to what would otherwise be a confusing and disordered text. Unfortunately, anything that is not brought before Wolf's attention does not reach us, and he does not witness these reconciliations.



is true of her male counterparts Jason, Urquhart and Valley—indeed one of the novel's calmest and most beautiful scenes is when Jason and Urquhart watch Bob Weevil and Lobbie Tarp swimming naked in Lenty Pond.

A much darker treatment is given to the Malakite family. Malakite, an old friend of William Solent, fathered a child, Olwen, on his own daughter in Powys' first full-blown incestuous relationship. Powys' fascination with incest, and his somewhat idiosyncratic attitude towards it is revealed in a letter to Nicholas Ross, which also calls for some speculation as to Powys' relationships with his brothers and sisters:

I feel so very very very very strongly that what is nowadays considered one of the most wicked sins is in reality a beautiful and praiseworthy thing. I refer to what is called INCEST. Of all the families in the world we Powyses ought to stand up fiercely in favour of Incest. What statue of all in the whole world is the most famous? The Sphinx. And where is that? In Egypt. And whom did the Pharaoh Kings marry? Their sisters! O wise, wise men!... When visitors came to have tea with our mothers they said 'but where are your children? We hear you have eleven.' My mother replied, 'My children like to be together.' AND SO BY HEAVEN WE DID.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of this attitude, the perversity of the Malakites alone among their fellows attracts approbation. Selena Gault mounts a campaign of persecution against them, doing her utmost to keep Olwen away from her father/grandfather and sister. Wolf's dislike of Malakite keeps him a dim and distant figure, implicated in Urquhart's unsavoury activities by virtue of being the supplier of books 'the debased purpose of which is simply and solely to play upon the erotic nerves of unbalanced sensuality'.(p418).

Christie Malakite, the second and darker object of Wolf's desire after Gerda, is the most powerful so far of Powys' androgynes. Her first appearance stresses this nature:

...the impression he received of her appearance was confined to an awareness of smoothly-parted hair, of quaint, pointed chin,

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<sup>8</sup> Letters to Nicholas Ross, letter of March 17, 1960, pp159-60

and of a figure so slight and sexless that it resembled those meagre, androgynous forms that can be seen sometimes in early Italian pictures.  
(WS:83)

For all his professed love, Wolf never really comes to know her. When he reads a section of a book that she is writing—Christie is unique in Powys' work as a female writer, and one of two novelists, the other being *Maiden Castle's* Dud No-Man—he is shocked by both the content and the style. In prose more related to Virginia Woolf than Powys she writes of a girl coming to terms with an incestuous relationship with her father in a remarkably callous fashion:

Forgetting. A girl dissecting memory and forgetting her shame! Why shouldn't she forget? He was a very old man. In a few years, perhaps in less than a year, she would be looking at his dead face. (WS:486)

As their relationship begins to crumble Wolf seriously begins to wonder whether Christie, like her sister, has been taken to her father's bed. He is also forced to acknowledge that she is as deeply implicated as her father in the sale of perverted books. Finally, as Malakite lies dying he introduces the idea that Christie has murdered him, claiming that 'She pushed me down'(p595), thus explaining his fall down the steps.

If Christie is an androgyne, then the walking-stick-carrying, perpetually dithering Wolf is a 'hero' in the true Powys tradition. Other character-types occur here. Selena Gault is one of the wise old maids. Ann and Gerda are women concerned more with living life rather than with intellectual issues, both looking forward to Morfydd in *Porius*. The many homosexual and lesbian characters that are to come later are rooted here. In some senses it falls to Malakite to act as a prophet/mystic figure, his dying words highlighting the importance of leaving behind the past:

'He...will...for...' The sound of this ghastly susurrations seemed to come from under the bedclothes, from under the bed, from under the floor, from under the bookshop beneath the floor, from under the clay-bottom of Blacksod...with a convulsion of his whole frame, the

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bookseller jerked himself into a sitting posture. Spasmodically drawing in his legs, like a frog swimming on its back, he kicked off every shred of clothing.....

'Forget!' he shrieked; and his voice resembled the tearing of a strip of calico. He was dead when he sank back; and from one of the corners of his mouth a stream of saliva tinged with a red stain, trickled upon the pillow. (WS:595)

Malakite's final word is the essence of what Wolf has slowly learned. An obsession with the past—either the actuality of it, as in Selena Gault's case, or Wolf's more abstract 'mythology'—can only lead to pain and failure.<sup>9</sup> The reconciliations between Jason, Urquhart and Valley would all seem to point to the same necessity to forget the past. And so we are left with Wolf alone in a field of buttercups turned to a gorgeous glowing gold by the sunset—a prefiguring perhaps of the sunset at the climax of *Porius* which sees the final confounding of Nineue's schemes—accepting the probability of Gerda's new infidelity with Carfax, with the mundane thought 'Well, I shall have a cup of tea.'(p634) Not quite the abysmal silence that ended *Wood and Stone* and *Rodmoor*, but a similar sense of isolation and despair.

I have termed these novels 'Flowers of Silence' because of the enduring silences and incomprehensions into which they subside. For all that life may triumph in *Ducdame*, for all that Wolf finally turns from his past and is prepared to live his life in the present, for all that Quicunx, Lacrima and Dolores escape Nevilton, the over-riding tone is of a terrible isolation. Even the sexual relationships dealt with here—and sex is always one of the strongest forces in Powys' work—tend to collapse into non-existence: Luke Andersen and Brand Renshaw both abandon their pregnant mistresses; Gerda's passion for Wolf quickly cools;

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<sup>9</sup> There are strong associations here with *King Lear*, a play where it is essentially Lear's inability to forget his past that drives him into madness. The final chapter is entitled 'Ripeness is All', a direct quotation from the play, which stresses the importance of the moment, rather than the future or the past, while in his thoughts at on stage Wolf calls for 'an ounce of civet, good apothecary' another direct quotation, this time from Lear's insane conversation with the blinded Gloucester. By virtue of these direct references an echo of the desolate world we glimpse at the end of *King Lear* touches *Wolf Solent* although Wolf forgets and accepts as Lear never could.

## *2. Flowers of Silence*

Wolf and Christie's relationship never becomes sexual. And behind this continual falling away into isolation there is an uncaring universe:

...the distant expanse of the Milky Way, too remote in its translunar gulfs to heed these planetary conflicts, shimmered haughtily down upon the Wood and Stone of Nevilton—impassive, indifferent, unconcerned.(WAS:518)

## INTERLUDE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It is not an unreasonable assumption that an autobiography is going to supply you with a fair amount of information about the life of its author. Not so in the case of John Cowper Powys. Although some biographical details emerge, what we really have in *Autobiography* is a very brief outline of his life fleshed out with his perceptions of himself—what he described in a letter to his sister Marion, quoted in R.L. Blackmore's introductory note to the book, as 'a sort of mental *autobiography* not an *ordinary* autobiography but a very queer one *such as has never been written before!*' (AUT: xix). The result is a strange and solipsistic work. Few of the men, and virtually none of the women, with whom he associated are mentioned by name—many are simply not mentioned at all—leaving the massive, neurosis-ridden personality of John Cowper Powys centre-stage.

Yet even of this we cannot be sure, if we recall the advice with which he begins *Confessions of Two Brothers*, the autobiographical piece he wrote with his brother Llewelyn in America in 1916:

In reading what follows the reader must be on the look-out for indirect betrayals and unmaskings. He must follow me suspiciously, guardedly, furtively. He must be prepared for that invincible human trick of using language to conceal rather than to reveal. I am ready to confess myself, as a man may be prepared to throw himself into the water. But once *in* the water, the instinct of self-preservation compels him to swim. So I swim—on words—unless the reader's imagination is shrewdly alert to thrust me down into truth. (CONF: 11)

This virtual negation of D.H. Lawrence's dictum that we should 'trust the novel not the novelist'—Powys is suggesting that we must distrust both—has many disturbing consequences for his work.

## Interlude

There are obvious resonances with the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, and the Structuralist, Post-structuralist and Deconstructive movements which have grown up around them—language as a purely arbitrary, and shifting, system of signs; the final impossibility of extracting a meaning from a text—and we are left isolated in a world devoid of meanings and resolutions. When this is coupled with the extreme isolationism Powys employs in *Autobiography* we are confronted with an implicit denial of community—we are once more to the state of Nature postulated by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, in which the establishment of a community is impossible, which I have equated with Powys' Golden Age, even though so many of his characters are trying to move out of isolated positions and into a community (see especially *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Weymouth Sands*, below). If true communication does not occur, and Powys' warning of self-isolation suggests that it does not, there can be no concept of community; without communication and community fiction is deprived of its function—it becomes a communication of self to self rather than self to others, 'non-fiction' rather than fiction.<sup>1</sup>

These ideas become much more forceful in Powys' later works. The inability to communicate is at the heart of *Weymouth Sands* while deconstruction of society and community is put forward in *Porius* and is ever-present from then on, until we come to the final, eternal isolation which ends 'Cataclysm'. At the same time his writing begins to move away from accepted fictional/novelistic norms, and from his own previous style, as Glen Cavaliero points out in his 'Afterword' in *Three Fantasies* (p180ff).

Although it is essential that we recognise these points, especially when considering the later works, we should not allow ourselves to become dominated

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<sup>1</sup> The same problem arises in Edmund White's 'fictional autobiography' *The Beautiful Room is Empty*. This chronicle of America's gay 'community' is concerned with a lack of communication—the beautiful room of the title always remains empty because, in the series of casual sexual encounters the 'hero' goes through there is no communication, and thus no community. Similarly, in the narration of these encounters there seems to be only endless repetition rather than a plot. Once again we have 'non-fiction'.

### *Interlude*

by them. Powys himself did not succumb to the debilitating inertia and isolation which they imply—although increasingly reclusive in his later years in Wales he continued to communicate through his writing, both letters and fiction, as many posthumous publications have shown—preferring to leave that to such of his characters as Adrian Sorio and Wolf Solent. In spite of its dark nature and its possible consequences, we should accept *Autobiography* at face value, and proceed as I have so far done with the fiction.

Religion plays an important part in much of Powys' work, with priests numbering among the central characters in the first five novels—an importance which is perhaps unsurprising given that he followed his parents' wishes, Powys would have followed his father into the Anglican priesthood. After *Wood and Stone*, where a considerable portion of the discourse is concerned with the tension between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, there is a sharp decline in the importance of actual Christian activity—aside from the occasional Vespers, Hamish Traherne and his successors appear largely free of religious duties—until *A Glastonbury Romance*, which peers more deeply into theological concerns.<sup>2</sup> His attitude in *Autobiography* looks back very much to the tensions of *Wood and Stone*, emphasising the attraction he felt towards Catholicism, particularly as a highly ritualised continuous Church and Faith:

palimpsest upon palimpsest, as it seemed to me then, and indeed does still, of the poetic religiousness of the generations, that was revealed in the cadences of the Roman liturgy. My brothers and I—it was what we all had in common—had acquired, out of our readings from earliest childhood a deep, earthy response to the Authorised Version of the Bible. But this mediæval Latin, this liturgical Latin, endowed those well-known images and metaphors with a strange and novel glamour. The fact that it was all ritual too, and in a profound sense all *acting*, satisfied my dramatic nature as nothing had ever done before. The occult mysteriousness of these holy syllables, the way in which the passion of the Psalms and the sensuous beauty of the 'Song of Songs' were forever repeating themselves, caused me to go about in a sort of drugged beatitude. (AUT:343-44)

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<sup>2</sup> In this it is much closer to the later works than to its predecessors, as Powys' concerns shift more towards the political implications of religion, a shift begun in the *Romance* with the association between the Glastonbury commune and the new religion, and continued in the Welsh uprising chronicled in *Owen Glendower*.

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Although he flirted for a time with converting to Catholicism—the theologian John William Williams, whom he called, ‘The Catholic’, was one of his closest friends, and exerted a great influence upon him at Cambridge—he never did so, perhaps because of his recognition that it was the ritual and the acting which attracted him.<sup>3</sup> Although never becoming a virulent critic like his brother Llewelyn, Powys began to drift away from religion into a vague Humanism, seeking for magical powers within himself—although a passage from *Autobiography* (pp634-35), in which he compares himself to Johnny Geard, still reveals a deep regard for the mysteries of the incarnation and the eucharist. The following passage reveals this magical/mystical perception of himself in action—again linking him with Johnny Geard and other magicians in his work:

Such is my deep-rooted asceticism, that the mere fact of my feeling so happy in these hills at having escaped from the turmoil of cities automatically sets me upon my heavy burden of playing at God. While ‘The Black’ [his dog] is safe at home waiting for me on the porch my own return is now delayed by prolonged pauses, during which I shut my eyes and project my various-coloured and yet invisible sprites upon their airy campaigns of rescue...

I act the Trinity in fact; for I project my waves of magnetic force from the three centres of my being; from my brain, from the pit of my stomach, and from the centre of my erotic energy. I won’t weary you with a detailed description of the armies of magnetically created spirits I thus send forth...The thing was by no means a mere game to me. And it was not that if I left out any of these rigmaroles I felt that I should *myself* suffer from it. It was in no sense an obligatory penance. What I felt was that since human beings have believed in prayer for some twenty-five thousand years who was I—on the strength of a few scientific discoveries and a few scientific theories only a few hundred years old—to intermit an immemorial custom, with which my race had mitigated, or fancied it had mitigated, the horrors of life for the vast tract of time? I had at least conceded something to science—though to a somewhat unconventional and mystical science—by turning the great wheel round, and instead of praying to Buddha or Christ or Confucius or Zoroaster or any of *their* Gods, commanding my own private hosts of created entities, to do something to relieve these atrocious sufferings.(AUT:637-39)

Regardless of how seriously we may take these ideas, we can see something of how Powys thought of himself, and something of the extent to which he

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<sup>3</sup> This recognition, with its suggestion of duplicity at the heart of religion, is perhaps also responsible for the strangely cold characterisation and self-righteous attitudes of Vennie Seldom and Francis Taxater, the two major catholic characters in *Wood and Stone*.



### *Interlude*

populated his fiction with himself—and once again we are straying perilously close to solipsism and isolation. There are many small details which point us further in this direction. Along with the attempts to see himself as a magician, he shares sadism and sadistic imaginings with Owen Evans—he records how he was affected by a picture in a children's book, as Owen was, and how, 'from the age of three...till about 1922, when I was fifty, this deadly vice transported and obsessed me'(p8). In this same passage he goes on to encapsulate Owen's eventual plight—the actualisation of the Shattered Skull—in a single sentence: 'thoughts, as Paracelsus taught, when they are visualised and brooded on for a long while, *tend to become entities.*' (p11)

Perhaps one of the most surprising correspondences is between Powys and the materialistic industrialist Philip Crow.<sup>4</sup> Although they come together only once, the childhood experience described is identical:

*Colour!...*It is like a human body with which you are infatuated. It is, at any rate, something you touch, taste, feel, and embrace with your whole soul. It is something *you sink into* and enjoy like the revelation of an exotic Fourth Dimension. It was at Shirley in my very earliest infancy that I used to press my knuckles against my closed eyelids and watch with intense delight the marvellous kaleidoscope of colours which then formed and reformed before me. (AUT:73)

He pressed his knuckles against his closed eyeballs. When he had been quite a little boy—after his Devereux grandmother had repeated over his pillow in her stern and yet doting voice:

'Angels one and two and three guard thy counterpane for thee; while above thy sleeping head be the wings of Michael spread!'

He had been accustomed to do this; finding that the kaleidoscope of astonishing colours which this pressure made to pass before his vision was curiously soothing to his young mind in the black darkness. (AGR:669-70)

As well as drawing links between Powys and characters, both his retreat into the coloured darkness and the sending of his imagined army indicate a reliance upon self, which is a central motif in his work. In many cases—such as Wolf Solent's 'mythology'—such an inward turning leads only to isolation and failure, while in others—Morfydd, Porius and Nineue in *Porius* all rely upon some such sinking into themselves—it is an empowering activity.

*Autobiography* contains many vague hints and indications about Powys' life and work—with the vagueness being central. It is perhaps fitting to close this brief interlude with Powys' account of how he felt his friends—on this

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<sup>4</sup> Prince Einion in *Porius*, a far more sympathetic character than Philip, also shares such recollections.

*Interlude*

occasion Constantine Koelle—regarded him, which once again impels us towards his isolation:

I made him jumpy. I gave him the sensation that he was listening to the cracking of hyperborean ice forever receding and receding! I made him feel as if he were in danger of being embarrassed by the chilly breath of such a merman-disciple come inquisitively up to learn of his kindly nuptials from the frozen ooze where they neither marry nor are given in marriage. (AUT:178)

### 3. A Dark Mystic Copulation: *A Glastonbury Romance*

Of all Powys' novels *A Glastonbury Romance* is perhaps the most impressive. Its sheer size—one thousand, one hundred and twenty pages,<sup>1</sup> dealing with forty-seven 'Principal Characters' plus numerous others—makes it a remarkable work in any circumstances, while both its form and subject matter are hugely ambitious. For the first time Powys moves beyond purely human concerns, introducing the 'First Cause' as an active participant and supplying a chorus of spiritual spectators, of 'invisible watchers' (p557) who supply occasional comment on the narrated events. Sentience is granted to plants and trees, to tomb-stones and sanctuary lamps. The plot is concerned with just over a year in the life of Glastonbury, and encompasses political, economic, religious and sexual revolution. Isolated from his other works, it would be easy to read the *Romance* purely as a complex reworking of the Grail legend, and a re-interpretation of Christ's Incarnation and the eucharist—which indeed it is. Placed in its context it takes on a further significance; it is a milestone in Powys' fictional work. Many of his repeated character-types appear here in their clearest forms; the Shattered Skull appears as a truly dominant motivating force; the life and death urges are more closely implicated in one another than before, with sexual energy being closely linked to both for the first time. The employment of large diffuse plots begun in *Wolf Solent* is taken further here, with the unity supplied by Wolf's narrative centrality banished: the series of vivid yet isolated tableaux-like scenes is here unified, as is traditional with romances, only by powerful symbols—the Shattered Skull and the Grail.

Any discussion of so huge and complex a work is bound to be incomplete in some way, especially when it is part of a larger thesis. Consequently, I have

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<sup>1</sup> All references are to the Macdonald edition of 1955, reproduced by Picador in 1975.

### 3. *A Glastonbury Romance*

limited my discussion to the conflict between violence and the search for a Golden Age, and the areas most closely associated with this, although this is not to imply that there is not much more in the *Romance*.

