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Nationalism and Re-enchantment in
John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*

Glastonbury is a place far removed from the normal flow or steady ravennings of time in John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance* (henceforth *AGR*). Powys's Glastonbury is the site of an experiment in national consciousness, an experiment that attempts to re-enchant this insular reservoir of world-historical power by invoking its *genius loci*. Though the Glastonbury experiment, watched over and perhaps conducted by autochthonous spirits in Powys's imagination, seems to fail, its momentarily raised historical consciousness will spread throughout Britain. Re-enchantment works here as a collective recognition of the imagined past existing in the same space as the eternal present.

Powys's 'author's review' of his book suggested that the spiritual differences discovered by the Grail blend themselves, in our industrial age, with economic and political forms of conflict; and thus it works out that the protagonist of the story is an energetic Industrialist, hostile to the Grail, and bent upon converting Glastonbury into a prosperous industrial centre; while the antagonist is a prophetic visionary, anxious to rouse into being the beginnings of a new 'Culture'—in the mystical Spenglerian sense—towards which all western nations might draw, for a fresh growth of life. ('*Glastonbury*: Author's Review', 8)

Since he derives the 'Culture' concept from Spengler's *Decline of the West*, it is appropriate that he envisions 'western nations' as the target of the novel's transformative intention. But Powys's mythic frame of reference here is largely pre-English and geographically specific, and so I use 'British' throughout to describe the cultural and political dialectic that Powys invokes. Also important is the transat-

lantic context of Powys's ideas about the past reanimating the present, as *AGR* was written in the United States.

Nationalism, the consciousness of a group that imagines itself in unity, would be, for Powys, the product entirely of a national literature. For him, literature shapes the popular and the political imagination. More importantly, it structures the collective unconscious from which all sense of group identity springs. People do not think about literature; it thinks about them. Powys in his diary noted that he was not writing *AGR*, 'it was writing [him]' (*Petrushka*, xxi). Compare Rimbaud's '*C'est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: On me pense.*'¹ Literature constrains the range of possibilities of the human social imagination. In *AGR*, thoughts become eidola and impose themselves upon the fictive reality. Powys thought that this fictive reality imposes itself upon him or any writer who considers the nature of social being or who merely thinks about the world around him. It is inevitable. The infinite regression thus implied has severe consequences for a materialist understanding of the world, and *AGR* argues that escape from the vicious circle is possible. The mirror in the mind of the divine reflects human thoughts, and the resulting *mise en abyme* constitutes literature.

As a psychology or a philosophical understanding of literature, the ideas outlined above will not satisfy many. They provide a framework for thinking about Powys's literary method, however. Powys was a public intellectual whose voracious reading, professional reviewing, and constant lecturing kept him in touch with the intellectual developments of the interwar period. I will relate how these intellectual developments both consciously and unconsciously influenced his ideas about mind and literature.

Though Powys's many supernaturalist affectations invite scepticism, some of those who knew him thought him to have a considerable presence, a quality that might be described in other contexts as *mana*. He was a mesmerizing lecturer, though the poorest-paid in the U. S. due to his complete lack of business sense (Krisdóttir in *The Dorset Year*, xvii). He seemed to have astrally projected himself to Theodore Dreiser one evening on a dare,² an event that, perhaps coupled with untold others, made an impression on Dreiser's wife,

who wrote in her memoirs that 'I felt that sometimes his spirit was familiar with much that was evil, and that no order of black magic existed that had not been open to him' (58). Powys even reports in his autobiography that he placed a curse 'upon an arrogant Brighton bookseller that apparently resulted in his death' (qtd. in Cook 32 n7). At least there seems to be little doubt that he actually believed that he could do and had done feats such as this, and his view of the writer-as-magician was a direct result. Nabokov, for instance, may have also believed in the magical power of literature without believing in the literal magical abilities of the writer. Surrealism shared a fascination with the origins of magical thought. Part of the power of Powys's writing derives from his apparent belief in the idea.

