

THE VISIONARY ELEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF
JOHN COWPER POWYS AND WILLIAM GOLDING

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Phil Parker

SUMMARY

This thesis is a parallel exploration of the writings of John Cowper Powys and William Golding, as comparable examples of the visionary temperament in English literature. An analysis of the nature of 'visionary literature' is made - focusing on such matters as the use of mythic models, an attachment to the locally numinous, a sympathy with the primitive and the grotesque, a violent quasi-Manichean depiction of human nature and interaction, manifesting a religious or ritualist sensibility, redeemed or transformed by moments of vision - to provide a context in which to examine the work of Powys and Golding.

The non-fiction of the two writers demonstrates many shared interests and preoccupations, and has been analysed on the following lines: its use of autobiographical and familial evidence; its detailed anatomy of man as a species; its visionary attachment to a specific sense of place; its exploration of a stratified and hierarchic social perspective; its theories of art, novel-writing and creativity; its overall 'world-view'; its evocation of visionary moments and their significance.

The rest of this thesis examines the ways in which these similar opinions and philosophies are transmuted into fiction. In the case of Powys, I review the early fiction, focusing particularly on *After My Fashion*, as tentative steps towards the achieved fictional evocation of Powys' mature world-view which is manifested in the Wessex novels. I illustrate the ways in which, despite certain technical shortcomings, the Wessex novels most successfully affirm Powys' visionary beliefs.

I then turn to Golding's later fiction. I have attempted to justify my claim that *Darkness Visible* triumphantly embodies the complexities of Golding's recent statements of belief in a convincing fictional form. Finally, the other late fiction is assessed, putting subtle and often comic shadings onto Golding's visionary outlook.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The Visionary Element

*"Where there is no vision, the people perish."*¹

This introductory chapter has a two-fold purpose: it seeks first to analyse 'the visionary element' in English literature, and to provide the context of a visionary 'tradition' in which to set the work of Powys and Golding; second, it attempts to clarify the grounds on which the writings of Powys and Golding can be jointly analysed, grounds which the rest of this thesis then goes on to explore in greater detail.

I

The visionary element in English literature cannot be discussed in the same sense that, for example, one might analyse the satiric or the tragic. Satire and tragedy have recognisable and broadly accepted aims, styles, historical periods, practitioners. The visionary in literature is more elusive. True, there have been visionaries: Vaughan, Smart, Blake, Wordsworth. There have also been moments when the exploration of visionary preoccupations has dominated the spirit of the age: during the early flowering of Romanticism, or in the shared fascinations of the early moderns - Hardy, Conrad, Lawrence, Yeats, Eliot, Joyce. However, can one talk of a visionary tradition? Moreover, given the medium in which both Powys and Golding have worked, is there a tradition of the visionary English novel? I would suggest that the answer to both these questions is a tentative and limited yes.

¹Proverbs, 29:18.

In fact, the very expression 'visionary English novel' implies something at variance with the main tradition of novel writing in this country. The traditional English novel is 'realist', socially oriented, and proposes a common perceptual world shared by author and reader. It is, in Jakobsen's terms,¹ metonymic rather than metaphoric: it claims for itself a preference for content rather than form (in that it does not draw attention to itself as an aesthetic, artistic object) and, in this having very little in common with the visionary, it is materialist and liberal-humanist in value-orientation. Traditionally fixed in time and place, it deals in particularities, evoking a finite (and knowable) world.

Having gone some way towards defining what visionary literature is not, it is possible to suggest what characteristics it does possess. 'Visionary' is a word more comfortably associated with poetry (and to a lesser extent, with drama) because it is less rooted in 'realism'. It aspires (in crudely generalised terms) towards abstraction, exploring, for example, the perceptual capabilities of the individual by illuminating the inner self through metaphor, because it is relatively more free than the novel is from the necessity of specifying a contingent (metonymic) world. The visionary **novel**, seen in these terms, is something of a hybrid form, and its practitioners, though they might be regarded as part of some 'great tradition' of the novel, are less likely to be conveniently categorised.