The paralysing lethargy and silence which so characterised *Wolf Solent* and the earlier works are flung aside by the dynamism, violence and ferocious sexuality of this new novel. The conflict and inter-dependency of the life and death urges are nowhere more clearly and powerfully dramatised than in *A Glastonbury Romance*, with the increased complexity of their relationship—a development of the basic Power/Sacrifice duality of *Wood and Stone*—calling for a more complex system of symbols than we have encountered before.<sup>2</sup> As the extreme violence and the promise of the Golden Age implied by the Shattered Skull are forced closer together—even though many of Powys' characters are busy trying to separate them—a new symbol is required to avoid confusion. The Shattered Skull retains all the connotations of violence, and is eventually manifested as an actuality, while the Grail is introduced to signify the quest for the Golden Age. Although there are physical copies of the Grail within the text—Mother Legge's silver bowl and the christening cup given to Nell by the Marquis of P., for example—it remains a vague numinous presence which always has been and always will be in Glastonbury, appearing to people in extreme states of exhaustion or rest, whereas the Shattered Skull is brought into existence through the imaginations of those most strongly drawn towards violence. Both the Shattered Skull and the Grail are intimately associated with sexuality, which relates to Freud's idea of Eros and Thanatos, as stated above.

Christian symbolism is also brought more forcefully into this work than in any of the earlier works—an interesting contrast to the decreasingly important role played by priests. In Christian mythology the Grail has long been

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<sup>2</sup> *Wood and Stone* can virtually be read as a first draft of the *Romance*. Although that novel is devoid of the spiritual nature of the later, and its darker sexual overtones, there are many correspondences of character and plot between the two works, which are also noteworthy for their strikingly overt use of symbolism.

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associated with the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, so it is impossible to avoid Christian symbolism. It is, however, in the three imitations of Christ—particularly in Owen Evans' crucifixion in the Passion Play which is at the centre of the novel—that this symbolism is at its most important. But just as the closer association of Violence and the Golden Age, of life and death urges, forces them further apart, so the intimate association of Powys' symbolism with Christianity leads to a separation of the narrated events from Christian ideals.

If the Shattered Skull is not native to Glastonbury, then neither are its creator and principal adherents—as in *Wood and Stone* the motivating forces extend into both people and places. The opening chapters of the *Romance* mark a brief return to the hostile, wind-scoured landscapes of *Rodmoor*, although the air of stagnation and insanity which pervaded that earlier novel is here transformed into a fierce, primitive vitality. The Norfolk characters—the Crow family and Tom Barter—are attracted by the passivity of Glastonbury, although it is this same passivity which eventually repulses them. Many of them are intimately involved in violence of various forms. Both Philip and John Crow, despite their deep and instinctive dislike and distrust for one another, are engaged in attempts to destroy Glastonbury as it currently is: Philip physically with his new lorries, roads and bridges, his expanding dye works, his electrification and tin-mining in the Wookey Hole caves; John spiritually by his continued refusal to accept Glastonbury's mythology, and the new faith he is supposedly helping Johnny Geard to create. Mary Crow, the only woman in the novel to reject totally the mysticism and mythology of Glastonbury, is one of only three people granted sight of the Grail: she fails to recognise it and ignores the experience. Her cousin Persephone Spear leaves a trail of confusion and pain behind her in her search for love and happiness, as does Tom Barter. He is further implicated in the violence as Philip's works' manager and pilot of his aeroplane.<sup>3</sup> Persephone's husband Dave is one of the instigators and

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<sup>3</sup> Barter is very much the outsider of the Norfolk party, and his implication with violence is largely secondary. He acts as Philip's tool, rather than instigating action.

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administrators of the Glastonbury Commune, which may be seen as an act of political and economic violence against the town, along with the cockney Red Robinson, and Paul Trent, from the Scilly Isles—all outsiders.

The greatest perpetrator of violence, and original creator of the Shattered Skull, is also an outsider. Ostensibly a seeker of the Grail, Owen Evans—who perhaps fittingly arrives in Glastonbury with the most insidious bearer of violence, John Crow, in darkness while the town is sleeping—brings with him a huge store of sadistic violence. After vague hints about the nature of his vice(pp108-109), his sadism and his ambiguous attitude to it is made abundantly clear:

...he was disturbed by a particular sadistic image that he had not been troubled by since he saw John Crow embrace the Hêle stone at Stonehenge. This image was concerned with a killing blow delivered by an iron bar...one single image of homicidal violence, at once a torment of remorse and a living temptation...‘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...but...but...’

He craned his neck out of the window, pressing the palms of his hands upon the sill. His pose was grotesque. It was as if he were about to address a crowd assembled on the opposite roof.

‘But,’ Mr. Evans screamed in his twanging, quivering, twitching nerves, ‘but...but...I...*don’t...want...to see it!*’(AGR:150-51)

The Shattered Skull and the Grail are thus intimately associated in Owen’s loved/feared sadism. As Owen’s obsession with his vice, and his attempts to escape it go on, its sexual nature is rapidly made clear. The first major statement of this occurs during his portrayal of Christ in the Passion Play, an imitation of Christ through which he hopes to apply the salvific power of the Cross to

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Despite his continuing desire to return to his fenland home, he moves further away from it through his marriage to Tossie Stickles, although his subsumption into Glastonbury life is ended when he becomes the victim of the violence he had earlier served.

himself and thus exorcise the Shattered Skull.<sup>4</sup> Owen's attempt to use the Christian apocalypse as a means of redemption—one of the novel's major linkings of Christian and Pagan symbolism—is shown from the outset to be futile. As his agony begins—he has insisted on the crucifixion being as realistic as possible—the arousal of his sado-masochism is indicated:

Right up to the end, till by straining his torso to the breaking-point he lost consciousness, he not only endured the anguish but he exulted in enduring it. His exultation kept mounting and mounting—extreme pain and ecstatic triumph embracing each other in a dark and mystic copulation. (AGR:614)

His soul separates from his body and attempts to intensify the pain—whether to increase the sado-masochistic pleasure or to destroy it through an excess of agony is not made clear: possibly Owen himself does not know.

Owen's action denies Christ's own Incarnation and Crucifixion, by which he redeemed the world once and for all. In seeking salvation through Christian symbols, he is paradoxically denying their power. Consequently his experience ends in desolation: '*Eloi, Eloi, Lama, Sabachthani!*'<sup>5</sup> rather than with the completion implied by the 'It is finished' of St John's Gospel.

The associations with distorted sexuality are intensified when Owen's obsession is entering its final stages. His lust is now conceived as a separate entity, a 'worm-snake' inhabiting his body and forcing him to act. The following passage makes it impossible to dissociate the Shattered Skull from sexual desire:

It *had* to be thing of iron and it had to come crashing down, smashing everything, smashing skull and vertebrae together, or the performance, demanded with such a swooning, trembling, fainting orgasm by the worm-snake would not be a master one!...The fangs of the worm-snake dripped with a frothy milk. In mounted and erected expectancy, in blunt-nosed expectancy, in fork-tongued expectancy, it

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<sup>4</sup> A similarly selfish re-enactment of Christ's Passion and Death can be found in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902), which ends with the self-immolation of the Christ figure, Indra's Daughter. Although she promises to take the petitions of the people to her father, and although the people cast the symbols of their suffering onto her pyre to be consumed, she chose death solely to escape her own sufferings on earth, and not to help anyone.

<sup>5</sup> 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' Mark, 15, 34

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danced a lust-dance of delirious joy when it found that it could make this slave-corpse, the dead soul, this *rex mortuus*, that *had* been a human being, utter these simple words!(AGR:1020-21)

He is reduced to little more than a corpse, animated solely by lust. The reference to him as '*rex mortuus*', and elsewhere in this section as '*homo mortuus*', and '*deus mortuus*', all look forward to the description of Myrddin Wyllt as a corpse-god in *Porius*. Like Owen, Myrddin has deeply sexual motivations, but is free of his sadism.

The only check on Owen's dark sexuality is to be found in his normal sexual relationship with his wife. After his unsuccessful crucifixion he finds some relief in his marriage to Cordelia:

...every vestige of sensuality 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. It did not leave him...it slowly began to present itself to his mind as a strange and unexpected phenomenon, that in his new relations with Cordelia there arose in the essential nature of the case, a situation that lent itself to what might be called a harmless and legitimate sadism, a sadism that was so mitigated and diffused that it was difficult to disassociate it from a delicate and tender attraction. (AGR:782-3)

Although this normalisation of his sexuality is undone when he witnesses Mad Bet and Codfin plotting a murder that is to involve an iron bar smashing a skull (pp790-95)—hence the ferocious activity of the worm-snake—it again falls to Cordelia to rescue Owen:

...her eyes shone with such a lustrous appeal, that something happened within that other locked room, the room containing the iron bar. Not for nothing was this brave girl the child of Geard of Glastonbury. Roused to the uttermost her soul became a psychic force, a magnet of destruction, an annihilating ray, and the murderous instrument...crumbled into a pinch of dust.

Grotesque and Crannach-like though poor Cordy's naked body was, it was the body of a woman still, it was the ultimate symbol, the uttermost '*Gleichnis*', of life's wild experiment. Grotesque it might be, as nakedness went, but combined with the look she managed to fling, like a passion of immortal wine over the dark flame of his obsession, it overcame, it triumphed...(AGR: 1035)



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The Grail which Owen is seeking, which can free him from his obsessive vice and lead him into a Golden Age, lies in Cordelia's normal sexuality, but the realisation comes too late. The actualisation of the Shattered Skull cannot be averted and Owen, a witness to it is reduced to a premature senility by the shock, left laboriously to complete—for he is another of Powys' authors—his history of the life of Merlin.

At the time of her final attempt to redeem Owen Cordelia is pregnant and, like Anna Brangwen in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, particularly the 'Anna Victrix' section, her sexual power and influence over her husband is increased by this evidence of her potency. The contrasting use of the Women's power—Cordelia seeking to save her husband, Anna fighting to conquer and destroy Will—marks one of the great differences between Powys and Lawrence. Powys was more concerned with the elemental struggle between life and death than any conflict between male and female, as also suggested by his continual blurring of sexual differences in his androgyne characters. Cordelia, unlike the hugely fertile Anna, later loses the child after its premature birth—Owen's corrupted sexuality could not beget a healthy child, in marked contrast to the other characters in the *Romance*, a work remarkable for the number of healthy children conceived and born in it.

In opposition to Cordelia stands Mad Bet, the 'remorseful sadist' (p253) with whom Owen feels great affinity, and whom he proclaims as his Grail Messenger.<sup>6</sup> Mad Bet recognises Owen's sadism at Mother Legge's party (p503), and treats him as though he actually is Christ after his disastrous crucifixion, crying out to be allowed to 'touch the hem of his garment! Only to touch his coaties of trowsies!' (p609). It is when he overhears her planning the murder of

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<sup>6</sup> Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) offers a clear and easily accessible account of the Grail and its attendant mystical trappings, in its translation from Pagan to Christian symbol, including the Grail Messengers, or Grail Bearers—usually women or young boys. It is surely to this book that we owe the great profusion of Grail related literature of the 1920's and 30's, from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with its openly acknowledged debt to Charles Williams' 'Boys-Own'—style mystical thriller *War in Heaven*.

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John Crow with Codfin that his sadism is re-activated—she is indeed acting as a Grail messenger, even though it is a false Grail, the pursuit of violence, that she brings to him. The fact that John Crow is one of his closest friends does not appear to trouble Owen. Hobbes' state of Nature, the war of 'everyman against everyman' is making itself felt in this approach to a false Grail. The reaction of Cordelia, Owen's true Grail messenger, to Mad Bet reveals a dim awareness of the position occupied by the two women: 'If it wasn't for Owen having come, I'd soon of gone mad just like her!' (p794)

The violence which is so tightly bound up with both the Shattered Skull and the Grail in Owen occurs in a more unfocussed form in many of the other characters. Foremost among these are John and Mary Crow, who totally reject the mysticism which is so much part of Glastonbury even though both encounter it to a greater extent than many. John sees what he instinctively recognises to be King Arthur's sword being hurled into the waters of the river Brue (p361). Disturbed and frightened by the intrusion of the spiritual into his material world he attempts to ignore this occurrence, telling only Mary and Owen of what he has seen. Mary's rejection is far more complete, for the Grail itself is revealed to her—she is in fact the first to be allowed to see it. As with Owen, there is a strong sexual element for her in the Grail, although what was dark and corrupt before is now clean and pure:

Her pulse of happiness was intense. What she experienced was like a quivering love-ecstasy that had no human object. She could actually feel the small round breasts under her night-gown shiver and distend. Her head instinctively fell back a little, while her chin was lifted up. Her lips parted and a smile that was a smile of indescribable peace flickered over her face. She would have served at that moment as a model for some primitive Flemish artist painting a passionately concentrated vision of the rape of Danae. (AGR:556)

Even so, she ignores what has happened, not even telling John about it. In this silence and rejection lies their loss of the Golden Age which has been openly offered to them. Their eventual return to Norfolk, taking Tom Barter's body

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and his widow and children with them, emphasises this loss and re-introduces something of *Rodmoor's* sterility into Norfolk:

Well! they were going back to those pastures again...why was it then, that they both felt a curious and irresistible sadness as they thought of their return? Had they been captured in spite of themselves, by the terrible magic of this spot? Was John's clinging to his strange master a sign that something would be gone forever from each of their lives, when they went away, something that their dearest love for each other could only replace in a measure, in a fluctuating substitution? Did Mary recall the dawn of St John's Day?

'Come back to us Tom, Come back to us!' the big river and the little river were both calling; and it was with Tom that they were going back to the place where they would be; but they were carrying a corpse with them; not only the corpse of Tom Barter but the corpse of their stillborn never-returning opportunity of touching the Eternal in the enchanted soil where the Eternal once sank down into time!(AGR:1062-63)

Refusal to follow any Grail proves almost as destructive as being too dedicated a follower of a false Grail. Their attitude to their departure reveals the attraction and repulsion that Glastonbury exercises over so many people.

The violence committed by Persephone Spear is a side-effect of her own unrecognised search for a Grail—in her case the search for happiness and love in a sexual relationship. Despite her involvement with several men—her husband Dave, her cousin Philip, her husband's brother-in-law Will—her dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships soon becomes clear:

'It's these nights that are so awful. Oh *why* are men made as they are? Why *are* they made as they are? What's the matter with me that I shrink from these nights with Philip so...and yet enjoy the days with him? Do other women feel what I feel? Is there some deep, secret conspiracy among us to be silent about this loathing of skin to skin, this disgust of the way they are when they have their will of us?'(AGR:314)

From this she drifts into a lesbian relationship with Angela Beere, who became infatuated with her during the Passion Play. In her portrayal of the Virgin Mary at the foot of Owen's cross, Persephone responds to his spiritual experience and begins to feel attracted to him, even though he is unaware of her

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presence.(pp610–12) They are united in their sexual sacrificing for fulfilment. Even her relationship with the besotted Angela proves unsatisfactory as she quickly tires of her lover.

But Percy listened languidly. Her lonely,unsettled, restless soul had still not found what she craved. 'Perhaps,' she was thinking now, 'what I want is not in this world at all!'(AGR:699)

Despite this dim recognition of the nature of her search, she continues in her old way, entering into a brief passionate affair with Will Zoyland which in its ferocity refuses to recognise the feelings of others—their first sexual encounter is during the party after the christening of Will's wife's (illegitimate) child, with Persephone's husband present at the party. It's not long, however, before she goes 'back to politics, my dear, now that I've found love a fizzle'(p958), quitting England for Russia, the home of her beloved communism, leaving a trail of broken hearts behind her.

Philip's violence is a direct opposition of the material to the spiritual and, although he is more successful than John and Mary,—the flood which ends the novel sweeps away his new roads and bridges, and his tin-mine is exhausted, but he intends to start again, remaining in Glastonbury—he is also haunted by the Grail, spending his nights in his attempts to '*kill the Grail*'(p748), along with John, in his dreams.

There are two true adherents of the Grail, Sam Dekker and Johnny Geard, and both are also imitators of Christ, although not as consciously as Owen, nor as selfishly. The son of Glastonbury's Anglican priest, Sam begins the novel in a state of rebellion against his father and against the accepted moral code of society, through his adulterous relationship with Nell Zoyland. The eventual consummation of their love—one of the most natural, peaceful scenes Powys ever narrates (ch.11 'Consummation', pp294–313)—leads to the conception of a child, one of the above mentioned healthy pregnancies. Although he does not immediately become a seeker of the Grail, Sam manages some form of

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religious conversion—as is only fitting for a man said to have ‘the look of a saint’ (pp165; 263)—in which he avows that Christ is a ‘God among other Gods...who is *against* the cruelty of the great Creator-God’(p465), and which precludes a sexual relationship with Nell:

‘I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s wrong for me to make love to you any more. The pleasure I get from that kind of thing is so intense for me—if may not be so with other people but it is so with me—that it kills this new felling.’(AGR:467)

Owen forfeits the Golden Age by pursuing the Shattered Skull to the extreme, John and Mary Crow by rejecting the Grail: Sam comes dangerously close to doing so by rejecting the world. His predicament makes an interesting comparison with Wolf Solent’s, for it is by trying too hard to separate the intellectual and the physical that Wolf destroys any chance of real happiness with Gerda or Christie, leaving him with only his rapidly dying mythology—another false Golden Age.

Sam’s perception of Christ is intimately concerned with the Incarnation, and the Redemption thus implied. A discussion central to Sam’s ideas, and to Owen’s hope to use the Cross to redeem himself, as well as pointing to the identification of Christ with the Grail which becomes central to the novel, springs from Owen’s assertion that, although its creator, God is entirely outside nature, ‘often loathing it as much as I do!’:

‘I protest against what you’ve just said, Evans, with every instinct I have! That’s the essence of the Incarnation...that’s the...That’s what they really killed the Abbot for,’ he went on, ‘because he wouldn’t let anything come between him and It. It’s the whole secret. It’s where the most commonplace Christians can refute the greatest sages. Matter must be redeemed; and only Christ can redeem it. *Christ*, I say; not Jesus. *Verbum caro factus est*. Your making matter evil undoes the whole thing. It’s the Incarnation that transforms Nature. It has been done once. Nothing can reverse it. Something has come into it from outside; from that Outside you talk about. But it is *in it* now! You can’t get rid of it. The simplest person has an instinct about this, wiser than the greatest philosophers. Something has taken up Matter into Itself. Two and two can now make five! It’s the Thing Outside breaking into our closed circle. And every

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atom of Matter feels it. Matter is no longer separate from Spirit. It has become the living flesh of Spirit. *Verbum caro factus est!*' (AGR:260)

Sam's inspired rhetoric—which is matched only by Dave Spear's impassioned and desperate defence of communism and the commune (pp1015–19), a forerunner of the ideals espoused by Myrddin Wyllt in *Porius*—resounds through the text. The already quoted account of John and Mary's departure speaks of how the 'Eternal once sank down into time', while the invocation of the Cybele which ends the novel includes the words: 'Out of the Timeless she came down into time'(p1120). Although both refer to the Grail, they are obviously linked to Sam's Incarnation theology, and the immance of the Redeemer. Although seeking to reproduce its effect, Owen's recreation of the Crucifixion is a denial, almost a negation, of Sam's doctrine, attempting to repeat the unrepeatable. Sam's pursuit of Christ is very much a pursuit of a Golden Age; Christ is the Grail by another name. John's question, which follows Sam's outburst, as to whether Sam 'would call the mass this kind of miracle?'(p261) also has implications for eucharistic theology—Grail, Christ and the eucharistic elements all become one, making the celebration of mass an integral part of the pursuit of the Golden Age.