Powys's ideas about literary magic overtly incorporated a scientific vocabulary, a sign of his belief in the power of literature to re-enchant the world. Most prominent among the scientific concepts metaphorically used in *AGR* is magnetism. Powys seemed not to have much direct interest in Einstein's theories, unlike Wyndham Lewis, for instance; but magnetism as a metaphor for psychic energy fascinated him. 'It is doubtless these violent storms of intense feeling in great magnetic human personalities that are responsible of many of the supernatural occurrences vouched for by history and so crudely questioned by scoffing historians' (*AGR*, 359). Here Powys reveals his synthesis of scientific imagery with an occultist, magical system of thought. Human emotions and thoughts must produce magnetic currents which then interact with the invisible forces that guide history. What specific supernatural occurrences are 'vouched for by history' while remaining 'crudely questioned by scoffing historians' is an empirical question in which Powys is uninterested. Even so, it is a mistake to confuse the narrative voice which makes this interjection with Powys himself. Charles Lock suggests, for example, that the narrative voice which makes these extradiegetical statements should be regarded as merely another character within the romance, 'another zany fascinated by Glastonbury' (277).

Another magnetic example is 'It was one of those moments that are apt to occur in the most carefully regulated communities. My Lord was no longer under the protection of an invisible network of

magnetic wires' (*AGR*, 570). Lord P, the titular ruler of the lands surrounding Glastonbury is the 'lord' in question, and his magnetic network of authority dissolves in the novel's relatively well-known pageant scene. Powys represents tradition, in the form of hereditary rule, as an invisible and yet scientifically measurable and predictable force. The chthonic forces unleashed in the Pageant have dissolved this 'arterial or nerve-like net-work of property' (Coleridge, from *OED*). There are many direct references to Coleridge throughout *AGR*,³ and Powys may certainly have known this quotation. Laura Otis argues that there was a consistency between the development of electronic communications systems and the discovery of animal nervous systems in the nineteenth century (106). Communication networks were a technological instantiation of the previously imaginary relationship of owners to land, and, for Powys, these technological developments mirror eternally existing psychic energies.

Powys also used psychic energies to explain how he came to be sued for libel for his portrait of the industrialist Philip Crow, as he claimed not to know anything about Sir Gerard Hodgkinson, the decorated war hero who, like Crow, electrified the Wookey Hole Caves beforehand. Powys visited Glastonbury in July 1929, and he very likely would have known that the Caves had been illuminated in 1927 (Rands, 43). The book created such a scandal in Glastonbury that Hodgkinson felt that he had to sue, according to Rands, and English libel laws place the burden of proof on the defendant.

Powys lost, and subsequent editions of the novel had redactions to the 'Wookey Hole' chapter. Rands asks, 'How did Powys create a character so like a real person in so many details of character and fate? Either he had amazing psychic powers or someone had sent him a great deal of local material' (51). She notes that there is no evidence of the latter and concludes, facetiously, that precognition is the only remaining answer. The tin mine that Crow (and, later, Gerard) was to build at Wookey Hole became the logical goal of the process begun with its electrification. Once the Druidic mysteries were illuminated by the false light of man's technological prowess, the next goal would be for the wellspring of its magic to dry up and to be replaced by the mundane tin, the 'diabolous metallorum' (*AGR*, 316).

Wookey Hole is just one of the cracks through which the reservoirs of world-magic in Glastonbury seep. As this place is transformed by men's labour into abstract economic value, so it changes them. The *genius loci* of Glastonbury permeates every human effort. Through the means of the Pageant, the vision of King Arthur's Sword, the Grail, the World-Fish, and the final Flood, the spirit of the place both shapes the cyclical movement of history and promises transcendence to those who perceive its power.