That phrase "illuminating the inner self" suggests that one major source of the visionary in English literature is to be found in the theories and poetry of High Romanticism, which might be (arbitrarily but conventionally) defined as the period 1780-1830. Insofar as the term 'Romanticism' is capable of definition, it may be said to lay emphasis on

¹See his essay 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Linguistic Disturbance' and David Lodge's discussion of these concepts in **The Modes of Modern Writing**.

the following features: the primacy of subjective experience; a personal quest or exploration, as much within the self as external; a celebration of simplicity, indeed of the primitive; a preference for 'nature' before 'society', the countryside before the city; a fascination with the marvellous or the supernatural; a commitment to the revolutionary, shading into the apocalyptic; a fundamental dualism contrasting the power of creative mind with the phenomenal universe; the principle (or perhaps analogy) of organicism, as a process sustaining the production of all growing things (plants, animals, human beings), including poetry; the imagination.¹ In all of these, one sees aspects of the visionary temper: the visionary element is rooted in Romanticism.

This raises one enormous question: did the visionary exist before, say, 1780? Are not Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, or Dante's *The Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare's *King Lear* - to cite three texts more or less at random - 'visionary'? The answer must be yes, in part: the Apollonian/Dionysiac dichotomy in Greek tragedy, the cosmic disintegration, violence and subjectivity of experience in Shakespearean tragedy are illustrative of aspects of the visionary imagination. But in the sense that so many of these features **come together** in Romanticism, I think it is valid to see this as the mainspring of the visionary temperament as evidenced in the century and a half that has followed.

Might one not, in that case, simply propose the substitution of 'Romantic' in place of 'visionary' in my discussion thus far? This is a rather more problematical question, since any clear-cut distinction between the two is difficult to maintain. I would suggest that the 'visionary' exists on the fringes, so to speak, of Romanticism: it is extreme, intense, obscure, exhibiting what I would call a muffled

¹I am fully aware of the trite and cliched nature of a list such as this. A detailed study of the Romantic mind does not seem necessary to my task. It can be found, for example, in M.H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

explosiveness. A survey of aspects of the visionary imagination as I understand it should help to illustrate what I mean.

A primary feature of the visionary imagination is its attraction to the mythic: to myths as they are handed down in literary and folk culture, and to myth-making as a fictional activity.¹ In this one can see something of the Jungian attraction for primordial images, myths of a 'collective unconscious' - thus allusions to the mythic, narratives based on mythic models, are a way of bypassing intellect or history or individuality, to arrive at a 'deeper' insight into the human condition, to reveal archetypes and patterns of behaviour. Psychological approaches (myths as archetypes), moral approaches (myths containing a 'core meaning' or message) and ritualistic approaches (myths as patterns of religious understanding and response) have all been made to the work of both Powys and Golding.² Yet mythic allusion remains essentially mysterious: Belinda Humfrey comments on Powys' use of myth not for contrast (mythic grandeur, contemporary poverty) but, in some barely articulate way, for continuity;³ Golding repeatedly challenged the essentially narrowing perception of his fictional world mapped out in terms of fable or allegory by a reiterated defence of his work as mythic, commenting: "I do feel fable as being an invented thing on the surface whereas myth is something which comes out of the roots of things in the ancient sense of being the key to existence Myth is a story at which we can do nothing but wonder."⁴

¹In this, as in all the other aspects of the visionary to be cited in due course, I would stress that such features need not be visionary. Pope, for example, makes full and thorough use of classical mythology, yet one would not be tempted to call 'The Rape of the Lock' visionary.

²See, for example, the opening chapter of G. Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* or most of Morine Krissdottir's *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*; the opening chapter of Virginia Tiger's *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery* or the writings of Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, such as 'From the Cellar to the Rack: A Recurrent Pattern in William Golding's Novels' (*Modern Fiction Studies*: Winter 1971-2: pp. 501-12).

³See her 'Introduction' to *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, especially pp. 21-2.

⁴*Books and Bookmen*, August 1959, p. 10.

This attraction towards myth is more to do with the process of imaginative discovery than with form; form is discovered through the process of creation rather than being superimposed on the material in a pre-determined fashion. This, as Virginia Tiger sensibly notes, is related to Coleridge's theories of 'organic' and 'mechanic' form¹ and reveals a similar visionary inclination to that which Coleridge saw in Wordsworth's art:² consider the complex metamorphosis of natural phenomena, in mingled symbolism and animism, into the "huge and mighty forms" of Book One of *The Prelude*. Hence, one finds the visionary's attachment to myth, as I have observed, both in a web of shared allusions (what Philip Larkin called a "myth-kitty") and in a mythopoeic imagination. This is evidenced, for example, in Blake's urgent myth-making, and in his search to "Create a System or be enslaved by another Man's."³ It is present in the work of D.H. Lawrence: in the resonant, ambiguous, beyond-philosophising 'spell' of *The Rainbow*, say, or in the subversive re-mythifying of the *Apocalypse*. Other examples might include Yeats' *A Vision*, Graves' *The White Goddess*, or, in spectacularly different ways, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

K.K. Ruthven's coolly ironic study *Myth*, however, suggests that ultimately the protean vitality of the word means that it can be interpreted in countless, often mutually contradictory ways. For the visionary, an attachment to the mythic can generally be traced to a more

¹A relevant quotation from the *Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists*: "The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of properties of the material The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within Such as the life is, such is the form." (Quoted in V. Tiger, *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*, p. 27.)