The masochism that is so much a part of Owen's conscious imitation of Christ is also present in Sam's attempt to accept suffering and hardship just as his Master did. Yet, whereas the spirit summoned in the sado-masochistic excitement of Owen's crucifixion was a vengeful one, leaving him desolate and alone, Sam's Christ is kind and caring, trying to turn him away from his rejection of the world and from his suffering. If, as Sam so vehemently states, the world has been redeemed once and for all, there is no need to recreate Christ's agony:

His soul seemed to be saying to his natural senses and his natural will: 'You must go through this because Christ went through it! I care not how you suffer; so long as you go on, day by day, doing His will and not your own!'

And all the while Sam suffered there swaying in his anguish like a great bleeding animal held there by a steel ring through his nose,

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the Man-God that he invoked was struggling to reach the consciousness of this mad perverter of his secret...How could Christ, as He swept now like a cloud of weed-smoke under the door of St Patrick's Chapel, relax the tension of this soul, that pulled and jerked so relentlessly at the nose of a praying earth-beast?(AGR:551-52)

In his single-minded pursuit of Christ, Sam becomes closed to his Master, although he is eventually distracted by the boy who hero-worships him, Elphin Cante—the boy is being used by Christ, in spite of his homosexuality: Powys is once again refusing to apply moral standards.

Sam's near obsession with the single image of a suffering servant and his attempt to imitate it—as wrong in its own way as Owen's egocentric crucifixion—leads to his abandonment of his father, his lover and child, and his home. The chapter which deals with this desertion and the following events (ch.28, 'The Grail', pp903-86), in an illustration of the importance Powys attached to these events, is the only chapter in the novel to concern itself solely with one person. Living a life of almost clichéd self-sacrifice, Sam takes a room in the poorest quarter of the town, and work in the commune's Municipal Factory, hauling the clay out of which statuettes of mythical figures are made. Originally despised and rejected, he gradually finds acceptance and is nick-named 'Holy Sam' (p923). On top of his factory work, he continues with his selfless acts, giving away his food and spending time with pariahs such as Elphin Cante. One night, in a state of utter exhaustion, he turns himself loose in a barge on the river, and here becomes the second person to be granted sight of the Grail. As a prelude to his vision, and in sharp contrast to the sexual transport experienced by Mary, he is subjected to extreme pain:

The pain was so overwhelming that it was as if the whole of Sam's consciousness became the hidden darkness of his inmost organism; and when this darkness was split, and the whole atmosphere split, what he felt to be a gigantic spear was struck into his bowels and struck *from below*.(AGR:939)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See G. Wilson Knight's essay 'Lawrence, Joyce and Powys' in his book *Neglected Powers* (G. Wilson Knight, *Neglected Powers: Essays on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971). In this characteristically strange piece, Wilson Knight discusses anal penetra-

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After this shattering pain—and for once it is a whole being and not a skull which is broken open, in a spiritual rather than a physical shattering—the vision itself brings healing and relief to Sam. As is usual with the Grail legend the wound inflicted by the spear is healed by the Grail. Sam's experience of the Grail is the most concrete of the three, giving us an actual description of the Grail and its contents: 'dark water streaked with blood, and within the water was a shining fish' (p939)—a description oddly reminiscent of Brand Renshaw's claim to have 'seen the black pools...and...the red stains in them' (ROD:191). Brand's fear is a natural reaction to the breaking of the Outside—as Owen would term it—into his real world, of the Timeless into time; Sam accepts it because of his religious nature and up-bringing, and the general openness to mysticism possessed by Glastonbury yet lacking in Norfolk. Sam's vision of the Grail once again brings paganism and Christianity close together, far more harmoniously than Owen did in his Crucifixion, even though Sam's claim that Christ is separate from and opposed to the Creator-God again denies usual Christian ideas. Although it is a traditional part of the Grail quest—and Sam completes the quest by asking what the fish is, in true Grail-Knight fashion—the fish is also a symbol of Christ. Further, his Grail is filled with water and blood, as his father's chalice at the eucharist is filled with wine—Christ's blood—and water. His manner of asking the 'Grail-question' also brings paganism and Christianity closer together:

So anxious did he become to ascertain, before it vanished away, that *Ichthus* out of the Absolute was what he thought it was, that Sam actually struggled up to his feet and cried the question aloud—'Christ!' he groaned in a harsh, queer voice that resembled the voice of a priest speaking from a scaffold. 'Is it a Tench?' (AGR:939-40)

Thus associated with a priest, Sam introduces a certain amount of confusion by crying out to his master as he asks his question. He eventually concludes that Christ is somehow part of the Grail after his Master, a Figure 'harder to

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tion as a means of moving into higher spheres of consciousness, including Sam's experience as an example. Oddly, he ignores John Crow's 'profoundly corrupt' love-making with Mary, which would seem to be as overt a reference to anal intercourse as anything in Joyce's *Ulysses*.



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visualise than Time or Eternity for it contains the essence of both' (p943) has appeared to him. Again there are echoes of *Rodmoor*, this time of Adrian Sorio's vision of the seraphic, androgynous being.

Sam's Grail experience has shown him how the physical and spiritual are intimately linked, and he begins to move out of his isolation from the world, although he is too late to prevent Nell returning, with their child, to her husband. His first act is to administer an enema to Abel Twig, an act which, as Wilson Knight, Brebner and Cavaliero all point out, involves a physical repeat of Sam's metaphysical anal piercing and healing! His return to society also involves an attempt to evangelise on behalf of the Grail, although no-one will believe him.

More important is the realisation, partly inspired by a conversation with Crummie Geard, who has loved him hopelessly throughout, of how badly he has treated people: 'Oh, he had been so selfish in all this whole business of his relations with the people of his life!' (p982). He has also gained the ability to accept whatever happens to him: 'I can endure whatever fate can do to me, for I have seen the Grail!' (p986)—an acceptance more positive than Wolf Solent's fatalism, looking forward to the injunctions to 'Endure' and 'Enjoy' in *Porius*—which keeps him going until his eventual reconciliation with his father (p1102).

In many ways Sam is the most successful of those to see the Grail: he accepts its message and continues to live in the world, happy even though he has lost the possibility of a sexual Golden Age with his lover. But by far the most complete disciple of the Grail—and the most complete and unconscious imitation of Christ—is Johnny Geard. Sharing the basic passivity of Glastonbury, Johnny endures to the end, out-lasting with his beloved Grail Owen and his Shattered Skull, untroubled by the increasing chaos around him. He is the first of Powys' true magicians, and his first appearance—although there has been much discussion of and speculation about him—reveals plenty of the physical abnormality usual for these characters:

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...a broad shouldered, rather fleshy individual, without any hat whose grizzled head under that suspended light seemed to Sam the largest human head he had ever seen. It was the head of a hydrocephalic dwarf; but in every other respect its owner had the normally plump, rather unpleasantly plump figure of any well-to-do man, whose back has never been bent nor his muscles hardened by the diurnal heroism of manual labour.(AGR:147)

Johnny's physical size also makes him a possible forerunner of the giants who stride through the later novels, as is the case with Sam. Although by no means as grotesque as Myrddin Wyllt, Johnny is certainly unusual physically, and elsewhere—as is the case with other magicians—his 'diabolically dark eyes'(p410) are emphasised.

While Owen is stung into useless activity by his sadism, seeking to identify himself with both Christ and with his hero Merlin— to the extent of reading his own vice onto the magician(p1002)— Johnny becomes both a Merlin-figure and a Christ-figure without even trying. Visiting the Marquis of P. at Mark's Court on Easter Day—a visit prefaced by his heretical celebration of the Mass in his back garden with a loaf of bread and a bottle of port—he is persuaded to sleep in the manor house's haunted chamber, and in the course of the night succeeds in laying the tortured spirits of Merlin and the enchantress Nineue to rest. His strange experience (pp442–8), although causing him considerable fear, brings an eventual sense of calm:

What he felt in all his pulses was that if this desperate lover of Nineue...this great and lost magician...were to come forth now from behind that reddened smoke and approach his bed his heart would have become as calm as a saint's. It was the tone of that cry. He could not bear it. If he heard it again his heart would crack. Pity carried to that point was intolerable...(AGR:447)

Merlin holds no horrors for him, and is indeed equated with Christ later—it is by calling down Christ's mercy that Johnny brings peace to the troubled souls—in his slightly unusual view of things:

Mr. Geard's Christ was a Power to be exploited. In his weird gnostic dialogues with *his* master, the Mayor of Glastonbury

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addressed Him like a friend, almost like an equal. He was the Mayor's great magician, his super-Merlin, by whose strength and support he became strong. (AGR:909)

Pagan and Christian are once again brought together as the secret of Johnny's power is revealed. Unafraid of using Christ/Merlin's supernatural powers, Johnny mixes this with an extreme sympathy for his fellow man—an extension of the passivity of Glastonbury and the Grail—which allows him to accept their suffering into himself. Thus he is twice able to soothe Tittie Petherton's pain (pp292-94; 506), and to sympathise so deeply with Owen's account of the crucifixion that he 'fainted dead away!'(p618).

In due course, as part of the institution of his new Glastonbury/Grail-centred spirituality, he performs two miracles. The first is a private affair, in which he takes Tittie Petherton up to the Chalice Well before it is opened to the public, and heals her of her cancer. This is the one instance of Johnny employing active force and power, as he envisages himself directing 'arrow after arrow of blighting, withering, deadly force'(p709) at the cancer before plunging 'that Bleeding Lance of his mind into the half dead cancer'. This is Sam's experience viewed from the other side, a more direct association of Johnny with Christ and the Grail than his performance of other healing miracles. It also prefigures his daughter Cordelia's attempt to save Owen: 'Not for nothing was this brave little girl the child of Geard of Glastonbury.'(p1035)

The healing of Tittie is followed by the raising to life, in public, of a dead child during the opening ceremony of the saxon arch he has had built, and the beginning of his expounding of his new gospel. This event is only related at second-hand, and we are given sufficient evidence to suggest that the child was alive all along—he was an epileptic given to fits and death like states (see ch.22, 'Wind and Rain'), and he had not been certified as dead when Johnny raised him—still, a miracle was promised: 'heard the Mayor tell his lady there'd be a girt miracle when thick red water do run under his new arch'(p661), and a

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miracle has been delivered, in which both Tom Barter and the super-sceptical John believe : ‘ ‘This child,’ they both thought, ‘has been *behind life*,’ ’ (p895). By the use of second-hand reportage through such sturdy realists as the Norfolk friends the miracle is made to seem all the more likely, confirming Johnny as a Christ-figure.

There are further subtle touches in Powys’ portrayal of Johnny as a Christ-figure, most noticeable his breakfasting with the outcasts Elphin Cantle and Steve Lew on the morning of the Flood, the last day of his life, just as Christ dined with tax collectors and sinners.

Johnny is not simply a pure and spiritual figure—he does not make Sam’s mistake of trying to keep the physical and spiritual worlds separate. He is an extreme sensualist, taking great pleasure in the world around him, and not in the least devoid of sexuality. Despite forty years of marriage he is still able to evoke feelings, ‘not least of tenderness..but even of actual amorousness’(p408) towards his wife; there are also hints of an almost incestuous affection he feels for his youngest daughter Crummie: ‘He is fonder of me...than mother thinks he ought to be...I don’t mind—why should I mind?—his loving me so.’(p979), and he is captivated by Rachel Zoyland’s youthful beauty after he has laid Merlin and Nineue to rest.

Not obsessed by the material, the spiritual or the physical/sexual, Johnny is a complete man driven by his own vision of the Golden Age to try and bring it to others—later magicians, most obviously Myrddin Wyllt, are prefigured in this. But just as Sam is unable to convince anyone that he has seen the Grail, so Johnny’s vision cannot be made to work. The ‘towers of his New Jerusalem’, the ‘castles of crystal, islands of glass, mirrors and mirages of the invisible’ (p163) of which he dreams are never built. Even before the flood waters rise to wash away his saxon arch and the hall in which he expounds his gospel, dissension is breaking out among his disciples. Various elements are determined

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to bring about the return of King Arthur to lead them to power—just as Christ's followers called upon him to lead a revolt against Rome—rather than follow his teachings about the acceptance of self and the enjoyment of life. The initial voice of dissent is Welsh—a further example of the importation of violence into Glastonbury. Even the political and economic attempts to attain a Golden Age in the Glastonbury Commune, which Johnny endorses, are not wholly successful for, despite its ostensible successes, many people are dissatisfied with it and, as with Philip's industrial 'improvements' to the town, the flood washes it away.

Johnny's final, Christ-like act is the sacrifice of his own life to save Philip Crow from drowning. Philip's interpretation of the event reveals strong echoes of *Wood and Stone's* Power/Sacrifice duality, and further suggestions of Hobbe's state of Nature—he views his survival and Johnny's death as a victory in the 'Warre, where every man is enemy to every man', a war which Johnny is not even fighting, and prepares to continue his pursuit of an industrial Golden Age:

'Begin again,' he thought to himself, 'and to hell with mock-heroism! Geard and I are two beasts fighting for our lives. *I know it*. He doesn't know it! His soft, crazy idealisms, his I-am-the-one-to-give-my-life-for-the-enemy, is simply his handicap in our struggle. If the man *does* drown before I get back, it'll only prove that he preferred his ideal gestures to life.'(AGR:1111)

This interpretation is woefully misguided, for despite the apparent self sacrifice in Johnny's actions, his death is essentially self-motivated—Owen's perverted crucifixion is disturbingly recalled. In seeking death Johnny is seeking the ultimate fulfilment of his life and ideas, a fulfilment he attains at the moment of his death as the Grail is revealed to him and his soul slips into the Golden Age he has been seeking:

It was as if he had ceased to belong to our world of looking-glass pantomime wherein we are driven to worship we know not what; and had slipped down among the Gods and had taken his place among those who cast their own mysterious reflections in the Glastonbury of our bewilderment. (AGR:1117)

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Johnny alone reaches the Golden Age beyond death, behind the Shattered Skull.

As I have already stated, sexuality has a greatly increased importance in the *Romance* than in previous works. It is essential to both Owen and Sam in their pursuit of the Grail, whether in the mindless acceptance of its most violent manifestations or in the total denial of it. Johnny's successful integration of sexuality into his spirituality and Cordelia's attempts to redeem Owen show how its power can be employed positively.

Both lesbianism and homosexuality are dealt with in the novel. I have already mentioned Persephone, one of the most fascinating and mercurial androgynes Powys ever created. His choice of name for her is significant for, as John A. Brebner points out (*The Demon Within*: 139n) it is frequently and easily contracted to the masculine Percy, and also links her to classical mythology. Persephone, seduced by the God of the Underworld, was forced to divide her time equally between the living and the dead—is Powys suggesting that, by moving from heterosexual to lesbian affairs and back that his Persephone is also undergoing her season of death? Or is her season of death perhaps her abandonment of love in favour of politics? With his extensive reading of classical literature Powys cannot have been unaware of the associations of the name, making such an interpretation likely.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Crow also stands on the edge of a lesbian relationship with her employer Euphemia Drew. It is in her relationship with Miss Drew that her worthiness to see the Grail, and to be described, along with Sam, as 'one of the two noblest hearts in Glastonbury,' is illustrated. Just before Mary leaves the house to spend her first night with John Miss Drew declares her love for

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<sup>8</sup> Powys' choice of names throughout his corpus is somewhat strange. Names such as Perdita, Cordelia, Persephone, Baltazar and Dangelis all suggest links with mythology or literary forerunners, or some other symbolic significance—Dangelis, the outsider and catalytic figure in *Wood and Stone*, is perhaps 'of the angels'—and yet such interpretations often appear so tenuous, if not non-existent, that one cannot help wondering whether he simply had a penchant for unusual names!

### 3. *A Glastonbury Romance*

Mary in one of the novels most poignant, pathetic scenes(pp634– 49). Despite her abrasive attitude to the town, and her frequently expressed desire to escape from Miss Drew, Mary offers to stay with her, and later, while her husband lies awake worrying about his friend Tom, again thinks of her employer: 'I'll be sweeter to Miss Drew than anyone in all her days has been!'(p647).

The treatment of male homosexuality is far less overt than it was in *Wolf Solent*. Elphin Cattle—Elphin is another of Powys' odd names, being used also for the page-boy who proves such a temptation to Rhisiart in *Owen Glendower*—is the only truly homosexual character who, after his hero-worship of Sam, sets about what Sam regards as 'that young degenerate's seduction of such a wholesome lad'(p1081), the corruption of Steve Lew, a boy of his own age.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from this there is the never defined relationship between John Crow and Tom Barter. In his courting of Mary, John manages to confuse her with Tom in his memories of childhood, leading her to speculate upon the relationship of the two boys:

And in her heart she saw two little boys standing exactly where they two were standing at this minute. Could it have been Tom, and not her at all, that he had hugged at the bottom of the boat? Boys no doubt are often shameless on long, hot afternoons! (AGR:40)

Although there is nothing overtly homosexual in their adult relationship, the shadows of it are there. On their wedding night, while Mary is planning her future kindness to Miss Drew, John is tortured by thoughts of having pushed Tom aside because of Mary, while his love making with Mary—she is on the verge of being one of Powys' fatally attractive androgynous boy-women—is 'not only profoundly corrupt but extremely egoistic'(p88), recalling G. Wilson Knight's theories concerning anal intercourse (*Neglected Powers*:pp153–56).

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<sup>9</sup> It is possible to view Sam's metaphysical piercing as a homosexual experience, thus emphasising the sexual elements of the Grail. Elsewhere, Powys has categorically stated that Sam is not homosexual.

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The whole John-Mary-Tom relationship—one of the numerous three-way love affairs Powys describes—is highly dubious. Tom and Mary were almost engaged at one point, while Mary and John are cousins, making their eventual marriage virtually incestuous—although as I have already stated Powys saw no moral taint in incest—an incest mirrored in the love affair between their cousins Persephone and Philip.<sup>10</sup> Rejected by both John and Mary, Tom goes through a rapid series of relationships—again mirrored by Persephone's actions—until he finds happiness with Tossie Stickles, who bears him twins. Their happiness is curtailed when Tom sacrifices himself to save John's life, becoming the actualisation of the Shattered Skull.