Powys's attitude towards history was essentially cosmicist in orientation. It is both vast and beyond human perception, but it is also precisely ordered—the opposite of Carlyle's 'chaotic' (*OED*). When Powys writes that 'thought is a real thing' (*AGR*, 457) and that 'all thought-eidola are not of the same consistency or of the same endurance. It is the amount of life-energy thrown into them that makes the difference' (*AGR*, 500), he is claiming that human-thoughts have a reality that their thinkers do not as of yet possess. These thoughts enter into a realm of timelessness, and the dimly grasped perceptions of those eternal movements of time manifest themselves in human destinies. What are the particularly national character of those destinies, however? Jed Esty suggests that Powys recreates a 'properly and native form of English primitive resistance to modernity' (64) in *AGR* as opposed to a Celtic pan-Nationalism.

Though one meaning of 'cosmic' is orderly, as I have noted above, the retreat from the cosmic forces represented in *AGR* is a retreat into a stultifying order and regularity. The chaotic passions which govern life and which themselves are reflections of a larger, more complete order, have been eliminated in the progressive rationality of existence. Man's technological achievements—his electricity, tin mines, and airplanes—are only the outward manifestations.

The chapter entitled 'The Pageant' resolves this tension between technological mastery of the world and detachment from the governing passions of the self. The brainchild of mayor and wandering itinerant preacher Bloody John Geard, the pageant is a combination of Passion Play and revival of the Arthurian myths that govern the town's psychic energy. Louis Napoleon Parker was primarily responsible for the modern British pageant-play. He launched the genre in

1905 with his Sherbourne Pageant and called it a ‘historical folk-play’ (qtd. in Esty, 57). There were earlier pageants in Glastonbury, on a smaller scale, which Powys may have attended when he was younger (Rands ‘Topicality’, 42). Parker’s theory of the historical significance of the pageant was that it should blur any sense of historical distance; it should be ‘designed to kill [...] the modernizing spirit’ (qtd in Esty, 59). Esty sees the modernist appropriations of the pageant in Powys and Woolf’s *Between the Acts* as reflective of their interest in ritual acts of consciousness (61), and the focus on ritual is especially apparent in Powys’s treatment.

Nicholas Birns has explored the oddity of Powys composing this highly ritualized invocation of the English national spirit while in the United States:

It has usually been seen as an anomaly that John Cowper Powys composed *AGR*, a book seemingly intense in its British setting and identification, during his residence in America, more specifically at Phudd Bottom⁴ in Columbia County in upstate New York. The circumstances of the book’s composition, though, become less anomalous when it is realized that Powys’s Glastonbury is not the locus for a nostalgic or mythic Arthurianism. It exists as a synthetic and hybrid set of spiritual and material resonances. (43)

Richard Maxwell suggests that *AGR* and other books might be written about England specifically for Americans (103), an idea that also stresses the importance of Powys’s American experience for his social imagination. Powys did not think America was without history, but the art of the pageant made British history new and alive in the same way that he perceived it to be for the Americans. When Philip Crow discusses the upcoming pageant with Mr. Stilly, the teller of the Glastonbury bank, Stilly says that it reminds him of what he reads about America. When Crow, irate at this answer, demands clarification, Stilly stammers: ‘They perform ... performances ... a good deal ... don’t they ... in the ... open air?’ (*AGR*, 549). When Birns writes that Glastonbury exists ‘as a synthetic and hybrid set of spiritual and material resonances’, he seems to suggest that Powys sets Glastonbury in an aquarium outside of any particular time-frame⁵ or even

spatial location. Though there is much support for this position within the novel, a closer examination of Powys's attitudes towards the psychology of the crowd will help refine that claim.