²See Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, II, 124.

³*Jerusalem*, I, 10. This tendency is very marked in both Powys' and Golding's work also, though, for rather different reasons, I suspect that both writers would hesitate before committing themselves to so organised and specific a word as Blake's "System".

specific source - to a sense of, and a response to, the locally numinous. Along with this goes a seeking for reassurance in terms of the primitive. An 'earth-rooted' attachment to a locality is, as G. Wilson Knight showed in a **Times Literary Supplement** review, part of a long occult tradition in English literature.¹ For Powys this meant initially an attachment to the Dorset/Somerset region, focusing on places rich in pagan mysticism: Glastonbury, Maiden Castle, Portland and Chesil. Later the same fascination was transferred to Wales, to remnants of Celtic folk-lore, to the **Mabinogion** and to aspects of the 'Saturnian' existing in such primitive culture, such as the myth of the Cauldron of the Mothers. Likewise Golding has spent most of his adult life in Wiltshire, in the presence of Stonehenge, and fully aware of the clash of Christian and pre-Christian cultures resonating from the proximity of that ancient edifice to Salisbury.

Primitivism has been associated with visionary impulses at two distinct periods in literary and cultural history. In the early flourishing of Romanticism the primitive was attractive as an escape from the cultured, 'civilised' ordered eighteenth-century world, evidenced in the unschooled folk-wisdom of Wordsworth's vagrants, attuned to the rhythms of sun and seasons, stones and trees and earth and the voices of Nature. To the early moderns the primitive was also a touchstone, a reassurance. Though this often took, paradoxically, sophisticated forms, it was sought out as a vitalising force in the music (Stravinsky's *Rite*) and painting (the debt of Cubism to primitive African carving) as well as the writing of the period. Again one thinks of Yeats, or of Lawrence - the 'Totem' chapter in *Women in Love*, for example. In all these cases the primitive functions as a revivifying, energising power to counteract the enervating

¹**Times Literary Supplement**, 11/10/57, pp. 601-2. Once again writers like Blake, Wordsworth and Lawrence feature prominently.

listlessness of ennui, or soulless mechanisation or the excessive rationalisation of the age, offering instead an animal, irrational (indeed anti-rational) insight into a more elemental existence.

It is a relatively easy task to demonstrate that the local mythography of Powys and Golding is part of a rich visionary seam in literary history. To those figures cited thus far - Wordsworth, Blake, Yeats, Lawrence - one might add Clare or Samuel Palmer's early Shoreham-inspired verse (and painting), Geoffrey Hill or Ted Hughes. Among novelists, Hardy looms large and there are the contrasting contemporary skills of John Fowles and Alan Garner. In all these cases, I would suggest, one sees more than merely the idiosyncrasies of folk-culture and local colour: in this sense 'visionary' does not equate with 'regional'. Instead I think what one sees in such literature is writing 'charged' with the explosive disruptiveness of local myth which (literally) animates the action.

If there is a violence about the visionary's handling of local mythology, the same might be said of such a writer's analysis of the human condition. This area of interest, likewise, is not solely the domain of the visionary: thinkers from many ages and of many persuasions have considered man's life to be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. What characterises the visionary analysis is not so much violence between men as violence within man, an identity fragmented, nominally rational but driven by other passions, within whom a lurking, seething 'cellarage' churns as often, if not more often, than any aspiration. Golding's characters, with their dark centres, committees, cellarages; Powys' characters with their 'etherealising' and 'cavoseniargising', their life-illusions and physical fastidiousness - in both cases what is notable is the way the writer exploits man's position on this isthmus of a middle state to reach both ways (needing to go down as far as it goes up, in

Jocelin's terminology in *The Spire*), and often both ways simultaneously, in search of vision.