Out of this huge and complex text there begins to arise a clearer picture of the Golden Age towards which Powys propels his characters. Surrounded by cosmic presences—the dualistic First Cause which is frequently invoked, the chorus of spiritual watchers, the ancient goddess Cybele, hymned in the final pages, the Grail itself which Powys, in the 1953 preface, claims to be the novel's heroine (p xiii)—they are striving towards some idea of community, trying to break out of their isolation, whether in the personal happiness sought by Persephone, and by Nell in her relationship with Sam, or in the larger communities, spiritual and temporal, that Johnny Geard and the builders of the commune are seeking to create in their various fashions. Paradoxically it is this sense of community which Hobbes' state of Nature—which I have associated with Powys' Golden Age beyond death—cannot allow, and which Powys himself implicitly denies in *Autobiography*. The characters who come closest to the denial of community—Owen Evans and Philip Crow—are the ones who most nearly resemble Powys' portrait of himself in *Autobiography*.

This clearer statement of the Golden Age is matched by the emergence of several powerful examples of the repeated character-types not to be matched

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Demon Within* John A. Brebner suggests a homosexual element here for 'Philip has not known physical passion since an affair with a boy at school' (p112), and his relationship here is with his androgynous cousin with a male name.



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until *Porius*. Johnny Geard is the first magician, and a prototype of the later giants; Persephone ranks alongside Christie Malakite as one of the foremost androgynous figures; Sam is one of the rare truly heroic figures, while John Crow is one of the more usual hero/anti-hero types; Mad Bet is one of the many wise women/crones.

Behind the various Golden Age/Grail quests in which these characters are involved there lies the huge reservoir of nihilistic violence represented by the Shattered Skull, which is present as much in the brief sexual encounter between Persephone and Will as it is in Owen's sadism and the eventual killing of Tom Barter.

The Grail and the Shattered Skull unite the various elements of this conflict. Two halves of a symbol eternally divided against itself, they are, in the *Romance*, brought close to a resolution, in their 'dark, mystic copulation' for beyond the consummation of violence in the physical Shattered Skull comes the final triumphant fulfilment of Johnny Geard's vision as he attains the Golden Age beyond death. Again, it is not until *Porius* that another such conclusion is again brought about.

After this romance dealing with the intrusion of the Timeless into time—and intrusion which links the Grail with the Incarnation of the Redeeming Christ and his presence in the eucharist, almost suggesting the whole text is a reworking of the Mass—Powys steps back for a time from such cosmic concerns, focusing for a time on more human affairs.

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##### *Weymouth Sands to Owen Glendower*

Powys' next four novels, although they are far more than merely transitional works, form a link between *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius*, the two novels central to this thesis. Between these two a new serenity and calm descends upon Powys' work, and although events of a violent and often darkly sexual nature are narrated the intervening works seem to be possessed of a strange dream-like quality which distances us from such things.

The cycle of the four Wessex novels is brought to a close with *Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle*, and as Powys moves away from the south-west of England into Wales he also begins to move away from realism and contemporary settings into the semi-mythological world of the later novels. A deep sense of despair—a development of the isolation of the early novels—and an obsession with death begin to emerge, particularly in *Maiden Castle*, which G. Wilson Knight has described as a 'transition work' and 'a hinge and a precursor' (*The Saturnian Quest*: 49; 55), and which points towards what is to come with its continual looking to Wales, and in the quasi-divine person of the magician-figure Uryen Quirm.

*Morwyn* and *Owen Glendower* mark Powys' entry into Wales, the emergence of an implicit Welsh nationalism and usher in a new era in his fiction. *Morwyn*, the chronicle of a journey through Hell, is his first sortie into the fantastic and grotesque world that was the scene of his later fantasies, while *Owen Glendower* shows him as an historical novelist of great skill. This latter and *Weymouth Sands*, although dealt with only very briefly here, are among Powys'

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most assured and competent works, and in simple terms are two of the most enjoyable to read.

Through all these works Powys' vision remains consistent. The quest for a Golden Age continues and, although absent as a tangible symbol, *The Shattered Skull* continues to cast its shadow.

### 4.1: WEYMOUTH SANDS AND MAIDEN CASTLE

The ceaseless noise of waves upon the shore which echoed through *Rodmoor*, as a continual image and reminder of the erosion of stability, returns in *Weymouth Sands*—perhaps the most dream-like of these novels in its mixing of violence and despair with serene happiness—where, along with the repeated litany of Weymouth landmarks, 'the Spire and the Statue and the Fort'(p499,etc), it is used to lend a certain amount of unity to the loosely connected series of scenes which flow into one another in a kind of cinematic montage.<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf's use of the sea in *The Waves*, published some three years before Powys' novel, makes an interesting comparison. In her much more tightly structured work the sea is a symbol of the characters and their thoughts, and supplies both the novel's form—endlessly moving waves of thought—and a linking image. The function of Powys' sea is much less clearly defined. If it represents anything it is surely, as in *Wood and Stone*, an intensification of Weymouth's promise of peace and freedom, and the paradox of an eternally changing changeless eternity.

Against this shadowy and monumental background the inhabitants of Weymouth drift past us, caught up in a series of futile and sterile relationships. Both here and in *Maiden Castle* human relationships are Powys' central concern—the cosmic concerns introduced in the *Romance* are pushed aside for a

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<sup>1</sup> The diffuse narrative of *Weymouth Sands* requires these concrete objects as pivots, whereas the more vivid and dynamic *Romance* survives with its unifying symbols.

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time—and the Golden Age his characters struggle towards is that which Persephone Spear sought: the basic sense of community which arises from personal relationships. The central dramatisation of this struggle is in the relationship between Perdita Wane and Adam Skald, the Jobber of the original English title.<sup>2</sup> It is also through this passionate relationship that the Shattered Skull casts its shadow over the novel, and is linked with the Golden Age quest.

The Jobber is obsessed by his desire to kill Dogberry Cattistock—whom he refers to as ‘the Dog’—and carries a Chesil-Beach stone with which to put his plans into effect. Although the image of the Shattered Skull is never directly invoked we are still close enough to Owen Evans, Codfin and Mad Bet to make its presence an obvious inference. The pursuit of violence is once again brought into opposition with the quest for the Golden Age. The successful execution of his plan can only lead to the curtailment of the Jobber’s relationship with Perdita through his own death, either at the hangman’s hands or through his intended suicide. The stone becomes virtually a replacement symbol for the Shattered Skull, and like Owen’s vice being countered by Cordelia’s sexuality, it is opposed and nearly exorcised by his love for Perdita:

Their sunset walk to ‘The Head’ after this incident...was so happy that for the third time that day the Jobber came near to forgetting the Chesil-Beach pebble that he still carried in his trousers-pocket. Though in her excitement at the moment the girl did not notice it, she found afterwards she had received a bruise in her thigh as they fell, from that primitive weapon concealed by her lover. (WEY:357)

This symbolic wounding of Perdita, and of their relationship by the Jobber’s discipleship of violence is intensified when he refuses to surrender his quest (pp363–64). Left in isolation after the consummation of their love, Perdita declares: ‘But I can-always-die-too.’(p366). The threat upon the Jobber’s life and his chance of a Golden Age is extended to include Perdita as well as Dog

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the libel action over *A Glastonbury Romance*, and although published as *Weymouth Sands* in America, it originally appeared in England as *Jobber Skald*, with Weymouth called Sea Sands and Portland Shellback, to avoid further libel actions. It was not published as *Weymouth Sands* until 1963.

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

Cattistock—despite its absence the Shattered Skull is at its most virulent. Although the loose structure of the novel would imply that tension and suspense are not among its foremost features, it is worth noting that the Jobber's desertion of his lover is followed by long absences for the Jobber, Perdita and Cattistock, which coupled with the unexplained cancellation of the latter's wedding to Mrs Lily, all of which generates a good deal of tension and suspense!

A long separation of the two lovers follows, during which Perdita returns to her native Guernsey and the Jobber enters into a debilitating melancholy, again reminiscent of Owen in his senility, after his Golden Age was lost. Their eventual reconciliation, in the Inn where they had earlier separated, which brings the novel to its triumphant close, makes the victory of love over violence and through this creation of community ushers in the Golden Age:

‘Have you got a fairly large pocket Mr Muir?’ she said. Magnus stared at her and very seriously began moving various objects from his left hand pocket to his right.

‘Pretty large,’ he replied. ‘Is it a present for Mrs Cobbold?’

Then, while Melia and Celia looked on in astonishment, she handed him the stone which had been in the Jobber's pocket so long.

‘No,’ she said and the words seemed to come to her by some sudden inspiration. ‘It's for my old friend Mr Gaul. It will keep the Philosophy of Representation from blowing away!’ (WEY:567)

The Jobber's renunciation of violence and the triumph of a love that ‘was literally the love of bone for bone, skeleton for skeleton, not any mere spiritual affinity, not any mere sexual passion’ (p565) brings about one of Powys' only truly happy endings, an ending in which echoes of E.M. Forster's cry ‘Only connect’ can be heard. Perdita's return to the Jobber—from over the sea, once again pointing to its salvific properties in a fulfilment of the role planned by Nance for Baptiste Sorio in *Rodmoor*—brings healing to them both and deprives the stone of its violent potency, making it an anchor for the dry and desperate philosophising of Richard Gaul.

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This resolution is not confined to Perdita and the Jobber, for many other characters are moving away from their isolation as the novel ends. Peg Frampton, who earlier drifted along on the verge of promiscuity and prostitution, and Richard Gaul, in spite of all his doubts and fears—both Persephone Spear and Wolf Solent are here recalled—are moving towards a loving relationship. Daisy Lily, who was at first in love with the androgynous Peg, before Peg bored of her, is beginning to spend more and more time with Rodney Lader, who had previously been poisoned and paralysed by his hatred for his dying father. The dancing girls Tissty and Tossty, previously mistresses of Dog Cattistock and Jerry Cobbold, are eventually shown in an almost incestuous lesbian relationship, for ‘the fair-skinned Tissty was the dark Tossty’s one and single passion.’(p466).<sup>3</sup> Dog Cattistock jilted Mrs Lily because of his fears of sharing his life and money with her:

This knowledge, that had clarified itself just in time, was that to bring Hortensia into his life would undermine, dissolve, corrupt, disintegrate the grand secret of his days.(WEY:441)

and although thus seeming to be confirmed in his opposition to ideas of community, he eventually elopes with Curly Wix. Both Sippy Ballard, with whom the girl had been having an affair, and her fiancé Magnus Muir—who has already commented that ‘I shouldn’t kill myself if I lost Curly...I should just go on’, confirming himself in his isolation—are thus left alone, but the last of Powys’ rich industrialists is moving towards the possibility of a Golden Age.

In spite of the fact that Jerry Cobbold is also involved in a fulfilling relationship by the novel’s close—with his sister-in-law, the jilted Mrs Lily—he is throughout the propounder of a nihilistic creed. Jerry’s great outburst, an outburst which shows him close to the world-weary insanity suffered by King

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<sup>3</sup> Tossty goes on to acknowledge that it is through this unrevealed passion that she has been able to captivate Jerry, for he *has to have what he can’t understand*, recalling Wolf’s puzzled attraction to the lesbian Bess Round.

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

Lear, to the extent of quoting the play directly, is occasioned by his brother's continued assertions that there is something greater than both life and death:

'Behind...behind...behind—that's where you tricky mystics always put the secret, as if life had a rainbow-coloured rump like a pet baboon. It makes me sick to hear you, you old blackguard. Peace to all beings! Our only comfort is to rail, since we're not brave enough to die! Your baboon's arse may be an *Aurora Borealis* for all I care, since we shall never see it! The point is, pilgarlic darling, your jigging monkey world is a *Monsieur sans queue*, an arse-less *Monsieur*! Like the moon it has never turned round; and it *never will*! Dead we shall all be—...Dead we shall all be, dead as those Dinosaur bones that girl found at Bingstead Bay. And the only good thing about life is that it *does* end! *Poudre de Perlimpimpin*! If we sick lepers couldn't lie down and *know* it was the last, we'd *all* be candidates for Dr Brush's Summer House...Yes, I'll tell you what the other side of Life is, about which Van tells you his lies!...Piffer-rary! love you dearie! and I tell you all for once and clearly...But *my* dearie here knows all...that at the bottom of our hearts—O me! my heart, my rising heart! but down! cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em in the paste alive; she knapped 'em o' the coxcombs with a stick and cried 'Down, wantons, down! 'Twas her brother—and *that's you, brother*—'that, in pure kindness to his horse, buttered his hay.' Piffer-rary! love you dearie!—and I, *moi qui vous parle*, the dancing bear, have peeped behind that curtain, when brother was playing the scrannel pipe and *there's nothing there!*'(WEY:328–30)

This intense despair and world-loathing—a successor to Brand Renshaw's neurotic fears in *Rodmoor* and a forerunner of Medrawd's nihilistic philosophy in *Porius*—remains until the end, colouring his final view of himself (pp559–60), although it is not allowed to taint the victory of love.

In direct opposition to this view is his brother, the mystic Sylvanus Cobbold, successor to Johnny Geard as the novel's magician figure. He represents something of a retreat from the powerful position occupied by Johnny, being more of a pseudo-religious prophet than a magician: he is a much more sympathetic figure than his predecessor, and more fully human than any that come later. In his sexless relationships with women he looks forward to Uryen Quirm:

He had long ago acquired that precious power, in which, they say, the Lamas of Thibet are such adepts, of reducing the intensity of his physical desire to a level that lent itself to the prolongation rather than the culmination of the exotic ecstasy. And as he now held this slender young being in his arms, who, even in her sleep, made little natural movements of natural contentment, he began using her

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

warmth, even as the aged King David did that of the youthful Abishag, to strengthen his colloquy with the mystery of the cosmos.(WEY:380)

Unconsummated sexual desire may empower Sylvanus' soul, and although such unconsummated lust may be the state of many of the novel's characters—as the meeting between Perdita and the half-wit Larry Zed(pp165–75) illustrates—no-one appears to understand him, and he is eventually confined in Dr Brush's asylum, called Hell's Museum by the locals because of the vivisections carried out there. <sup>4</sup>

It is in the person of Dr Daniel Brush that we encounter the novel's only homosexual character—this is the most sexually conventional work Powys wrote—and for once a moral judgement is almost applied: certainly it is implied in Sylvanus' reaction:

But it now began seriously to enter his stirred-up wits, as a startling but quite real possibility, that he had at last stumbled on the secret of the Doctor's partiality to him and his passion for conversing with him. This would explain, too...the man's power of self-negation and the almost humiliating way he had of imbibing another person's ideas.

'You poor devil!' thought Sylvanus. 'What I feel now as I look at you is quite reason enough for your being unhappy. We need an opposite sex, just as plants need water.'(WEY:528)

After this uncharacteristically wholesome book concerned with love and sex we are again taken by Powys into a darker world. Although it is not so far removed from Sylvanus' 'precious Thibetan power', the content of *Maiden Castle*—as summed up by the magician Uryen Quirm, and which also looks forward to Myrddin Wyllt and Medrawd in *Porius*—it is far more disturbing:

I became convinced, not from any revelation, you understand, but because of this *necessity* I'm under of bearing the pain of the world, the pain of what beats against the wall, that in one carnation after another I've been the same Power...I've been the power that's older than all these new gods, the Power that's the deepest of

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<sup>4</sup> The final parting of Sylvanus from the Punch and Judy girl, Marret, following his committal is one of the novel's most poignant and touching scenes (pp514–19)—Powys at his lyrical best in his most lyrical work.



#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

all, for it's got Death in it as well as Life...I tell you it's in all the pain of the world where love turns to hate and beats against the wall! It's in the despair of all the sterile love that's ever been since the beginning! Don't you see what force there is in sterile love? Why, my dear boy, it's the strongest love there is! 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.(MAI:251–52)

Sterility, death and the past are once again our chief concerns. The 'hero' Dud No-Man—a name he selects for himself on learning that he is the bastard of an unknown father in a deliberate attempt at self-negation—is an historical novelist, writing about the death of Mary Channing, who was burnt in 1705 for poisoning her husband. He is living in Dorchester, the town where his wife and mother both died. His life with Wizzie, the girl he 'rescues'—i.e. buys—from a travelling circus is sexless. Our self-negating hero is an embodiment of his father's words—for Uryen is his father.

There is a continual looking to the past. Even Wizzie, who looks more to the future than the others and eventually goes to America with Thuella Wye, the next androgyne, often thinks back to her circus days, to the ring master Old Funky who, even though it was through rape, represented sexual fulfilment and vitality: 'You taught me my job. You taught me my power. You taught me my life. You re-created my body.'(p457).

The novel's conclusion, with Uryen's death, Wizzie's departure and Dud's settling back into his isolation, reiterates Uryen's great pronouncement—sterility and death have triumphed—and inevitably a darker version of the conclusion of *Wolf Solent*. Indeed Dud and Wolf, and to some extent Magnus Muir, the Latin teacher in *Weymouth Sands* who is unable to escape his dead father's shadow, have much in common in their shared obsession with the past and with their dead.

In looking back to his parents, Dud inevitably looks towards Wales, the land of their birth, and we are thus also pointed forward, towards the dark

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

mystic world that is to be so powerfully evoked in *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*.

### 4.2: MORWYN or THE VENGEANCE OF GOD

Although only its first few pages actually take place in Wales, *Morwyn* is the first of the Welsh novels, and mixes together the mythologies of Wales and Greece with actual historical characters. Realism is abandoned, giving place to an horrific grotesquerie which allows Powys to confront directly the essential evil of sadism and vivisection—described in *Weymouth Sands* as ‘the worst sin of our age’(p253). The first person narrative is an account, written for the benefit of the narrator’s son, of a journey through Hell into the realm where Merlin, Saturn, Caridwen the Great Mother and Rhadamanthos all sleep, awaiting the return of the Golden Age.

The denizens of Hell, who spend their time watching vivisection experiments on huge screens, are the souls of dead sadists with the Marquis de Sade, Torquemada, Calvin, Nero and countless Vivisectionists among their number. Their bodies are transparent, revealing the writhing mass of nerve endings beneath their skin, which becomes more agitated as they become excited. They communicate silently by some form of telepathy. Their Hell is self-created, for this is the vengeance of God—these sadists are given what they lusted after, the ceaseless torture of innocent victims, but being insubstantial they cannot participate and many, notably de Sade, are tormented by remorse over their sadism.

Although as a work of sustained grotesque horror *Morwyn* is impressive—with the fear and revulsion aroused by the threat to ‘vivisect’ the girl, Morwyn, and the dog, Black Peter, by the souls of the sadists passing through the solid bodies a good example of Powys’ skill with narrative—it is for its philosophic statements that it is more important. Science and religion are perceived as evil in their domination over humanity, and the cruelty they inspire—hence

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the alignment of the religious persecutors Torquemada and Calvin with the vivisectionists:

‘They’re the twin-gods of Religion and Science,’ he went on. ‘I don’t myself know which is which; and I think, in the end, under the washing of this sea they will become one figure with two faces. They’re both as you observe, still in the process of creation. They’re the creation of they’re worshippers and have only a dim half-life.’(MOR:178)

Humanity is depicted as enslaving itself to these cruel gods in a massive act of self-deception through the creation of hierarchies. And yet the pathway to the Golden Age opens beneath these idols—if the Shattered Skull implies an existence beyond death, this is a more open statement of a Golden Age beyond Hell, for even ‘out from the most noisome regions of evil’(p178) good can come.