'Every audience, however hurriedly collected, quickly takes to itself a queer identity of its own and becomes a living organism whose reactions are as spontaneous and incalculable as those of a single human being' (*AGR*, 340–41), Powys writes in the 'Dolorous Blow' chapter. The idea of the crowd as an organism which takes on the atavistic characteristics of its members was popular in the early decades of the twentieth century. Herbert Spencer, Gustave Le Bon, and Georges Sorel were just a few of the writers who advanced the idea, and Wyndham Lewis, whose *Time and Western Man* Powys reviewed,⁶ discusses it repeatedly in his prolific writing from the period, including particularly *The Childermass* and *The Art of Being Ruled*. For Powys, the crowd's reversion to ancestral characteristics is not a sign of degeneration but of transcendence: 'In all human communities—indeed in all human groups—there are strange atavistic forces that are held in chains deep down under the surface. Like the imprisoned Titans, these Enceladuses and Sisyphuses and Briareuses, dwell in the nether depths of human nature ready to break forth in blind scoriac fury under a given touch' (569). Powys, who preferred Jung to Freud, invokes the collective unconscious here, and this passage, which is from 'The Pageant' chapter, suggests that the 'strange atavistic forces' manifest in the group possess a creative energy similar to that of the Titans. The Olympians of the present world-order have harmonized that creation, but the pendulum has swung too far in their direction.

On the subject of harmonizing directional forces in history, Michael Ballin writes

[Powys] had begun by utilizing Spengler's philosophy of history presented as a process of eternal becoming. As a consequence of this view, history appears to be a directional movement in which the past has a dynamic relationship with the present and moves towards an unknown future. Thus, *AGR* enabled the reader to see the twentieth century present of Glastonbury from the perspective of a legendary

medieval past. But whereas in *AGR*, Powys tended to identify past and present, in *Porius* he creates a historically realized sixth century. (20)

Identification differs from dynamic relationship, as seen in Powys's representation of different modes of historical consciousness. Mayor Geard's anarchistic commune, for example, hostile as it is to the 'Jacobin' Red Robinson's visceral communism, is a direct result of the social forces unleashed by the pageant. While composing *AGR*, Powys wrote that he was fully in sympathy with the Communist Party and that he lacked the courage to join it (*Petrushka*, 54, 57). Dave Spear, the theoretical communist in the novel, suggests that 'communism is the destined *next phase* of evolutionary, planetary life [. . .]. We can afford to be what one else can afford to be; for the simple reason that we are the solidifying of the *intention of evolution*' (*AGR*, 200).

Powys does not seem to be able to 'create in terms of a political society' (Collins, 82). His political imagination is not limited by the possible, certainly. Political systems of thought are for Powys indistinct eidola of the primeval forces that surround and shape the human imaginary. Communism and anarchism are significant in so far as they exist in dialectical opposite to Philip Crow's rugged industrialist individualism. Crow argues that 'it's always been by the brains and the energy of exceptional individuals, fighting for their own hands, that the world has moved on [. . .] We have the future to think of, or, as I say, Nature has the future to think of' (*AGR*, 61). Political systems arise in opposition to each other as a means of re-enchanting the world they inhabit. The genius loci acts as a constraint on political development. When Spear suggests that 'to be rich is to be a moral leper. To be rich is to be on the side of Cancer!' (*AGR*, 268), he is echoing a debate about the relationship of capitalism to the progressive ordering of human existence. Cancer is here a metaphor for entropy, the progressive disordering of the universe which may result in its ultimate heat-death. For Powys, the increasing complexity of social organization will reflect the accumulated psychic energies of a place, permeating even the most trivial of human affairs and causing them to repeat homoeomerously. Only a crack in the world-system can transcend

this process.