Division within the individual, a perception of self as fragmented, has, as I have noted, a long and varied history. Golding has explicitly remarked on his debt to the Euripidean analysis of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac warring elements; perhaps more central, more pervasive in its cultural impact, has been St Paul's exposition of the flesh warring against the spirit, of choice and omissions and commissions - of fragmentation as a consequence of sin, in fact. Though, as I will show, adherence to a conventional Christian world view is not a characteristic of the visionary mind, all the writers cited thus far have a perhaps idiosyncratic but nevertheless profoundly religious perspective on the human condition, and in this sense the prevailing Christian culture has had a shaping influence.

Within this general framework of the divided human consciousness, one can isolate a number of features which seem to have acquired a visionary significance. One is man's isolation: man islanded - alone on a wide, wide sea, as Pincher Martin might have said - unable to communicate truly or know anything beyond the self. But for the visionary this is neither modish alienation nor existentialist despair. It is, rather, man laid out, stripped bare for analysis, whether in Golding's 'laboratory' conditions, or in Powys' solitary sensuality, or Conrad's islanded and isolated figures, or the population of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The visionary, I would hasten to add, does not stop there, seeking instead glimpses of a new wholeness, in order to reconcile not only the fragments within the self but also the gap between self and other - but this loneliness, this brokenness, is where man starts.

At the centre of the broken fragments is a darkness - if the cliché is permitted, a heart of darkness. The horror of this pervades the work of

Golding and Powys as it does that of Conrad. Paradoxically, though this might be said to equate, crudely, with a sense of evil in the human condition, it is necessary to be aware of its existence and to come to terms with it. In espousing a kind of instinctive anti-modernism, visionary writers in varying degrees seek to imply that modern man does not. The recognition in Hughes' poem 'Thrushes' is typical: 'civilised' man possesses a cosy and tamed vanity, unaware of the proximity of the "furious spaces of fire", "the distracting devils" who "orgy and hosannah". This is, in a sense, a response to the primitive within man which is analogous to a primitivism in local mythography - a flaring black explosiveness which is antagonistic to intellect or reason. Lawrence's work provides many examples of this tendency: in theoretical treatises like *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, in the primitive 'life' figures in his fiction such as Ramon in *The Plumed Serpent*, in the whole powerful tale of *St Mawr*.

If the visionary sees man divided, in the dissociation of mind and body, intellect and instinct, it is also true that each of these writers conducts a search, on his own terms, for a way to discover a new unity. That there is a unity, in principle at least, is not doubted, and in that sense a version of a myth of a Golden Age is likewise common to them all. Golding, against the protests of his reason which tell him that life was not like that, locates it in ancient Egyptian culture. For Powys it is the Saturnian myth of Cronos, mediated ultimately through pre-Celtic mythology. Here one sees again an attachment to a primitive (or at least historically distant) culture: compare Lawrence's fascination for the Etruscans or Aztecs, or, on a different level, the dissociation of sensibility Eliot traced to the seventeenth century.

Just as primitive cultures possessed this visionary wholeness, so often, for these writers, it is those 'primitives' within (or on the

fringes of) contemporary society who are marked down as vehicles for vision. Again this has a fairly consistent literary and cultural history: a tradition of grotesques, epileptics, cultic votaries offering oracular wisdom. In visionary literature grotesquerie is rarely exploited for comic purposes; rather it is as a channel for the intuitive barely-articulated insight of vision. Powys' fiction is densely populated with such characters. In that sense his whole fictional world lies at a very oblique angle to our own. In Golding, one thinks centrally, I suppose, of Matty: physically disfigured, emotionally and humanly isolated, spiritually gifted. There is also Colley, and perhaps Simon. In visionary literature such gifts have frequently been poured out on the child and the mystic, representative of types like Wordsworth's idiot boy, or indeed his 'Peter Bell' or 'Lucy Grey'. One thinks of the young Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, dark, alien, animal, or, less articulately, of the disturbed Stevie in *The Secret Agent*. And such novelists frequently employ the grotesque and seemingly malign figures to challenge, to cut away comfortable preconceptions and subvert the accepted order - as Loerke does in *Women in Love*, for example. The final impression one gains from such characters is that they are closer to the violent 'reality' that the visionary novelist posits - indeed that they see that reality is a totally different way, as the adolescent Magnus does in A.S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*, or as Alf Dubbo does in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*. At the limits of this type of visionary Golding places the saint: in this, perhaps, he is more 'orthodox' than other visionary writers, though sanctity is destabilising and disruptive rather than comforting and consolatory.