Over the entry is inscribed: ‘Sleep is the bond forged for Cronos’(p183), and for the first time Powys invokes the Golden Age of Hesiod. In this refuge the narrator and his companions are saved by Merlin’s power, which transforms the pursuing vivisectionist’s into their own victims.

Although the actual site of the Golden Age has been attained it is not satisfactory. Morwyn and Taliesin, accompanied by her semi-reformed father’s spirit—he was a vivisectionist himself—and the Titan Tityos set out for America to crusade for the end of vivisection, while the narrator, comforted only by Socrates and Rabelais, is left to return to Wales. Rabelais leaves him with words of comfort, for both himself and for humanity. All sexual pleasure, he ensures us, is allowed by ‘God’ so long as it isn’t cruel, and he goes on to point us to a Golden Age:

‘The sleeping-place of the Age of Gold is in the depths of every human heart; an to this must all revert. Bloody religion and Bloody Science are not forever. At the bottom of the world is pain, but below the pain is hope. Be of good cheer, dear cod, He is overcoming the world. There is knowledge; but He is not the knowledge. There is religion; but He is not in the religion. Wherever a man refuses to do evil that good may come, wherever a man is merciful and pitiful, *even unto his hurt*, there and there only is the great and true God, who is below all, and above all, and in us all!’(MOR:320–21)

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The imminence of Sam Dekker's incarnate Christ is here mixed with a kind of humanism in the hope born out of the nightmare, in an early version of the doctrines expressed by Myrddin and Brother John in *Porius* and echoing Nietzsche's assertion that 'Joy is deeper than heart's agony' in Zarathustra's Intoxicated Song.<sup>5</sup> The potential for our salvation—the hope of attaining the Golden Age—lies within us, as does the possibility of damnation, as the sadists in their He;; reveal. In spite of its weird grotesqueries, *Morwyn* is one of the clearest statements Powys made about his philosophical and metaphysical beliefs.

### 4.3: OWEN GLENDOWER

The melancholy dream-state from which the vivid nightmare of *Morwyn* disturbed us returns in *Owen Glendower*. At the centre of this huge chronicle of the fifteenth-century Welsh uprising is Owen himself, for once a truly heroic and tragic hero, destined to fail in his quest to free Wales from the domination of England. Although violence and death are an unavoidable part of this chronicle of revolution, and although it is the violence necessitated by his action that hinders Owen in his pursuit of his Golden Age, the malign influence of the Shattered Skull is absent here. No single character is obsessed by the pursuit of homicidal violence. Even the sado-masochistic sexuality of Mistress Lowri and her lovers—a sado-masochism from which Rhisiart, the typical Powysian anti-hero is not free—is far less disturbing than that of Owen Evans in the *Romance*.

Destiny is for the first time acknowledged as a major force. Owen is both our hero and our magician, yet on the morning of his declaration of himself as Prince of Wales he surrenders his 'magic' powers, destroying the symbol:

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<sup>5</sup> R.J. Hollingdale, trans., *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Friedrich Nietzsche (penguin, London, 1969) pp326–333 'The Intoxicated Song'

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

The next thing he did was to fling over the magic globe, which now reflected the first real light of the rising sun, the wolfskin from his head. Then after a moment's pause he raised the great axe and struck...At the third the crystal fell into fragments! He stood listening intently, leaning on the handle of the weapon and surveying the wolf-skin...There, the sun had risen! A thin spear-head of golden rays flickered upon the crumpled skin that now lay almost flat upon the massive oak support. He stared at the ruffled pall, as if he expected to see blood-stains of some sort—blood-stains of the eidola of the future—staining that great pelt...Then he went to the window, and facing the sunlight, all grandly accoutred and anointed as he was, became—had there been eyes peeping through that arrow-slit to see—a figure of gleaming gold.(OG:393-94)

In surrendering himself to destiny—with an act that perhaps comes closer to anything else in the novel to the shattering of a skull—Owen thus becomes a golden figure, a human representative of the Golden Age. Yet even as he proclaims himself Prince of Wales he is disturbed by the vision of 'Blood and ashes'(pp395- 96)—the end of his quest is present at its inception.

Although Owen is defeated, seeing many of his family killed and some of his supporters—notably Rhisiart, who becomes a judge— joining the English, his death, like Johnny's before him is in some sense a triumph and a fulfilment:

But Glyn Dŵr still had his arms out-stretched. 'Prince of Powys—Prince of Gwynedd—Prince of Wales—' and then in a tone that made the boy stop crying and made even Lord Talbot cross himself, 'Prince of Annwn!

A deep silence followed and Father Sulien said to himself: 'He was dead before he spoke. *A spirit spoke through him.* They're holding up a dead weight now.'

If they were Broch-o'-Meifod was powerful enough to do his part with one hand while with the other he deliberately removed one of the torches from its iron sconce and set light to the dry furze-stalks on the altar. These instantaneously burst into flame; and as the flames rose Judge Rhisiart was aware of an irresistible compulsion.

Lifting the hand that held the pardon high above his head, he flung it lightly, easily and without effort into the heart of the fire.(OG:925-26)

Rejecting King Henry's pardon, Owen passes in his death from temporal to spiritual domination—for Annwn is the Welsh Hades identified in *Morwyn* as the resting place of the Golden Age.

#### 4. *Raising the Dragon*

There are other new forces besides destiny introduced in *Owen Glendower*. In his essay 'Land and Sacrifice in the *Odyssey*' Pierre Vidal-Naquet comments that 'Hesiod's age of gold, the age of Cronos the 'vegetarian' age before cooking and before sacrifice...is also the period of cannibalism and human sacrifice, in at least part of the tradition.'<sup>6</sup> Although it is in *Porius* that cannibalism becomes more central, it is present in *Owen*. Fearing that Owen has been struck by a poisoned arrow, Rhisiart wishes to clean the wound:

'If you will, child,' he murmured faintly, 'but my blood is dangerous.'

Rhisiart didn't wait for further permission. Kneeling down by his hero's side in the darkness he had no difficulty in finding the wound in his arm and pressing his lips to it. Then he sucked and swallowed and sucked and swallowed. (OG:388)

By sharing his blood Rhisiart is thus bound to his lord—perhaps explaining the compulsion he feels to obey Owen's final unspoken wish to burn his royal pardon.

This drinking of blood also has obvious links with eucharistic theology—the wine which becomes Christ's blood in the mass offers us a share in Christ's Resurrection, effectively allowing us to share in his destiny, just as Owen believes that Rhisiart will now share his: 'A Man's blood's a man's soul. Do'ee want to share—'(p388). Although Powys was moving away from Christianity all the time, his idiosyncratic belief in the efficacy of Christ's Blood and Body—which he shared with Johnny Geard: see *Autobiography* and *A Glastonbury Romance* above—or at least in the sharing of the blood, never faded.

Issues of time and eternity raised in earlier works are also present here. Although the novel covers sixteen years—the greatest time span of any of Powys' novels—many earlier events are recalled at Owen's death. The proclamation of Owen as Prince of Wales (p395) is echoed in his death speech, proclaiming

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<sup>6</sup> *Myth, Religion and Society: Structuralist Essays*, ed. R.L. Gordon. 'Land and sacrifice in the *Odyssey*', Pierre Vidal-Naquet, p.82

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himself as Prince of Hades (p925). As he watches his lord die Rhisiart recalls how he had once sucked blood from a poisoned wound. In his final moments, Owen invokes both his daughter Catherine and Rhisiart's wife Tegolin—women central to Rhisiart's life and the action of the novel—after calling on the great mythological women Arianrod ferch Dōn and Bronwen ferch Llyr (p925). The priest present at his death, Father Sulien, is the pageboy Elphin who, sixteen years before had flirted with Rhisiart. The youthful Rhisiart of the novel's beginning is now echoed by Catherine's son, the boy who shares his name. Time and people seem to telescope into this one moment, Owen's entry into the spirit world.

The compression of long expanses of time is repeated in the novel's melancholic end as Meredith ap Owen ponders his father's end:

And now, as the sight of those majestic horns against the dawn brought back memory upon memory, he felt that each one of these images—else why in the confusion of his days had they remained?—was much more than an owl's cry, a buzzard's vigil, a salmon's leap, a mountain's summit above the mist. What were they, what did they have in them, that they could bring such comfort?

'It's their impersonality,' he thought. 'It's the fact that they're the visions of thousands of generations of man living in these hills. They're mine; and they're not mine! With a host of other commoner simpler things they're the experiences of our people throughout the generations.'(OG:938)

Eternity once again enters Time, bringing healing and comfort just as it did through the Grail in the *Romance*, and we are left with a 'sad-faced man smiling'(p938).

In the course of these four novels Powys has moved from contemporary Wessex to historical Wales, the scene in *Owen Glendower* and *Porius* of what Glen Cavaliero has called 'profoundly impressive' novels (*John Cowper Powys: Novelist*:43). In their dream-like serenity he has presented us with majestic characters who, even when they are caught up in political or spiritual quests, are largely concerned with people and personal relationships—true seekers of

#### *4. Raising the Dragon*

the Golden Age offered by communication and community. Through them the scene has been set for the last great attempt to attain that Golden Age, and the creation of some of his most memorable characters, which we see in *Porius*.



## 5. A Golden Sunset: *Porius*

After a break of ten years, Powys published *Porius*, the novel which he described as 'the Best Book of My Life' <sup>1</sup> and which I have taken as the second great example of his work. A vast mystical/historical chronicle like its predecessor, the narrative complexity of *Porius* has been greatly increased by the deletion of large sections of the text before its original publication in 1951, reducing it from some fifteen hundred typescript pages (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*; p150) to just under seven hundred, and by some rather perfunctory re-writing to tie up the loose ends. <sup>2</sup> Such excisions are seriously damaging, and the latter part of the novel is rendered particularly confusing.

The plot involves the meeting in the North Welsh valley of Edeyrnion of a party of the Emperor Arthur's cavalry, an invading Saesan, or Saxon, force and the inhabitants of the valley, themselves a confusion of several races—the Gwyddylaid, the Ffichtiaid, the Gwyddyl-Ffichti, the Brythons and the Cewri. It would take almost as long to explain the complex series of conflicts that this meeting brings to a head as it would to read the novel!

As a further possible source of confusion lies in Powys' frequent references to the Pelagian heresy, to which *Porius*' view of life is linked, I shall give a brief account of it before looking at the novel itself. Pelagius was a British or Irish monk who strongly opposed St Augustine's teachings on sin and divine grace.

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-1956*; Macdonald; London; 1958:p143

<sup>2</sup> The Appendix (pp185-87) of Glen Cavaliero's *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* gives an account of Powys' original intentions for the novel, and describes some of the deleted scenes. A full text is currently being prepared by Colgate University Press, USA, to be published in 1992 (see *The Powys Society Newsletter*, December 1989)—a publication which should help *Porius* be recognised as the great novel that it is—and for this reason the literary agents of the Powys estate have felt it inappropriate to grant permission for portions of the deleted text to be reproduced here.

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Deeply worried by Augustine's prayer: '*da quod iubes et iube quod vis*'—'grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt'—and its implication that man was only a puppet of divine grace, he began his advocacy of man's free-will, claiming that although God empowers us to do good or evil, the choice is man's own, and as such he merits praise or blame himself. If man, Pelagius argued, is incapable of choosing not to sin he is given a virtual licence to do whatever he wishes. He also denied original sin, for how can man be in a state of sin before he has begun to exercise his will? The logical extension of these ideas, which Pelagius accepted, is that a man is capable of leading a sinless life, even though the practicalities make this a virtual impossibility. Although the synod of Diospolis in 415 cleared Pelagius of charges of heresy leading Pope Zosimus to rescind his excommunication, this decision was reversed at the Council of Carthage in 418. After this date there is no other direct information about Pelagius, who had been in Africa and Palestine since Alaric's invasion of Rome in 410, and he is thought to have died in Palestine—although for Powys' purposes the scene of his death is shifted to Wales.

There are several differences between Pelagius' declared views and the doctrine that goes by the name of Pelagianism, which was largely expounded by such of his disciples as Celestius and Julian of Eclanum, and which was anathematized at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Pelagianism stresses that Adam was created mortal, that children do not require baptism to be eligible for eternal life—the Fall is thus re-enacted in every life, rather than being a once for all act—and that divine grace and human free-will are incompatible, with Julian of Eclanum eventually declaring that man is independent of God. Even though much of this is an amplification, if not a distortion of Pelagius' actual beliefs, the centrality of man and the absence of any divine predestination are echoed in both the Humanist creed announced by Rabelais in *Morwyn* and the philosophical ideas put forward in *Porius*.

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To the conflict between Pelagianism and orthodox Christianity, here represented by the priest Minnawc Gorsant and his successor, Powys adds various other religious strands. The beliefs of the ancient forest-people are represented by their druid, Gogfran Derwydd, one of the novel's major characters; Rhun, Porius' cousin and foster-brother, is an initiate of the Mithraic Mysteries; Medrawd's nihilism takes on an almost religious stature, with the gospel of destruction he puts forward finding resonances in the thoughts of both Porius and Myrddin Wyllt; finally, Myrddin Wyllt is at the heart of his own mysterious cultus. Through this religious confusion, indeed through the novel as a whole, run references to blood, and the drinking of blood, recalling ideas raised by Rhisiart's drinking of Owen's blood in *Owen Glendower*, and looking towards both the Golden Age cannibalism mentioned above and the Christian eucharist.

The long-absent Shattered Skull here makes its return as a physical actuality, and is also present in its more diffused form—the general violence and outrage of war—that was implicit in *Owen Glendower*. Set against it is the strongest quest for the Golden Age—both that to be attained in personal relationships and the ancient time Hesiod wrote of—we are to encounter, although even here nihilism and isolationism are beginning to creep in. The relationship of time and eternity which formed a large part of the theological/metaphysical discourse of the *Romance* is one of the central issues, foreshadowing the growing pre-occupation with time in the later works. Despite all these universal and theological concerns, the increased importance of human relationships which has developed over the preceding novels is maintained here. In a novel in which Powys' skill at characterisation is shown at its best advantage, many of his repeated character-types find their ultimate, and most touchingly human, expressions.

While *Owen Glendower*, which with its sixteen-year plot encompasses Powys' greatest time-span, ended with long vistas of time telescoping into a

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single moment at Owen's death, *Porius*—a novel set in and around Mynydd-y-Gaer, the pre-historic fortress in the ruins of which Owen died—begins with the opposite effect. This is partly due to the structure of the text. The events narrated all occur during one seven day period at the end of the fifth century AD—Powys' most concentrated time-span—with virtually the first quarter of the book (pp1-146) concerned with a single evening. Thus expanded through space and time—at least for the reader if not for the characters involved, this short period of time covers many events, two of which repeat this process of the expansion of moments of time, until they become eternity. Both are concerned with Myrddin Wyllt, the first when Porius is obliged to lend him physical support:

It seemed to him...that he shaped the recession backward of the bones under his grasp into those animal-worlds and vegetation-worlds from which they had, it seemed, only yesterday, emerged. And by degrees the figure he was holding grew less self-contained, less buttressed-in upon himself, and the man's very identity seemed slipping back into the elements. The human frame he held became an organism whose *conscious recession* into its primordial beginnings extended far beyond the prophet's temporary existence. It was as if what he had held, and what he could so easily have crushed, became a multiple identity composed of many separate lives, the lives of beasts and birds and reptiles, and plants and trees and even rocks and stones! this multiple entity was weak and helpless in his grasp; and yet it was so much vaster, so much older, so much more enduring than himself that it awed him even while he dominated it.(POR:58-59)

Myrddin's extension of himself into time and matter—the action which cost both Johnny Geard and Owen Glendower their lives, although this apotheosis of the Powys-magician does it to gain strength—is not limited to a backward motion. During this same protracted evening, declaring himself to be the mouth-piece of 'the Son of the Morning...Cronos'(p99) he begins to speak of the future.

'But when our Lord the sun with his attendant planets has passed from the power of Pisces into the power of Aquarius, the white dragon from Germania will cross the sea to trouble us again. This time it will not swim with its feet and with its tail through the water, breathing smoke and fire. It will—it will—that white dragon from Germania will—that white dragon will—'(POR:100)

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The prophecy—perhaps concerning Hitler's Third Reich—is never completed, and yet Porius is troubled by a coldness emanating from Myrddin (p101) which corresponds to the icy wind which he feels 'had reached them *through time* as well as through space'(p102).

Myrddin is thus depicted as a human realisation of the Grail, the 'Eternal [which] once sank down into time'(AGR:1063), a part of the very Golden Age which he is seeking.<sup>3</sup> His eventual declaration of himself as an incarnation of Cronos, the creator of the original Golden Age, should come as no surprise. But Myrddin Wylt is a very different figure from the majestic sleeping form of Cronos encountered in *Morwyn*. As with the preceeding magicians he is physically ugly, and if he is the most powerful of the line, he is also the ugliest (see pp55–56), and exudes a strange fungal smell, which Porius describes as a 'peculiar death-and-corruption stench,' and yet finds 'morbidly sexual'(p53). His true difference, however, from the earlier version of the ancient god is that while 'sleep is the bond forged for Cronos ' then held true, it is now gone—Myrddin is too powerful to be held by sleep, or even to be bound by time. A statue in Rhun's Mithraic temple shows Cronos bound by the time-snake—an image which occurs to Porius when he is holding Myrddin in his embrace(p60)—and after threatening to destroy it, Myrddin symbolically demonstrates his power over time:

'And now, little one, I want you to see how I have the real right to break up the image of one god at least. You mustn't be frightened if I show you how my pet snake...twines itself round my wrist and tries to put its tail into its mouth. A slow-worm can act unending Time as well as a sea-serpent. You won't be afraid, Neb ap Digon?'

'No, Master!'

And the small creature really did show no sign of uneasiness as the being who declared he had been buried on yr Wyddfa revealed his wrist with the slow-worm twisted round it so tightly that its tail

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<sup>3</sup> Powys' idiosyncratic use of names again crops up here, making this valley in North Wales an appropriate spot for such meetings of time and eternity. The name of the valley, Edeyrnion, is derived from the name of Porius' great-grandfather Edeyrn, which in Romanised form is rendered Eternus:Eternity.