The chapter 'Mark's Court', which introduces Powys's apparent creation of the story of Merlin pulverizing the fell King Mark,⁷ describes Philip Crow's plan to manufacture figurines of Arthur and Merlin (*AGR*, 430). William Zoyland, a materialist, believes that this is only fitting for a town like Glastonbury at this point, but the Marquis of P then challenges him to sleep in the room of his castle, where, according to Powys's legend, King Mark was reduced to a handful of dust (*AGR*, 431). As in John Buchan's *The Gap in the Curtain*, mass-produced re-enchantment fails. Buchan's novel proposes a thought experiment based on J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*. An assembled audience gathers at an English country house to participate in an experiment where they visualize a newspaper page one year in the future. As they meditate upon it, images of their future are revealed in the newsprint paradigm. There are several sequences involving characters trying to come to terms with their fate (an idea explored in the Calvinist manner), one of whom, Reginald Daker, a rather hapless young man who sees in the *Times* a year from now that he will be traveling to Yucatan, a place he knows nothing of, and who resolutely declares that nothing will get him there, thus affirming his free will. During the year, he meets and courts Miss Verona Cortal while at the Welsh country estate of a Mr. Tallis, who happens to have a collection of Mayan antiquities. Daker had taken some time to find his way in life and had only recently devoted himself to rare book collecting. Cortal and her family decide, after she and Daker get engaged, to rationalize his amateurish seventeenth-century antiquarianism and market the magic of England. 'In a word, it would "rationalize" and make available to the public the antique glamour of these islands' (199). Previously, Cortal had asked, 'who was it called it 'Merlin's isle of Gramarye?' (185). The line, from Kipling's 'Puck's Song', calls attention, in Cortal's rationalized form, to the shared etymology of 'grammar' and 'glamour'. In trying to provide the more vulgarized version of the latter, she and her enterprise have bleached the magic from the former. Leithen, the detached narrator, regards the 'Interpreter's House', as the venture is known, with horror: 'the magic of England was "rationalized" with a vengeance' (205). Unlike

Buchan, however, Powys does not see this as a violation of the British national-spirit. Rather, the repetition and mirroring is an inevitable consequence and a sign of subsequent transformation. Geard, who will pass the test of Mark's chamber, later proposes that

Little inanimate things [...] can become great symbols and symbols are—No! [...] bugger me black! That's not what I mean at all! I mean something much deeper, much more living than symbols. [...] Certain material objects came become charged with supernatural power. *That's* what I mean. They can get filled with the electricity that's more than electricity, with a kind of magnetism that's more than magnetism. (*AGR*, 436)

The aura, as it were, of the putative Merlin and Arthur dolls would exert a far greater influence than the energy contained within their matter. Their psychic resonances can tap into and control great regions of collective memory. Precisely because of their mass production, their similarity repeats itself and is not diffused by the individual craftsmen. For Powys, nationalism is the management of repetition in the consciousness of a given people, and it has its own internal logic.

Geard later comes to the realization that 'I know now what the Grail is. It is the desire of the generations mingling like water with the Blood of Christ, and caught in a fragment of Substance that is beyond Matter! It is a little nucleus of Eternity, dropped somehow from the outer spaces upon one particular spot' (*AGR*, 457–8). The phrase 'nucleus of Eternity' suggests latent energy that grows via developmental constraint, similar on every level and guided by the spirits of the place. Wolfram Von Eschenbach's Grail is a stone dropped from outer space, and the ability of such an object to exist and distort earthly time is a constant theme in speculative fiction. Powys explores the ability of this space- or earth-born object to transcend the repetitive structures of human existence.

I now will consider the roles of repetition and transcendence in *AGR* through an analysis of the character of Owen Evans, the scholar whose life-long project has been a new biography of Merlin, and who, like Merlin, is imprisoned, but in this case by a series of sadistic fantasies. Powys himself was an admitted sadist, though he was

disturbed by this aspect of this nature (and claimed never to have read de Sade, though he was fond of more contemporary French sado-masochistic pornography) and scolded Henry Miller for what seemed to be an overt celebration of it, though the context is unclear:

And when you think that these infernal cruelties weer [*sic*] done not from any particular sadistic mania but from—so the books seem to suggest—some desire to gain wizzardry [*sic*] and Black Magic powers for himself—his cult it appears to me ought not to be encouraged as people who have more personal sadistic tendencies than this monster had might easily get the feeling from your word ‘glorious’ that after all if to cause extreme anguish to a helpless person gave them extreme pleasure that pleasure is justified.