Mention of saints does, however, suggest another area of visionary preoccupation: the religious or ritualist sensibility which colours the visionary's world view. This is rarely a conventional or doctrinally

'sound' point of view; the only significant examples of this, I think, would be Gerard Manley Hopkins and the later Eliot (of the plays and the **Four Quartets**). By the rest, a personal and idiosyncratic 'faith' is declared. Golding denies himself the security of 'belonging' to any creed or system, but searches for a unity, a bringing together of matter and spirit, and he repeatedly avows a belief in 'God'. Powys advocates a subjective ritualism, a complex invocation to (often self-generated) 'deities' and 'spirits'. Such explanations echo through the pages of visionary literature. Few writers are as intensely animist as Powys, though such sensations are powerfully evoked in Wordsworth's glimpses of "unknown modes of being" and his communion with "Souls of lonely places" in the first book of **The Prelude**.

A further characteristic of the visionary religious perspective is the violence and opposition at its heart. One finds almost a polarisation of response to spiritual stimuli, a seeming black-and-white extremity of perspective, and a desire to force these oppositions together again in vision, to arrive at Powys' "apex-thought": "a meeting place of desperate and violent extremes". This amounts to a quasi-Manichean perspective, not, perhaps, in the conventional sense of the inherent evil of the material world (though it might explain a reiterated seeming hatred for physicality) but certainly in the dualist outlook suggested by Blake's exploration of Innocence and Experience, or his 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell' in which the contraries are reconciled, but neither absorbed nor subsumed. Dualism recurs in Powys' setting 'the Idea of Christ' against his malign 'First Cause' in the never ending but profoundly creative war between Love and Malice. In this analysis the similarities between Powys' First Cause and the 'President of the Immortals' who sports with Tess or the 'Immanent Will' at work in Hardy's **The Dynasts** are striking. In

slightly different form we recognise a similar creative force to the one Powys proposes in Lawrence's 'dark gods'.

Even a brief survey like this demonstrates the extreme variety and subjectivity of religious or ritualist perspective, and this in itself is characteristic of the visionary outlook which stresses the volatile fluidity of vision. By this I mean not just the instability of visions, but the essentially undoctrinal quality of vision as a spiritual faculty, since what is 'seen' relies, in Blake's terms, on "Imagination", which is "surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration."¹

At the heart of the visionary consciousness, however, is a response to visions themselves, to moments of revelatory perception. The rhetoric of individual writers clothes this in various forms, but a sense of things 'coming together', of glimpsed revelations, of levels of existence 'breaking into' conventional awareness, of spiritual and physical transformation of being as a consequence: these things are common to all. Vision, of course, has meanings on several levels, but though both Golding and Powys would echo Conrad's famous exhortation that the function of their art was "to make you see", nevertheless it is more than literal seeing, as is implied in fact in Conrad's continuation of his definition, offering "that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask".² This implies something revelatory, life-changing, consciousness-shaping.

In Golding's fiction these events occur in what Virginia Tiger, in her book **William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery**, calls "confrontation scenes": they are accompanied by a characteristic vocabulary ('convulsion', 'revelation', 'nothingness') and depiction of event (silence, the shedding of tears). Characteristically too such moments of confrontation alter radically the experience and orientation of

¹Quoted in V. Tiger, **William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery**, p. 37.

²See the 'Preface' to **The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'**.

the perceiver. Again, such things are not uncommon in many types of literature: the preceding description would fit the haunting, mysterious 'confrontation' of Owen's 'Strange Meeting', for example. Perhaps what distinguishes the authentic visionary moment is the sudden glimpse of the multi-layered nature of 'reality', the 'spiritual' or quasi-divine informing ordinary perception, which changes the relationship not just between the individual and his fellow men, but between the individual and **everything** that is, including states of being that have hitherto not been perceived.

In Powys' work such moments of intensity are defined as moments of "apex-thought", aiming ultimately to a glimpse of "the complex vision" itself. If, on first examination, Powys' treatment of such events seems rather passive, this is essentially, I think, a consequence of a visionary vocabulary ('sinking back', 'lying back', 'cool vegetative embrace') rooted in Paterian sensationalism, in the complex hedonism of Pater's theory of 'pulsations'; such a sensibility can be seen again, for instance, in Powys' expressed sympathy for the Proust of the 'madeleine moments'.