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did give the impression of enterring its mouth. But the counsellor now began murmuring something in a language that was apparently more difficult for his human listener to understand than for the slow-worm, for that intelligent reptile promptly untwisted itself from his wrist, glided across his beard, and crawling along one of his legs made its way silently and rapidly into the open air.(POR:277)

By demonstrating his domination in this fashion, the need to shatter the statue is removed, and violence is avoided—a very different picture to that later presented in *Up and Out* where, represented as physical beings, Eternity consumes Time and then dies itself. *Porius* shows a peaceful co-habiting of time and eternity which later seems impossible.

Myrddin's objective is the re-institution of the Golden Age which was lost when he was betrayed by his own son, and the only way this can be brought about, he argues, is through the voluntary surrender of power over others:

'The Golden Age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and devils learn to unmake themselves as I did, and leave men and women to themselves!'(POR:276)

This oblique invocation of Pelagianism—men and women must be given the choice—is coupled with a turning inward of the Shattered Skull in the un-making of the self, and begins to lead us towards Hobbes' state of Nature. The rejection of authority and hierarchy can only lead to anarchy, to the 'chance-ruled chaos of souls'(p681) which *Porius* comes to accept as his Golden Age. Something of this can be glimpsed in the relationship between Myrddin and his page Neb—the pages of Arthur's court, as Wilson Knight points out (*The Saturnian Quest*: 80–81) have none of the sexual ambiguities of their counterparts in *Owen Glendower*—as they make thier way to the Cave of Mithras:

Once out of sight, however...a subhuman exultation seemed to seize them both. The counsellor took Neb between his great hands and repeatedly flung him into the air and caught him as he came down; while Neb kept climbing trees like a squirrel and skipping from one to another until he would finally descend with the leap of a wild cat upon the shoulder of his companion.(POR:217)

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It is this exultant celebration of life and community that prevents Myrddin's philosophy of the destruction authority becoming malign, and makes it so much more attractive than the austere christianity of Minnawc Gorsant. In his intolerant authoritarianism—an attitude responsible for the murder of Porius' cousin Morvran by 'fanatical Christians'(p157)—the priest is representative, along with his ally Gogfan Derwydd, of the religious tyranny Myrddin is seeking to destroy. Here, for the first time we see Powys' stepping out of the Christian discourse in which, or at least along side which, he has previously written—all his priests, bar Hastings in *Ducdame*, have been 'good' characters, and their religion accepted if not actively practised—as he begins to turn on hierarchies and power-structures. <sup>4</sup>

Actual expressions of Myrddin's power are rare. His influence over the animal world is demonstrated at his first appearance, and in his manipulation of the slow-worm. Elsewhere, he possibly uses his power to destroy Minnawc Gorsant—who collapses after his great denunciation of Myrddin as the devil (pp481–86)—by sinking his soul into the earth. In this act he also succeeds in bringing unity to Arthur's and the forest-people's archers— previously they had been deadly enemies—in a 'wild and exultant reconcillation and fraternization'(p489), before rising up like a 'deus mortuus, or a 'corpse-god"—recalling both Owen Glendower, described as a '*Deus Semi-Mortuus*'(OG:935) after his death, and Owen Evans, who is '*homo mortuus*', '*rex mortuus*' and '*deus mortuus*'—to proclaim the word '*Cymry*', or 'community, a cry taken up by all the soldiers, pointing us towards the Golden Age.

The second, and only concrete expression of his power is in the transformation of the owl, Blodeuwedd, back into her human form(pp653–58), an event made to appear out of place, and virtually pointless by the cuts made to the

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<sup>4</sup> Myrddin's ominous comment about the 'lust for obedience' which is a part of Christianity in part recalls the twin God's of Religion and Science which, in *Morwyn*, are seen as the constructs of their own worshippers. The lust to obey is also linked to the religious masochism earlier displayed by Owen Evans.

### 5. *A Golden Sunset*

book. Its basic significance is an affirmation of love and community over obedience, for Blodeuwedd, the maiden made from flowers to be the lover of Llew Llaw Gyffes by Mathand Gwydian refused to remain faithful, becoming instead the lover of Goronwy, and was made an owl by way of punishment.<sup>5</sup> Myrddin's actions cancel this punishment, and justify Blodeuwedd's actions.

Although Myrddin's ends have not been attained by the close of the novel, he is left in a position to bring them about. A partial Golden Age has already been achieved by his declaration of 'Cymry', and he has also prophesied the end of Christianity: "This new Three-in-One...will only last two thousand years. The thunderer I begot lasted ten thousand. But none of them last for ever." (pp276-77).<sup>6</sup> In the final pages he is freed from Nineue's power, even though he has allowed everyone to believe that he is destined to be imprisoned by her on the summit of Cader Idris (see p274). Through his subversions this life-affirming opponent of authority is left in a position of considerable power, with the attainment of the Golden Age a very real possibility.

In opposition to this triumphant progress towards the Golden Age is the destructive philosophy of Medrawd—more familiar in the Arthurian cannon as Mordred—the greatest of all Powys' nihilists. A dark and seductive figure—Porius thinks that his was the most beautiful face he had ever seen' (p137)—and one of the few people able to command respect from Einion, the wayward Prince of Edeyrnion, his gospel of death is mingled with a savage vindictiveness and a 'mystic horror' (p572) of blood:

'...*There!* I'm sure I have hurt myself, but I can't see any blood!...My meaning is that it would have been much better if life had never begun; but since it *has* begun...No, I can't find any cut in my hand. I must have seen blood somewhere else—*on* something else—and with someone else—it's all very curious...But since it has begun, the sooner it's brought to an end the better, and the quickest of all ways to bring it to an end is *war!* In life there's more pain than

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<sup>5</sup> see *The Mabinogian*; trans. & ed. Jeffrey Gantz; Penguin Books; London; 1976: 'Math Son of Mathonwy' pp111-16.

<sup>6</sup> This prophecy and the earlier one concerning the start of the age of Aquarius give Porius a certain immediacy, for both point to the late twentieth century.



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pleasure, more ugliness than beauty, more lies than truth, more misery than happiness, more cruelty than pity, more illusion than reality. So I have condemned life to die, and I have appointed war its executioner. The twin children of life, Hate-love and Love-hate, I have likewise condemned to death, with war as their executioner. I am come that the world should have death; and I am strong because death is more powerful than life, higher than life, larger than life, older than life and deeper than life. It existed before life appeared and it will exist after life has disappeared. When I slept with you mother last night, and thought how probable it was that both your father and her father were dead, and how likely it was that remorse for what I was making her do would bring her to death, and how probable it was that you—  
'(POR:570)

When the significance of blood in both the *Romance*, with its emphasis on eucharistic theology, and *Owen Glendower*, where by consuming Owen's blood Rhisiart is bound to him, is considered, Medrawd's fears are easily explained, for his destruction can allow no concept of community or of relationships.

The sharing of blood is more common in *Porius* than in the preceeding novels. Both Gogfran and Derwydd and Brochael, Porius' uncle, taste the blood of Llew, the druid's brother, symbolically binding them all together: 'within his body was the food, within his veins the blood of this mystic family'(p260), even though it is to their servant Drom, rather than with the druid and his brother, that Brochael eventually becomes close. A similar blood bond is forged between Porius, Rhun and their cousin Morfydd who, although she loves Rhun has been betrothed to Porius—another of Powys' beloved triangular, incestuous relationships:

Without a word [Porius] seized her head in his two hands and kissed her so impetuously on the mouth that he could taste blood as he drew away. Nor was she, who at that moment recalled, and did so with a sensation like the splitting of a tablet of living stone in her breast, the taste Rhun's blood, quite sure this time whose lip had been hurt nor whose teeth had drawn the blood.(POR:640)<sup>7</sup>

The final consumption of blood, and of flesh, is that by the Cewri, the ancient giants from the Cader—another ultimate expression of a character-type:

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<sup>7</sup> In one of the sections of the novel deleted before publication, Porius recalls how, in a childhood fight, he had cut Rhun and then licked the blood off his hand—a further extension of the cousins' blood-bond.

### 5. *A Golden Sunset*

Porius may have giant-like attributes, but the Gawr and his daughter are actual giants—who consume the bodies of those killed in battle(p510). The cannibalism of the Golden Age cited by Pierre Vidal-Naquet (see above) is obliquely invoked—the Cewri do not consume their own, but the idea is similar—while the fact that they are giants recalls the the gigantic Titans, ruled by Cronos, who are a part of the Golden Age legends.

Medrawd's horror of blood arises out of his opposition to the sense of community which it can create, and to the Golden Age which it implies. Paradoxically, though, his account of death's power comes close to being an account of eternity, and Myrddin the representative of Eternity is dedicated to the creation of the Golden Age: a direct confrontation of Hobbes' state of Nature—Myrddin's philosophy—and the nihilistic destruction—Medrawd's philosophy—which dominates the later works. Medrawd's creed is also an amplification of Freud's Thanatos, the death instinct 'the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state', which finds expression in *All or Nothing*, the last of Powys' novels published during his life-time.

But Medrawd goes beyond this, becoming, literally, a death-lover. After seducing and poisoning a half-witted servant girl, Teleri—who reveals that Euronwy has not after all succumbed to him—he is caught desecrating her grave, recalling Urquhart's actions over Redfern's grave in *Wolf Solent*:

driven crazy by her inscrutable chastity, scrabbling down  
in the grave of a dead whore, and wreaking his passion upon her dead  
corpse.(POR:650)

Even in these acts of violence and desecration Medrawd's object is defeated. Teleri's death has been caused, but Medrawd is motivated strongly by sexual urges which, no matter what violence is attached to them, cannot be separated from the life instinct, Eros. Further, the death of Teleri at the hands of the death-lover has a life-affirming effect upon Morfydd:

## 5. A Golden Sunset

How curious this was, that the death of Teleri, the life-hater, had brought to her [Morfydd], the life-lover, such a rush of energy that she felt almost ashamed, as if she absorbed into herself part of the dead girl's being, only to use it for the purpose opposite to hers, that is for life, not death!(POR:621)

Life-lover triumphs over death-lover in a novel which, although it introduces so strongly a nihilistic philosophy, is still, in the end, an affirmation of love.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, Medrawd is never associated with the Shattered Skull. His symbolic linking is with a snake—a symbolism inherited from Thomas Malory, who uses it for both Mordred and Arthur—specifically a snake in a picture of the infant Christ which Porius has seen:

The little Jesus...was lovingly and obsinately thwarting the one supreme desire of his dangerous plaything, *the desire to escape*. This desire had smouldered into such a recoil of tragic desperation that even as a boy Porius had read in the one small saurian eye which alone was visible the shuddering resolve, *sooner than not to escape*, to drag the world's hope of redemption down with him!

'it wants to escape...It wants to escape into nothingness; and, if God won't let it, it's ready to drag creation down with it!'  
(POR:138)

Medrawd is shown as the advocate of a generalised diffused violence, rather than of the specific violence of the Shattered Skull. It is Porius himself, torn between his service of Myrddin and the 'all-annihilating will to perish and a desire that all that is, was, or *could* be, should be swallowed up in irretrievable *nothingness!*'(P571) that Medrawd's words arouse in him, who is associated with the Shattered Skull.

His family has historical connections with the giants of the Cader, the Cewri. Their ancient ruler Rhitta Gawr was the original inhabitant of the family's fortress Mynydd-y-Gaer—and on whose remains Morfydd swears an oath,

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<sup>8</sup> As with Blodeuwedd, the deletions from the text have made Teleri's role almost nonsensical. She was originally much more important, just as Medrawd was originally allowed to justify his action in a final meeting with Porius, once more casting his nihilistic shadow over the novel.

### 5. *A Golden Sunset*

while Euronwy swears on the Blood of Christ—while Edeyrn, Porius' great-grandfather, married Creiddylad, one of the Cewri. Although many believe them to be extinct, it is through the re-establishment of contact with the flesh-eaters that Porius encounters the Shattered Skull. He is involved in a brief sexual encounter with the last female giant—as the culmination of his imagined association with her, and looking back to his ancestor, he christens her Creiddylad—during which this 'goddess-like creature'(p517) teaches him a little of her language, and which is ended when her father seeks to destroy Porius. Creiddylad intervenes in their battle with fatal consequences:

One of the most hammer like bulgings of that knotted root struck her on the side of the head. Her skull cracked like floating sea-shell struck by the prow of a powerfully rowed boat. Porius could see the blood and more than the blood. The whole side of her head was cracked, crushed and smitten in. Broken bits of her skull, to which were adhering blood-soaked strands of yellow hair, hung down against her shoulder.

Porius could see these sickening details more clearly than the giant himself, who had now dropped the tree trunk, snatched up his daughter in both his arms, where he held her as a mother holds an infant, and flung at his enemy—and these were the first sounds Porius had heard him utter—a wild and terrible word, the reverberation of which no living man at whom it was aimed could ever forget; and Porius never did forget its psychic vibration, though of the syllables that composed it he remembered nothing, for it was a long scaly word like the hissing of a dragon heard through miles of marshy reeds; and Porius could feel its deadly venom, like the spittle of an insane incubus, strike ice-cold against his cheek.(POR:521)

The rage and despair awoken in the Gawr—and his 'scaly' dragon-ward is perhaps a reference to Medrawd's saurian associations—leads him, in an orgy of self destruction of which Medrawd could not but approve, to fling himself and his daughter into a mountain lake, where a rock 'crushed the father's skull as the pine-tree had crushed the daughter's'(p523). In the aftermath of these deaths Porius slaughters a troop of Saeson invaders, using the body of one of their number as a weapon before his final attack:

With no motive-force now in his exhausted mind save an obscure preference for being surrounded by dead Saeson rather than by wounded ones, Porius picked up Thorson's great axe and beginning

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with that axe's owner went heavily, wearily, doggedly, round the whole circle of his enemies, smashing their skulls.(POR:561)

Although these are undeniably acts of violence and despair—and although the latter comes perilously close to Medrawd's advocacy of destruction for destruction's sake—over them rise the two main phrases in the tongue of the Cewri that Porius has learnt. The first, 'tungerong-larry-ong', taught to him by the druid's servant Morgant, means 'endure until the end'(pp503–4), <sup>7</sup> while Creiddylad herself says to him 'cariad-digon', 'love is enough'(p518). Shortly after the death of the Gawr and his daughter, Porius adopts the words 'Gorsorb-larry-ong', 'enjoy until the end'(p529) as his own motto. Even in the midst of destruction his main motivators are life and love.

The Shattered Skull's potency is weakened here. In the face of the increased force in the movement towards the Golden Age— motivated as it is by the God of that age—and in the introduction of such a strong strand of nihilistic destruction, the intensely focussed violence which the Shattered Skull had previously symbolised, particularly in the *Romance*, is no longer such a potent force. In this respect *Porius* is as much a 'transition work' as the four novels that fall between it and the *Romance*, for a re-definition of both the Shattered Skull and the Golden Age begins here, which is consummated in the emptiness beyond death to which both *Up and Out* and 'Cataclysm' eventually lead us.

It is also through Porius, upon whom the Shattered Skull thus impinges, that the main link with Pelagianism is made. Brother John, Porius' boyhood teacher, nursed Pelagius at his death, and has passed on his teachings, with the result that Porius intends to journey to Anastasius' court at Constantinople in an attempt to reopen the question of the heresy and get the Pope's decrees overturned. Although none of Porius' beliefs has much to do with Christianity,

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<sup>7</sup> Morgant also mentions 'Thmberol Gongquod' - 'to tread the earth lovingly'—words which seem to be given very little importance, overshadowed as they are by the other Cewri syllables.

## 5. *A Golden Sunset*

orthodox or heretical, there is a strong strand of Pelagianism in his continued assertions that man and his creative imagination are more important than God:

It came from Pelagius. He recognized *that* clearly enough: and now as he stared at the white foam on the river's surface he thought he knew just what it was! It was the idea that each solitary individual man had the power, from the very start of his conscious life, not so much by his will, for *that* was coerced by other wills, but by his free imagination, by the stories he told himself, to create his future...Well! the Mithras Bull might bellow and bleed till it broke the adamantine chains of every tradition in the world! The important thing was the human imagination that defied it: the human imagination that defied not only the Bull and the Slayer of the Bull, but the Crucified and the slayer of the Crucified, yea! and all the God-bearers and all the God-slayers from the beginning of the world unto this hour!

The human imagination must never be robbed of its power to tell itself other stories, and thus to create a different future. (POR:-40-44)

The reliance upon self which Porius' distortion of Pelagianism implies is seen as a source of power in the novel—the culmination of another slow development which began with Wolf Solent's enervating 'mythology'. His sinking into his soul is developed by Owen Glendower into the trances which so disturb Rhisiart, a much greater expression of power:

And as if fishing for his own self-treachery in his fluctuating eyes he spiked with his spirit a terribly glittering fish, and as he caught it he thought, 'That's my reward for knowing you so well, old cloven-beard. I can detach myself from you till my soul *isn't in you at all*, till my soul is there, or there, or *there*—till my soul's so independent of you that it can make you do anything—*perhaps even live after you're dead!*' (OG:392-93)

Porius' habit—which he terms 'cavoseniargizing'—is almost the direct opposite of Owen's trances, for it is a coming together of body and soul; a coming together inspired by a close contemplation of his surroundings:

the gulf between the animal consciousness of his body, the body of a youthful Hercules, and the consciousness of his restless soul was temporarily bridged; so that his soul found itself able to follow every curve and ripple of his bodily sensations *and yet remain suspended above them.* (POR:83)

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Porius suspects the enchantress Nineue, who comes close to succeeding in her plan to imprison and enslave Myrddin, of practising 'cavoseniargizing' or something similar (p84), which would perhaps explain her mystic powers, while Morfydd comes to a conscious decision to look to herself for support:

that henceforth, whether loved or unloved, whether secure or insecure, whether lucky or unlucky, whether deciding right or deciding wrong, she would sink into her spirit and remain strong and intact, there, however much she betrayed herself elsewhere.(POR:468)

Myrddin Wyllt is the greatest example of gaining power through sinking his soul—in a combination of Johnny Geard's union with the Grail and Wolf and Morffyd's sinking into themselves—into himself and into nature. Where Myrddin is concerned, as Porius' first encounter with him makes clear, it is very difficult to draw a distinction between him and his surroundings, as he extends through both matter and time. It is through his huge consciousness that he is able to draw on such reserves of power, as he does in uniting the soldiers and freeing Blodeuwedd.

If the self and the imagination are new sources of power here, then a familiar one is sex. The novel's action takes place at the time of the Feast of the Autumn Sowing, an ancient fertility celebration, and the date agreed for Porius' marriage to Morfydd. This coincides with the more violently orgiastic Ritual of the Fisher King—associations with the Grail legend are again raised—which involves a 'monstrous phallic lance'(p449) being plunged into St Julian's Fountain. Over this background—a background perceived as a threat by the 'moral' Christian forces, and manipulated by Gogfan Derwydd to raise as much hatred and passion between the forest people and Arthur's cavalry as he can—a complex web of sexual attractions and relationships is woven. Some have already been mentioned: the Rhun-Morfydd-Porius triangle; Porius and the Gawres Creiddylad; Medrawd and Teleri; Medrawd and Euronwy—the list is

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almost endless. Nineue is sexually involved with both Myrddin and Porius—although thanks to deletions this can only remain an inference in the current published text, and the novel's closing scene in which Porius rejects Nineue makes it a very tenuous inference. Einion, the Prince of Edeyrnion—and one of Powys' few truly likeable characters—is, in his womanising, a direct descendent of William Solent.