(*Letters to Miller*, 65, letter dated August 14 1952)

Powys rejects the ethos of necromancy here. He also described his own sadism as that of a woman, that which shrinks away from overt depictions of violence (*Autobiography*, 390). Had Miller’s motivation been simple sadistic mania, however, that would have been at least understandable. In any event, Powys recognizes that sadism should not be encouraged. His characterization of Evans, however unreal it seems, reveals considerable thought about its psychological origins.

The inner life of the sadist is repetitive. Sadism itself is a series of repetitions on a theme. Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* contains a famous discussions of sadism and repetition: ‘From the very first we recognized the presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct. As we know, it can make itself independent and can, in the form of a perversion, dominate an individual’s entire sexual activity’ (621). And repetition is an ‘expression of inertia inherent in organic life’ (612). Note the repetition of ‘mechanically’ in this passage:

[Evans] was disturbed by a particular sadistic urge 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. Mechanically he closed the street door; mechanically he lit a candle; mechanically he met the marble gaze of an alabaster bust of Dante; mechanically he ascended the flight of narrow stairs

to his room above. (AGR, 150)

Crow's embrace of the 'sun' stone represents a union with a mythic and more real past that provokes Evans's fit of impotent rage. 'Dolorous blow' is the title of a chapter and the description given in the medieval romances of Balin's murder of King Pelles with a spear.⁸ Now it is Evans's imagined exit from his mental labyrinth. The aforementioned repetition of 'mechanically' suggests a mind stuck in its tracks, and the 'alabaster bust of Dante' is a reminder that the ascent to his bedroom is also a descent to Avernus.

A troika of Red Robinson, Dave Spear, and Paul Trent, the solicitor anarchist, plots to wrest the recently deceased Canon Crow's bequest away from 'Bloody Johnny' Geard. They decide to eliminate John Crow, whom they perceive as being the motivating power behind Geard's communal experiment. Finn Toller, currently enthralled by the madwoman Bet Chinnock, is enlisted. He decides that crushing Crow's skull with a heavy iron bar is the most humane way of murdering him, and Evans learns of the plot from the beginning and hears of its manner of execution later. His utmost wish seems to be granted; rather than reading about such deeds in volumes such as *The Unpardonable Sin*, he will have the opportunity to see a man's skull crushed. When the moment is near, Evans thinks 'I must go through with this, though I get no pleasure from it'. The curious thing, in the mind of this slave of the iron bar, was that it was *the iron bar itself* that now excited in him this relentless, pleasureless necessity to go on' (AGR, 1019). Through transference, the object itself has acquired sadistic agency.

As Evans plans to meet Toller on the designated killing grounds, the narrative explains the origins of his compulsion. The sadism is now described as a 'worm-snake': 'whatever this worm-snake—which kept emitting a poisonous froth, like a snail that has been wounded—ordered this corpse-man, this *homo mortuus*, to do, the corpse-man obeyed' (AGR, 1020). Evans, the *homo mortuus* enthralled to the snake, the sex-nerve, might have become this way 'from his father's forcing his mother to let him enjoy her long after the child's conception had begun' (AGR, 1020). The dolorous stroke

falls not on John Crow's head but on his walking companion, Philip Crow's manager, Tom Barter. With the 'punctual, mechanical precision of a consummate actor performing a long-ago perfectly rehearsed part', Evans finds the murderous iron bar and wipes it clean (AGR, 1053–4). The 'nerve-worm' of his sexual excitement has been severed by his disgust at viewing Barter's shattered skull. The shock of his guilt over the enactment of his sadistic fantasy turns his hair white. Evans continues to work on his *Vita Merlini*, and, if any passers-by would see him reading a volume of Malory, the narrator informs us, it would be because he was looking for the real meaning of the word 'Esplumeoir' (AGR, 1056).