Old issues such as incest and homosexuality are also brought into this web. Aside from the Rhun-Morfydd-Porius relationship there is a strong sexual attraction between Erddud, one of the three Modrybedd, the ancient wise-women—another character type reaching its highest point—who exert great influence upon the forest-people from their palace Ogof-y-Gawr, and her nephew Brochvail. Erddud's long suppressed passion, her 'ideal and impassioned love'-(p464) eventually finds expression at the moment of her death, and merges with the Ritual of the Fisher-King:

Whether her incestuous passion, as the old Princess indulged it now without a thought for anything else, was itself enough to plunge her into the gulf of nothingness, or whether it received in some automatic response from the senses of the man who was holding her, the final shock that pushed her over the brink, it seems likely that they both heard at that desperate moment certain particular strains from the Fisher-King's chant which from the beginning of time seem to have had some peculiar power over the daughters of the desert. All Brochvail knew was that when the spasmodic ecstasy of the Princess reached a particular climax, a shuddering convulsion contorted her whole body; and after a horrible jerk, like the snapping of a bow, he knew with his brain she was dead, though with his heart against which she was now so fiercely pressed he refused to accept this ghastly termination of an affection which, however guilty in the eyes of Minnawc Gorsant, 'the slave of Christ', possessed elements as noble and exalted as they were imbalanced and insane.(POR:471- 72)

Erddud's ecstasy and death fuse together, burning an impression into the place of her consummation that will last 'thousands of years'(p470), the place that is shortly afterwards the place of Prince Einion's own death.

Brochvail is also involved in the expression of homosexual attraction. After a brief relationship with Sybilla, one of his brother's cast-offs who eventually



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becomes Rhun's mistress and lady of Ogof-y-Gawr, he is captivated by Drom, one-time servant of Gogfan Derwydd. There is no overt statement of a homosexual relationship. Drom is portrayed as a strangely bisexual character—an androgynous male counterpart to Nineue's boy-woman who captivates Porius—particularly in Morfydd's perception of him and his relationship to her father (see chxxvii 'The Home Rock', pp620–32). Of the novel's many shadowy characters Drom is one of the most fascinating for, despite forceful denials from the preist (pp622-28) he is portrayed as a virtual Christ-figure who is 'possessed by the mind of the living Jesus'(p621). This is most explicit when he pays homage to Porius, newly declared Prince of Edeyrnion in the aftermath of Einion's death:

There was no treachery, no cruelty, no hypocrisy about Drom's kiss. It was worse. It took away a person's ultimate right—the abysmal *right to choose*, to choose *not* to love Drom, or any other living creature, the right to live alone, and finally to choose death if a if a person preferred death to life. The Kiss of Drom sought to condemn him to the holy glory of life however much he might long for the unblest anonymity of death...It was the kiss of rounded identity, of perfect balance, of the reconcillation of all opposites, the kiss of everlasting peace, the kiss of unutterable sameness, the kiss of pure divinity, the kiss of anti-*man*.(POR:599)

In his imitation of Christ, Drom becomes a living representative of the bland goodness symbolised for Porius by the infant Jesus in the same picture whose snake gave him a reference for Medrawd. If Medrawd is the representative of Thanatos the death instinct, then Drom is Eros the life instinct, seeking to fill the universe with created matter (see *All or Nothing* below). Once again it is the denial of the right to choose, the negation of free-will by divine grace that is opposed by Porius' Pelagianism.

In this mass of relationships the most touching is that of Tanwen, youngest of the Modrybedd, and Cadawg the Disinherited. This is the stuff of true medieval romace—he is a hero of olden times, she his devoted lover, and after their honouring by Arthur himself, they find their death in an heroic attempt to serve him. It is in their death that the true horror of violence and war is

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hammered home, and that the Shattered Skull is re-invoked—the sight of their decapitated bodies immediately precedes Porius' attack on the Saeson:

They were the figure of the Princess Tonwen of Ogof-y-Gawr and the figure of the disinherited son of Bendigeid Gorthevyr of Ogof-yr-Avanc. But it was not only the fact that these figures were lying in complete nakedness side by side that gave him this ultimate shock. It was the further abomination that their severed heads had been exchanged, so that to the naked body of the youngest princess—who was an old woman over seventy—had been joined the head of the son of the saintly Gothevyr, while the body of the disinherited recluse looked out upon the twilight through the proud aloof death-enamoured eyes of the woman who loved him.(POR:558–59)

This is the desecration worked upon love by violence and death, although even death does not succeed in separating the lovers.

In a novel so bound up with free-will and the power of sexual attraction, it is fitting that its conclusion should rest upon Porius' choice between the offer of sexual fulfilment with Nineue, or the pursuit of the Golden Age in freeing Myrddin. He is presented with a sexual temptation that goes far beyond anything offered him by either Morfydd or Creiddylad:

The very sun, on the brink of sinking, was helping her! It was turning her body to magnetic gold. He began to move towards her, his lust gathering within him like up-rushing lava. 'Tungerong-larry-ong!' it was as if the sun were stretching out a last pharos-ray to caress her on the very summit of y Wyddfa.

Porius was touching her now. Her whole figure had become transmuted into glowing gold. And although her eyes remained glazed, just as if she had been cavoseniargizing and forgetting his presence, she now deliberately, heedless of the icy air about her, exposed one of her breasts. And lo! the sight of it froze his desire at the source. 'Tungerong-larry-ong!' So the sub-human sounds of the Cewri tongue *had* propitiated the Mystery of Chance...in her absent-minded enjoyment of the sun's last rays, Nineue's erotic magnetism had dissolved from behind the arrow-slit of her eyes and lost itself in response to this more tremendous lover...and the attraction that had drawn him [Porius] to her side was utterly broken.(POR:674–75)

In his rejection of her 'temporal age of sexual gold [offered] in place of the magician's permanent Saturnalia of the imagination' (*The Demon Within*: 185) Porius completes Myrddin's victory. 'He has escaped from the wheel that turns.'

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So Nineue tells Porius as she departs, showing that Myrddin's domination of time is now complete—he is both within time, yet not bound by it, for its symbols, the serpent and the turning wheel, no longer hold him. The sleep of Cronos, the bond forged for him in *Morwyn*, is also broken when, opening y Wyddfa, or 'the Tomb', as the summit of teh Cader is called, Porius drops the thunderbolt Nineue gave upon the Magician's forehead. In these final moments we move beyond recognizable world into cosmic spaces. Porius feels himself to be 'upon a centrepoin in the midst of appearing and disappearing universes'(p676); he finds both his own balance and the balance of creation. In this balance there lies:

an unfathomable power within him, a power that was at once divine and human, animal and elemental, a power that could be drawn upon at will, not to create or destroy, but simply to enjoy: gorsorb-larry-ong: 'enjoy to the end.'(POR:678)

In his isolation upon y Wyddfa with the resurrected Cronos, Porius once again experiences the expansion/contraction of time that he felt at his first meeting with the magician, for he feels 'he was re-living an experience he had had long ago when the world was young'(p681).

This second great work of Powys', then, has huge cosmic concerns—time and eternity; the approach of the Golden Age; prophecies of the end of Christianity; the plunge into nihilistic destruction—and yet this is kept in proportion by our concern with human love and death, love and death affecting some of Powys' most beautifully drawn characters. Myrddin, Medrawd, Nineue, Porius, the Gawr and Creiddylad all represent the ultimate fulfilment of their character-types—respectively the magician, the nihilist, the dark and mysterious androgynous, the hero/anti-hero; and Porius succeeds in evoking both sympathy and exasperation through his dilemmas and ditherings; and the giant. Morfydd is the most successful and most sympathetic young woman Powys ever created,



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while Euronwy and Sybilla both stand out as examples of powerful characterisation. Yssylt, Erddud and Tonwen, the Modrybedd, are his most tragic old women, while Einion is his most lovable rogue.

Yet the success and greatness of *Porius* goes far beyond its characterisations and its balancing of human and cosmic concerns. Various ideas of the Golden Age—the anarchic ‘chance-ruled chaos of souls’ sought by Myrddin; the vicious and lawless state approximating Hobbes’ state of Nature which is so close to it; the total emptiness envisaged by Medrawd—here co-habit uneasily. The tightly focussed violence of the Shattered Skull is beginning to spread itself through the whole text: even Myrddin’s exultant life vision is not free of it, for the creation of his Golden Age necessitates the voluntary in-turning of the Shattered Skull, the unmaking of authority and the wielders of authority by themselves.

The brilliant, mystical conclusion of the work, with its golden sunset, typifies the whole. If the golden field of buttercups at the end of it Wolf Solent was the mark of the beginning of a Golden Age quest, then the glorious sunset of *Porius* heralds its end, and signals the move into the increasingly dark and nihilistic world of the fantasies. Owen’s golden dawn (OG: 393–94) is answered by Nineue’s golden sunset (POR: 674–75).

## 6. A Deepening Twilight: *The Inmates to Three Fantasies*

The start of the most productive period of Powys' career was heralded by the publication of *Porius* in 1951. By 1960 another six works had been published—in the eighty-odd years of his life before *Porius* there had been only nine—and since his death in 1963 several novellas and short stories from these last years have come to light. It is in these late narratives that we witness the darkening of Powys' 'life illusion'. Ever greater emphasis is placed upon deviations from the recognised sexual norms, with rape, incest and masturbation all gaining acceptability and approval. The Golden Age becomes more and more associated with the oblivion advocated by Medrawd, and the violence of a revitalised Shattered Skull is increasingly perceived as the gateway to this Golden Age. The death-instinct is granted equal status with the life-instinct, making Adrian Sorio and the necrophiliast Medrawd prophets as potent as Myrddin Wyllt.

As this darkness falls within the narratives, the narratives themselves are subject to disruption.<sup>1</sup> These fantastic narratives are governed by the laws of childhood: there is no explanation of events; no background given to the characters; any sense of causality is banished. We are presented with a kaleidoscope of impossibilities where the rules, if there are any, are continually changing. Powys' work was never in the mainstream of English modernism, and it is easier to find similarities in American fiction than in English. I have already noted the high regard Powys had for the novels of William Faulkner (see ch.1, above),

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<sup>1</sup> While the actual structure of the novels has not been among my major concerns, it would be impossible to deal with these late works without making some reference to narratology.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

and it is here that the most instructive comparison may be made. *The Sound and the Fury* opens with the narration of the mentally defective Benjy, who is unable to distinguish between the past and the present, and the total absence of an omnipotent narrator means that the reader is forced to piece together for himself a coherent plot for these ramblings. Although narrated by one of sound mind, *Absalom, Absalom!*—‘the best novel I’ve read for years’ (Powys, *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*:32)—also flits through time with no sense of logical order. While the disjunctions in Powys’ narratives tend to be physical rather than temporal, the effect is similarly disorienting. It is not only in disruption that the two are similar, for Faulkner treats subjects as disturbingly sexual and violent as Powys, although the inhabitants of Yoknapatawph County, North Mississippi have lost even the perception of the Golden Age, for their Golden time in America’s southern states is irretrievably lost.

It should not be thought that these late works are entirely gloomy. As Doris Lessing commented when she began to write what she terms ‘space fiction’:

It was clear I had made—or found—a new world for myself...I feel as if I have been set free to be as experimental as I like, or as traditional.<sup>2</sup>

The abandonment of realism opened up whole new worlds of possibility for both Powys and Lessing, releasing new wells of creativity and humour.

Glen Cavaliero’s comment on the *Three Fantasies*, that ‘it does Powys an injustice to dismiss the stories as playthings of a literary senescence’ (TF:179), can be applied to all the late works, for the inconsistencies and innovations seem to be intended, designed as much as the content of narratives to disturb and disorient us.

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<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing, *Canopus in Argos: Archives: Shikasta*, (London, Grafton Books, 1981), ‘Some Remarks’: 8.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

### 6.1: The Inmates to The Brazen Head

The first three novels of this period, *The Inmates*, *Atlantis* and *The Brazen Head*, form something of a breathing space between the golden light of *Porius* and the final nihilistic darkness. Although *Atlantis* is set in the semi-mythic world of ancient Greece and *The Brazen Head* in a strange medieval world bearing close similarities to the Dark Ages of *Porius*, these are the last novels set in a world that we can recognise as roughly our own.

Powys appears to have originally regarded *The Inmates* as something of a pot-boiler:

Then shall I write, to earn my living, a short mystery story, a pure popular thriller about an escape from Bedlam. (*Letters to Nicholas Ross:97*)

Its contemporary setting in a lunatic asylum and its concern with vivisection do tend to set it apart from his more innovative and fantastic works. Even so, remarks in later letters to Louis Wilkinson show that he was conscious of creating a new style for himself in this novel:

I am now getting on at fine speed with a fantastical story—a *short*, ‘very modern’ one—at least as far as your aged voyeur & tottery chip of the True Cross *can* attain to what he himself regards as the Modern Style—though whether anybody else will be struck by its antics of modernity or will simply say ‘The old fool is clearly in his Second Childhood’ I cannot of course tell. (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson:278–79*)

It is a tense and claustrophobic novel clearly expressing Powys’ distrust of modern medical science, with the eventual escape of the Glint Hall inmates leading to a somewhat equivocal conclusion: the hero and heroine escape to a circus which, considering the associations of circuses in *Wood and Stone* and *Maiden Castle*, is hardly an escape, merely the substitution of one oppressive régime for another.

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The Shattered Skull exists as a physical reality here as it did in *Porius*. The death of Dr Echetus, proprietor of the Glint Hall asylum, is described with a calm serenity:

A small puff of smoke from the front of the Doctor's skull now floated off towards the river in a perfect ring, while a large puff of smoke, accompanied by a distinct but not overpowering detonation obscured the back of that same skull.(INM:303)

while that of the asylum's dairy-maid, who falls from the helicopter which is rescuing the inmates, is a cold, matter-of- fact account:

The hurt to the cattle-woman's spine would alone have been fatal, even if her skull had not been hit, and hit with the sort of crushing blow that kills at a stroke.(INM:311)

Both Echetus and the cattle-woman have been depicted as repressive characters, opponents of the life-affirming antics of the inmates. Even so, the Shattered Skull is once more firmly established as a symbol of death.

The heroine, Tenna Sheer, is given some of the androgynous characteristics that so frequently appear in Powys' work yet, although she recalls Cristie Malakite in the homicidal feelings she harbours towards her father, she does not fully share in her darker associations. Similarly, while her lover, John Hush, has many of the associations of previous anti-heros, he is a much more decisive figure. It is as if madness frees him from the struggle to maintain the collapsing world that paralyses so many of his predecessors.

*Atlantis* is the last of the long narratives, and draws heavily upon the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, and upon Greek legend in general. Powys is once again concerned with the re-institution of the Hesiodic Golden Age: as a continual background to the aged Odysseus' preparations for his final voyage, and the voyage itself, we receive continual rumours of a revolt of the Titans against Olympus and Zeus. Odysseus himself is journeying to the Hesperides, the Islands of the Blest, so often characterised in legends as golden islands.



## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

The central message of the novel is spoken by Zeuks, the son of Pan, who starts with the attitude that he must challenge and defy life in order to enjoy it to the full:

‘And since I’ve got to live out my destiny, whether I challenge it and defy it or simply submit to it, it seems silly to go on making this ‘prokleesis’ of mine the essence of the whole thing. No! I can now see well what the right for my life-struggle is— not the word ‘prokleesis’, ‘defiance’, but the word *Lanthanomai*, or ‘I forget,’ followed by the still simpler word, *Terpomai* or ‘I enjoy’.(ATL:284)

The dictums accepted by Wolf Solent and Porius are here brought together in a great affirmation of life. Even Zeuks’ eventual death is an affirmation of life and community—after commenting on the awfulness of the thought of people dying in isolation and loneliness, and reassuring his companions that a community of souls does exist (p461), in a final act of defiance to Zeus he literally dies laughing:

laughter so explosive that there was no corpse left to bury or burn. Out of world-dust he’d come, and into world-dust he dissolved, and the tiny blob of insect lovers he’d swallowed, melted with him into thin air.(ATL:462)

Dark forces are thus held at bay in *Atlantis*, but in *The Brazen Head* they are much stronger. The Wessex landscape of 1272 is peopled with characters drawn from history—Friar Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Saint Bonaventura—and from Powys’ imagination. It is on Friar Bacon and his inventions—principally the Brazen Head of the title, which is said to be capable of uttering oracles—that the very slight plot hinges. In a power struggle between three rival barons, possession of the Head and its creator—and the favours that can thus be won from various religious orders—becomes increasingly important. Both Bacon and the Head are absent for much of the novel, although they still exercise a dominant influence through rumour and hearsay.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

The Head—recalling in part the skull memorial of the Andersen's father in *Wood and Stone*, although without the negative associations—is closely associated with sexual powers: its activation is a virtual act of parthenogenesis. Driven by a 'voice' the Jewish virgin Ghosta goes to Friar Bacon and is persuaded to sit astride the head, a position which describes both birth and sexual activity—although the lack of penetration is more suggestive of masturbation, looking forward to the attitude expressed in *All or Nothing*:

'I want you to arrange your garments as if you were intending to make water, so that it is from contact with your nakedness that the head looks forth upon the world.'

It was in an incredibly short space of time...that Friar Bacon got both of them, and got the Brazen Head as well, into the position he desired;...the countenance of that Brazen Head...looked forth between Ghosta's thighs and from under her naked belly...(TBH:97)

Destructive sexuality is expressed in the person of Peter Peregrinus, and in his own inventions. This mysterious character—he is, as John A. Brebner points out, (*The Demon Within*:219–20) surrounded by narrative inconsistencies—brings with him his 'lodestone', a powerful magnet carried in a velvet bag next to his genitals, with which he achieves 'the deliberate manipulation of his own sexual force...for the domination of the souls and wills and minds of other entities.'(p239). It is obviously effective, rendering Bacon unconscious at their first meeting, and driving Sir Mort Abyssum into a frenzy.<sup>3</sup> The greatest expression of destructive sexuality is in Peter's 'murder' of the as yet unborn Edward II, in an act of vengeance upon his father, by the power of the lodestone. Edward's death—already mirrored in the death of Adda ap Leurig in *Owen Glendower*(pp490–96), who has the sword of Eliseg thrust through his buttocks—is, if you like, a perversion of a perversion, with anal penetration achieved with a poker rather than a penis, and it here shown to be brought about by the phallic lodestone—it is a tubular object, described variously as

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Mort is another example of Powys playing with unusual yet appropriate names. Death is powerfully suggested by the head of the Abyssum family, while he rival, the 'evil' Baron Maldung of Lost Towers, is given obviously unwholesome associations by his name.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

between six and twelve inches in length. In this murder distinctions of time dissolve, directly connecting Peter in 1272 with Edward in 1327:

It appeared that Peter Peregrinus was undergoing a kind of mental agitation so extreme that it amounted to something resembling a fit. He was folding both his hands to his ears, as if to render himself deaf to some sound that he was finding too horrible to endure... 'Thank the Devil he'll be dead soon now! And thank the Devil that he can put so much power into his voice that even in the midst of the unspeakable way they're murdering him a lot of his pain goes into his screams. O thanks be to the Devil! He's quite dead now!'

'Nobody is screaming here. Nobody is being killed here. What is it, Maitre Pierre?'

The reply came slowly but quite clearly, each word of it being like an enormous goblet of human flesh, streaming with red foam and dripping with hot blood.

'No! no! this thing is not happening now. Its *going* to happen! It-is-all-in-the-future. I-am-making-it-happen.' (TBH:295-96)

This abominable power eventually removes both itself and the other expression of sexual power. Peter and his lover Lilith—a dark androgynous temptress—turn the lodestone upon themselves, obliterating themselves and the head before it can complete its only oracle:

Both their bodies now burst into flame and became one single fiery ball; and as John watched it, this burning orb became so dazzling as to shine in his eyes with the blaze of a sapphire, and he perceived that it was moving fast through the air towards the Brazen Head. At that moment he heard the head speak.

'Time *was*,' it said. 'Time *is*,' it said. 'And time *will*.'

But the burning meteor then fell upon it, and neither it nor what destroyed it was ever seen again. (TBH:347-48)

This huge act of violence which destroys the head is an expression of the Shattered Skull, planned earlier by Bonaventura but never achieved (p188)<sup>4</sup> prevents the answer to Ghosta's desperate question 'is there any way I can get rid of this mad terror I have of the passing of time?' (p341) from being uttered.

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<sup>4</sup> A further instance of the Shattered Skull is the murder of Baron Maldung with a heavy stone (p323), a murder which also precipitates the death of his wife and his armour-bearer. These representatives of evil remove themselves as effectively as their daughter Lilith and Peter Peregrinus

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

Creative and destructive forces are thus shown to be equally balanced, here cancelling each other out, and time has once again been raised through Ghosta's fears as a central issue, pointing towards the final fantastic phase Powys' fiction now enters.

### 6.2 Final Fantasies<sup>2</sup>

*Up and Out* comprises two separate works, 'Up and Out' and 'Mountains of the Moon', the former dealing with the destruction of the world and the subsequent adventures of four survivors, the latter a 'Lunar Love Story'.

'Up and Out' possesses nothing which could really be called a plot, the majority of its hundred and ten pages consisting of debates between various divine and mythical beings, and ending with the plunge of all creation into obliteration.

The very premise of the novel—a piece of Central Park being blasted into space as a result of a nuclear war, a virtual reversal of a piece of a mountain being hurled into Hell by a meteor in *Morwyn*—is an impossibility, and the choice of outlandish names—our hero and heroine are Gor Goginog and Rhitha—makes the whole venture seem even more ludicrous. Yet there is perhaps reason here, for the names Rhitha and Gor echo Rhitta Gawr, the semi-mythical giant of *Po-rrius*, reminding us of that novel's affirmation of life, endurance and enjoyment. The second pair of survivors from earth have equally strange names. Org is a creation of the vivisectionists' laboratories, and just as he is a disordering of nature, so his name is a disordering of Gor's. His partner is Asm, their relationship obviously pointing again towards sexuality. It should be noted that if Org is a disordering of Gor, the reverse is also true. Substitution of the 'normal' Gor

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<sup>2</sup> *Homer and the Aether* is not a novel as such. Rather it is a combination of translation, paraphrase and commentary upon the *Illiad*. It is most notable for its denunciation of violence and glory hunting. (see especially p246, for his dismissal of Achilles.)

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

for his monstrous friend in the relationship with Asm destroys the fulfilment of a sexual relationship.

In the course of the story, in which God plans a second deterministic creation by which he hopes to avoid suffering (pp99–100)—God's plans reveal the accuracy of Pelagianism within Powys' fictional world, for man has been entirely independent of God—Time and Eternity are presented as physical beings which destroy one another. The oppositions and conflicts of earlier novels are swept aside, leaving an infinite, timeless space from which the four earthly survivors, God and the Devil take the leap into obliteration. The description of the moments before this leap is one of the earthily humorous observations that abound in these late works:

God considered his bare feet and his long curly beard. The devil considered the dry leathery movements of his tongue between his fibrous lips. And we all did the same. Both girls lifted their free hands to the back of their heads to arrange their hair. I gazed at my knees praying that they wouldn't show outwardly the shakiness they felt inwardly; and old Org scratched the least seemly part of his whole frame.(UP:115–16)

Even though all the characters seem to welcome their oblivion, giving the death-instinct its first major triumph, Gor eventually cries out, if not against his own annihilation, then at least against the destruction of everything:

I want to perform, to act, to play the clown, to show off as a philosopher; and how can I enjoy all this when I am nothing and there is nobody there! There *must* be somebody there, there must, there must, there must, there *must* be somebody!(UP:121)

By the very existence of Gor's first-person account, the totality of destruction is denied, even though the characters have passed into isolation and oblivion.

'Mountains of the Moon' is a much lighter work—although paradoxically it is set on the dark side of the moon—being a return to the affirmations of life and love such as can be found in *Weymouth Sands*. Even so, there is evidence

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of extremely perverse sexuality here, as the description of the Orvod trees of the Sacred Grove shows:

They have moreover the peculiarity...of containing in their sap something of the sexual progenitive juices of men and women. This peculiarity may have been due to the fact that Yorlt, the ancient king of Zed, was sexually so abnormal that he preferred embracing trees to embracing women; and he went to such extremes in his aberration that it produced remarkable results.(UP, 'MM':127)

The story's hero, and descendant of Yorlt, Rorlt feels an incestuous attraction towards his sister Lorlt.<sup>6</sup> However in an uncharacteristic turn-about, incest is denied as brother and sister find new partners.

Incest is a more potent force in *All or Nothing*—the last novel published during Powys' life—which has two brother and sister pairings, John o'Dreams and Jilly Tewky and Ring and Ding, as its central characters. More strongly plotted than the two preceding works, *All or Nothing* is a dramatisation of the conflict between the life and death instincts. Freud's summary of his theories of Eros and Thanatos could well stand as a summation of *All or Nothing*, and of Powys' fiction as a whole:

On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put forward a hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state; on the other hand, we supposed that Eros, by bringing about a more and more far reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it. Acting in this way, both the instincts would be conservative in the strictest sense of the word, since both would be endeavouring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life. The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Names are once again ridiculous, if not childish. All the names of the ruling house of Zed end in 'orlt', while other inhabitants of the moon glorify in such titles as Oom, Yoom and Woom o'Rim.

<sup>7</sup> James Strachey, trans. & ed., *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol xix (1923-25), The Ego and the Id and Other Works*.(London, Hogarth Press & the Institute of Psych. Analysis, 1961):40-41

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This conflict is distilled into the fountain Bubble and Squeak. As drops of water fall into a bowl, causing bubbles to burst into nothingness—Thanatos—tiny pieces of earth fall onto a petrified skull, causing a huge pillar of earth to form, and making the skull give a squeak—Eros (pp22–23). Owen Evans feared that the life of redeemed was built on the ‘Golgotha of the Second Death’ (AGR:618), and here the skull, a symbol of death, is at the base of the column symbolising the proliferation of life.<sup>8</sup>

The novel’s conclusion makes no attempt to resolve this ‘conflict and compromise’. Queen Boadicea—most venerable of all Powys’ matriarchal wise-women—offers this advice:

‘But remember when you hear those two disputing...that All is not Nothing, neither is Nothing All, but both of them have one home-star, where they can sink to eternal quiescence, or mount to everlasting activity, and that home-star, my children, is the heart in every one of us. So goodbye, my dears.’(ALL:219)

Although it ends with this calm valediction, there is a great deal of violence in the novel. Inspired by the nihilism of Bubble, the giant Urk takes it upon himself to devour the Heart of the Sun, around which the Universe revolves. Angered by this violence, John o’Dreams sets about Urk with a rock, until ‘before three minutes had elapsed, Urk had become a headless giant, with a bleeding neck ending in a mask of bones and brains and blood’(p69). In his attempt to reinforce Eros, John o’Dreams has only furthered the cause of Thanatos:

‘To Nothing! To Nothing! To Nothing! You’ve sent him off after the Heart! Both gone! Both gone! Both gone! No more Heart of the Sun and no more Urk of Cad! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!’(ALL:70)

Despite this disaster, no further damage appears to befall the Universe, and indeed the final section of the novel is concerned with the creation of a new star.

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<sup>8</sup> This also recalls the frequent device in religious art of painting Adam’s skull at the foot of the cross—eternal life rises above the first death. The skull, of course, is not shattered.

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It is, however, in association with the Cerne Giant that many of the novel's major themes are expressed. Originally enslaved by the monstrous giant Bog, the Cerne Giant escapes by crushing his master's skull (p135)—the description here is less violent and involved than John o'Dream's murder of Urk, although it is still very graphic. The violence of the Shattered Skull is thus firmly established in this novel where Squeak, a whole skull, is depicted at the root of life.

The Cerne Giant is also a powerfully sexual figure. Both he and his master, who kept 'the tip of his organ of generation...decently slung over his left shoulder'(p131)—another touch of Powys' slightly ribald humour—are endowed with colossal phalluses, and the Cerne Giant relays to us his master's ideas about sex. These ideas are given considerable weight, for Bog was able to hear everything that was said anywhere in the Universe, and thus to amass great wisdom:

'In the matter of sex, Bog taught me that what, in the English language, is called masturbation—that is to say, the excited emission of semen by the use of our imagination—is a much more important and creative act than ordinary and natural fornication or the raping, if we are male, of our feminine opposite. Bog used to tell me that I ought always to be thinking sufficiently erotic thoughts to keep my penis in a permanent state of erection.'(ALL:192)

Ghosta's virginal straddling of the Brazen Head, and Uryen Quirm's sex kept sterile are both here in this dark view of sexuality. And yet however powerful and creative fantasy and masturbation might be, they are linked to the death-instinct, for masturbation can never be anything but sterile.

There is a certain balancing of forces in *All or Nothing*, and the inseparability of the life and death instincts is clearly illustrated. In *You and Me*, written in 1959 but not published until 1974, these opposed urges are represented by Um and Mo, 'two youngish men of about twenty-five, one of whom likes to pretend to be like God and the other likes to pretend to be like the Devil!'(Letters to Nicholas Ross:153). The plot combines 'Up and Out' with *All or Nothing*, detailing the adventures of a group of young people who journey on a lump of the earth to the dark side of the moon. At the centre is Theophil, a three



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year-old girl who has 'lost nothing of her babyish insight' (*Letters to Nicholas Ross*:153), and who is equally drawn to both Um and Mo, until Um—the 'God' character—succeeds in drowning Mo.

More impressive are the stories collected in *Three Fantasies*, which show a truly dark and nihilistic world. 'Topsy-Turvy' is a love story of sorts, most of the characters of which are pieces of furniture in a drawing-room—Topsy is a picture, Turvy a door-handle. Escaping from the persecution of the Whirl-winds, Topsy and Turvy find themselves in a spirit world—it is never explained how, where they encounter characters from myth and history. Despite its childlike innocence, this is in no way a Golden Age. Dido and Aeneas are not fully at peace (p28); Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, Maid Marion and Dick Turpin are set upon a course of crime and personal enrichment (p33); Samson and Delilah are at odds (pp40–41); the Negro is still demanding rights for his people (p44)—and these are just some examples of the disharmony. Topsy and Turvy's return to their room is facilitated by the intrusion of Galatea into the spirit world, who rips her way through it as Powys' impossibilities rip his narrative apart.

The world to which they return is one of shame and sexual dysfunction. Although they had come to accept their nakedness in the spirit world, both Topsy and Turvy immediately clothe themselves when they return—there is no Edenic innocence here—while the excitement of their return inspires Big Doll finally to overcome his fear of sexual intercourse with Little Doll—their names of childish endearment, Bibabug and Sillysuck, are at odds with the sexual violence which they express:

Bibabug seized Sillysuck, pulled her down upon the rug and there, while legs and skirts and boots and shoes were tripping and switching and stumbling over their bodies he violently, shamelessly, recklessly and desperately ravished her and did so with such success that her muffled cry was a mixture of blood and tears and crazy exultation. 'I shall have a baby, a baby, a baby!' were the broken sounds that came up from the rug; but in the wild welter nobody heeded them.(TF, 'TOP':51)

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Love is here tainted with a violence much more basic than sadism—Bibabug does not import violence and cruelty into his lovemaking, they are simply the same thing, an attitude foreshadowed in the Cerne Giant's references to fornication and rape (see above).<sup>9</sup>

'Abertackle' falls distinctly into two parts. The opening chapters do not seem far from the brittle tea-shop bitchery of E.F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* novels, while Gor's later journeying into space, which was written some time after the early chapters, due to illness, recalls 'Up and Out', *All or Nothing* and *You and Me*. This is the least innovative of the three stories covering much familiar ground.

There are suggestions of an incestuous relationship between Gor and his younger sister:

'We must remember this, my dear, anyway—Nelly loved him intensely, desperately, far more than she loved either of us.'

'But isn't that *incest*, Mary dear?' said Charley Po gravely.

'I don't know what it is!' cried his wife, 'and I'm sure dear little Nelly didn't either! When a young girl of her age falls in love, she thinks of nothing but the youth she loves'.(TF,'AB':77-78)

Gor's adventuring in space ends when, carried by Paragon, Arch-Eagle of the Universe, he thinks of Nelly 'who had been so fond of him and of whom he hadn't had a thought for what seemed like hundreds of years'(p116), and he and his companions find themselves back in Abertackle, even though they were supposed to be flying away to new planets.

Whether Gor's homecoming is due to his sudden memory of Nelly, to some deception on the part of Paragon, or to the circularity of the Universe, there is no such tidy and convenient conclusion to 'Cataclysm'. Like 'Up and Out', this is a single outward journey from Earth to annihilation. In a story where violence

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<sup>9</sup> Freud's theories of a child's perception of sexual relationships—that the man is attacking the woman—are here invoked, recalling the respect Powys evinced for 'babyish insight' in *Theophil*.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

abounds, the opening conversation concerns Yok Pok's decision to destroy the human race because of its innate evil. He is dissuaded from this genocide, and his Auntie Zoo-Zoo instead becomes Queen of the Universe, with her son Why Ki becoming the focus of the narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Sexuality and annihilation are again the central themes. Why Ki's frank conversation with Ve Zed—again touching in its childish humour—reveals a certain amount of homosexual attraction between the two:

'Where is you prick and you balls?'

'On my side, at my hip,' replied the other. 'Yours, I suppose are in the front?'

'Yes,' responded Why gently, praying in his mind that the other boy would want to feel the aforesaid sexual organs. (TF, 'CAT':-153)

Journeying together the two reach a strange intellectualised place, Tap-paskultinkadom, where everyone is bodiless—and therefore sexless. There they meet Nelly Wallet, who gives voice to the boys' dismay at the lack of sex and masturbation:

'Why, among all these thinkers...has no missionary of exquisite provocation advocated a prolonging of the adorable spasms of masturbating abandonment? Why has no habitual practiser of the paradisiac organ of the imagination when the self alone with the self prolongs the self-play of luxurious erotic saturation ever advocated his practice here?'

Our two lads, Why and Ve...had always taken it for granted that masturbation was as much a prerogative of young men as menstruation was a prerogative of young women. (TF, 'CAT':165)

In his continual advocacy of masturbation, here declaring it a natural and inevitable activity, Powys is reinforcing the denial of community suggested in *Autobiography*. The self alone with the self prolonging the self-play of luxurious

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<sup>10</sup> In the compression of time and narrative so typical of these works, all this occurs in only thirty pages.

## 6. *A Deepening Twilight*

erotic saturation is merely an intensification of the communication of self to self rather than self to other that I suggested Powys' novels were.

As these three friends accept so unquestioningly the values of sexual isolation over community, it is fitting that, as they stand isolated at the foot of the Wall of the World debating whether to return to Earth or plunge into oblivion, their doom should so suddenly and unexplainedly overtake them:

Then with his right hand Gyges seized Why Ki and with his left hand seized Ve Zed, each by the hair of his head, and banged their skulls against the skull of Nelly until all three skulls became a congealed mass of blood and bones and brains which the giant swallowed handful after reeking handful until the three friends' heads were reeking in his belly, and the dust of the Wall of the World was scattered, along with their headless bodies, into every corner of space. (TF, 'CAT':176)

So Powys' work finishes with the apparent ascendancy of the Shattered Skull. The diffusion of violence through a whole text which was begun in *Owen Glendower* now co-exists with the tightly focussed symbol, and the nihilistic violence of the Shattered Skull brings everything to an end.

## 7. The Golden Age

What, then, has become of the Golden Age amidst all this violence and inward looking sexuality? The savage conclusion of 'Cataclysm' implies a final triumph for Thanatos, the death-impulse, fulfilling Medrawd's creed of oblivion. The chaotic violence of the final fantasies, which reflected both Hobbes' state of Nature and the anarchy envisioned by Myrrdin Wyllt in *Porius*, appears to reach a death-laden conclusion in this last act.

And yet a closer consideration of this final shattering of skulls suggests a different interpretation. The consuming of human flesh has been linked to the Golden Age in *Porius*, and the drinking of blood has been represented as a way of sharing and binding lives together in *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*. Gyges' consumption of his victims' flesh and blood can thus be seen as uniting them into the ultimate community of souls, just as the Moth, the Fly and Zeuks are united in their death in *Atlantis*.

We are brought back to the inseparability of apparently opposed quests—an inseparability first shown in the Power/Sacrifice conflict in *Wood and Stone*. Freud himself declared (see above) that the eventual aims of both Eros and Thanatos—the life and death instincts—were substantially the same, and this sameness has been enacted through Powys' fiction.

The fragments of a Shattered Skull, although no longer greatly resembling their former state, are all part of a coherent whole. Similarly, each of Powys' novels, although they involve many different styles, is part of a coherent whole. The Golden Age of the later works may be vastly distorted from its original form, yet it is still a Golden Age to be pursued. The sense of community, at first so strongly linked with the Golden Age, becomes mere numinous in the

### *7. The Golden Age*

later works, yet it is still there. In the same way the intense personal violence with which we began has expanded into a wider and more general force—still, it is violence. Above all this, the Shattered Skull has remained the master symbol and guiding star of Powys' fiction, to which all else is tied.

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