The best philological explanation for this mysterious word used to refer to Merlin's final resting place is that it means 'mew', a cage where falcons were kept while they were mottling. Both in this sense and in the mythical context, there is the clear suggestion of removal from this time and place into a stasis, a stasis where, after a transformation, the world will be reentered. Powys describes Evans as a *homo mortuus*, a reference to the frequently used description of Arthur as *rex mortuus* or *rex semi-mortuus*. The 'Dolorous Stroke' was 'termed one of the Three atrocious Slaughters of Britain' (Rhys, 258),⁹ and here it represents how the cycle of history and repetition has been transcended in the individual mind. Freud represents the mind as a system in circuit in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and Evan's self-regulating fantasy has been severed by contact with reality. His personal transcendence is a reflection of the larger renewal of the *genius loci*, as the novel's imagery of mirrors, fish, and aquariums reveals.

Catoptronomy interested Borges as well, who in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, has a section on 'Fauna of Mirrors'. In characteristically elliptical style, he notes that Father Fontecchio of the Society of Jesus noted the existence of a Fish that lived in mirrors among the superstitions of the people of Canton. A later researcher took up Fontecchio's research and discovered that the legend goes back to the time of Yellow Emperor, where 'the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now cut off from each other' (105). Though the emperor banished these forms, they will one day reawaken. The first to do so will be the Fish. And 'side by side with these mirror

creatures, the creatures of the water will join the battle' (106).

The mirror-fish evokes the ichthus symbol of Christ. The mirror is perhaps the ultimate representation of repetition (and individuality), and the appearance of the fish signals potential transcendence, an escape from the pendulum of world history. In *AGR*, the fish appears in 'The Grail' chapter in the form of a tench, a small chub invested with healing properties in local folklore.

Sam Dekker, who has abandoned the theological studies that his father has pressed upon him, with his face turned towards the 'three eminences of the Isle of Glastonbury, Wirral Hill, Chalice Hill, and the Tor', sees the 'earth and the water and the darkness *cracked*' (*AGR*, 938) and then sees a vision of the Grail. He feels a gigantic spear 'struck into his bowels and struck from *below*', a spear that echoes that of the similarly world-turning¹⁰ 'Dolorous Blow'. He has been sitting in a barge and looking into the water, seeing himself darkly. When wondering if it could be the fish of healing that he saw within the chalice, he thinks (or a narrator thinks) that 'something somewhere hid perhaps in the twisted heart of the cruel First Cause itself and able to break in *from outside* and smash to atoms this torturing chain of Cause and Effect?' (*AGR*, 940). Before he had his vision, he thought of 'Aquarium-Grail ... Grail-aquarium' and his 'ichthyological mind visioned a Fish that was a real fish and yet something more than a fish shedding a mystic light out of an enchanted vessel' (*AGR*, 910). Powys uses the aquarium image throughout the novel to describe how the tutelary spirits of Glastonbury view the terrene inhabitants. He wrote about the aquarium's personal significance in his *Autobiography*:

This aquarium was an intense and unique pleasure to me. I think it satisfied in some profound manner my desire to be God, or at least *a* god, and there is undoubtedly something about watching the movements of these restless Beings, as they swim in and out of the stones and weeds from which you have *created their world*, that gives you a mysterious feeling of excitement. Yes, it is as if you 'possessed' in the way I fancy that the First Cause must possess *his* Aquarium, these darting, silvery, rose-tinged aboriginals of our human organism. (54-5)

The humans are like animalcules or 'silvery, rose-tinged aboriginals' to the tutelary spirits, and, by the *mise en abyme* that the mirror suggests, so they too are viewed by other beings looking into the sea as if it were glass. After his vision, Sam Dekker goes to administer an enema¹¹ to an elderly man in need, a man who incidentally notes that the backside is a 'turble squeamy' place (*AGR*, 947). As the spear pierces him from below, so Sam is reconciled both to this ministrations and to his wife's adultery with his father. He has seen the Grail.

The vision of the Grail heralds the flood which drowns nearly all of Glastonbury. Philip Crow's constant drumming airplane, which is the Glastonbury embodiment of 'the conquest of the air is such an enormous event in human history that it is probably responsible for these reckless and chaotic impulses which we will all feel nowadays ... strange spiritualistic occurrences that we hear so much about are the result of Man's having to found how to fly' (144), has foundered. The tench in the grail has brought itself into the water, because a historical object cannot exist without a reflection. And the flood renews.

Powys writes in his autobiography:

I do not know much about Paracelsus, who must have been half-mystic, half-thaumaturge, but one idea of his, which jumps out with what I have gathered, by ambiguous hints here and there, of Tibetan adepts, has sunk deep into my mind. This is the idea that our intensely-concentrated thoughts can become 'elementals', faintly-living entities, that is to say, whose dimly-vitalized shapes, once projected form the creative energy of a person's imaginative will, can go on existing and acting in some etheric dimension of that psychic plane in which all so-called 'matter' floats. (576)

Here is yet another expression of Powys's interest in the eidola concept. Though I agree with George Steiner's assessment of Powys as a figure with a 'seeming absence in him of certain social and political central awareness in relation to his age' (9), the eidola-concept manifests itself in *AGR* as a sophisticated and dialogic representation of rapid conceptual change in the social imagination of the British nation-state.

What Powys describes as eidola has special significance for the narrative imagining of a community and nation. The timelessness and naivete that puzzle Steiner are a consequence of Powys's method. What he describes above as 'intensely concentrated thoughts' acting 'in some etheric dimension of that psychic plane' is in actuality the narrative manifestation through character and plot of the epiphenomenally diffuse matter of history. The ability of these eidola to act on the living reflects the writer's ability to act through the contingencies of reading in distant time. The eidola—and narrative creation more generally for Powys—are both timeless and perfect. Only their ability to communicate with the time-bound living is imperfect. Writing in 1927 about the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, Powys claims that 'the invisible power of money will be broken by the arbitrary will of conflicting conquerers; when the hordes of ordinary men and women will subside into a 'fellaheen' state of international endurance' ('Sacco-Vanzetti', 37). The word 'fellaheen' derives in Arabic from 'falaha', meaning to till the soil (*OED*), which suggests that he already conceptualized an autochthonous transnational future. His political intervention in this case stems from what David Goodway describes as his pre-theoretical affinity for anarchism.¹² In *AGR*, Powys seeks to reveal the invisible power of money, to unveil these old gods who have ascended from their graves¹³ and who now remain watching the little matter of Britain's disenchanting lives.

NOTES

¹ From a letter to Georges Izambard of May 13, 1871, written when Rimbaud was sixteen (302).

² This story is cited by G. Wilson Knight, who cites W. E. Woodward's *The Gift of Life* (III, 65) (128).

³ W. J. Keith's 'John Cowper Powys's *AGR*, A Reader's Guide' lists several references to 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan.'

⁴ 'Phudd Bottom' was the name of the farmhouse he and Phyllis Playter lived in, not the town itself.

⁵ It is surprisingly difficult to pinpoint what time the events in the novel take place. The Great War is never mentioned, but civilian aviation seems to be in a post-War stage.

⁶ 'The God of Time', *Dial*, 1928.

- ⁷ Keith's comprehensive 'Reader's Guide' finds no source for this.
- ⁸ Powys describes the spear which Balin used to wound the guardian of the Grail as that of Longinus, the spear that pierced Jesus' side according to legend (*AGR* 342).
- ⁹ Powys read Rhys's *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* nine times or more in the years before writing *AGR* (Krisssdottir 'Introduction', xx).
- ¹⁰ Yeats's gyres in 'The Second Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan' are a different manifestation of this essentially conic image of the transcending moment in history.
- ¹¹ Powys had digestive problems that he treated with constant enemas, a process recorded with enthusiasm in his diary. For instance, the entry for Bloomsday, 1934 begins 'Up at 8. *Enema!*' (*Dorset Year* 5).
- ¹² Goodway usefully describes Powys's late 1930s correspondence with Emma Goldman, who gave him well-received political instruction.
- ¹³ I refer to Weber's well-known passage from 'Science as Vocation': 'Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanting and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another' (149).

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