What such moments share is a profound creativity, and in this one could link them with similar occurrences in the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Hardy and Joyce, for example. Blake, like Pater after him, spoke of 'pulsations', moments of artistic creativity that he compared to pulsations of the artery. This is analogous to the Wordsworthian conceptual image, rather more far-reaching in its influence, of "spots of time", transfiguring visionary moments.¹ It is difficult to underestimate

¹The passage from which this reference is drawn, *The Prelude*, Book Twelve, lines 208-335, is profoundly influential, and is worthy of detailed study. Notice in particular the **function** of these moments (they retain "A renovating virtue . . . That penetrates, enables us to mount, / When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen") and their **composition** (highly charged moments when contingent normality is transfigured).

the impact of this formulation on later visionary writers. It is present, for instance, mediated perhaps through Keats and Pater, in Hopkins' idea of "inscape" - the sudden apprehension of visionary pattern in what is being observed - as illustrated in the flaring of epiphanic fire in 'The Windhover'. It is present in what Hardy called a "moment of vision", illustrated in his tragic novels but more especially in his poetry in the sudden revelation of a deeper dimension. As a final example, consider the Joycean "epiphany", the sudden flaring up of an essentially poetic revelation, such as the peak experience of Stephen's vision of the girl standing in the water in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a moment of fulfilment.

In visionary poetry, these glimpses often are characterised by brief lyrical evocations: consider Edwin Muir's poem 'Horses', for example, or the more demonstrably Wordsworthian piece 'The Horses', by Ted Hughes. In the novel, such moments have, as Golding notes, to be prepared for, 'shaped' and yet paradoxically 'allowed to happen', but also they have to be carried on from, subject to the pressures of plot and contingency and the passage of time. Nevertheless, the intense apocalypticism of visionary novelists ensures that the weight and emphasis placed on such visionary moments is dissipated as little as possible. In Golding's work this is achieved by his focus on endings and beginnings, small-scale apocalypses revealed in the contrasting worlds of *The Inheritors* and *Pincher Martin*, or in the potential for the dawning of a new age that ends *Darkness Visible*. Powys has his vision of dawning Aquarianism: his versions of apocalypse range from Wolf's "field of gold" experience at the end of *Wolf Solent* to the vast flood of *A Glastonbury Romance*. Like Blake, with his *Vision of the Last Judgment*, like Yeats, is his sense of living in the age of the trembling of the veil, like Lawrence, re-writing *Apocalypse*, like Eliot, deploying apocalyptic imagery at the climax to 'Little

Gidding' - in these ways, mediated through their profoundly different personalities, Powys and Golding are inheritors of the visionary tradition.

In some ways my discussion of the visionary, particularly as it impinges on the novel, bears comparison with Miriam Allott's identification of the novelist as 'prophet'.¹ In this sense the visionary writer is perhaps more familiar in other literary cultures - consider Dostoevsky or Melville, perhaps - but it should be evident, I hope, that it is possible to speak of a 'visionary tradition' in English literature, and even in the English novel. The greater force of that tradition is felt in poetry: Blake, Wordsworth, Clare, Palmer, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, to Hughes. But, brooding and bleak in broad world-view, irradiated by the sudden eruption of the flaring visionary light, it is not too implausible to trace a connecting thread through Emily Bronte, Hardy, Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce (to an extent), Powys, to Fowles, Garner and Golding.

II

The foregoing discussion provides a context in which the work of Powys and Golding can be seen to fit. The aim of this thesis is to explore the similar ways in which these two writers articulate shared ideas, and then transform them into fiction. It is, I would hasten to add, a 'parallel' study, not a 'comparative' one. I am very aware of the profound differences between Powys and Golding. I am emphatically not trying to prove 'sameness', as though Powys and Golding were simply two manifestations of the Platonic Idea of the visionary novelist. Nor am I trying to prove 'influence', as though Golding were responding to or reacting to the earlier work of Powys. Golding's novels have suffered too

¹See her extremely useful discussion in *Novelists on the Novel*, pp. 165-6.

much from this kind of reductive approach to criticism, with its source-spotting and ur-textural analysis. There is no evidence that Golding has ever read Powys: there are no references in interviews or essays, no allusions in the fiction.

Indeed both writers' work suggests their own powerful individuality. Powys' massive output is simply undeniably (often frustratingly) there: it is an immense achievement in every way. One can trace formative influences easily enough, through the reiterated enthusiasms Powys never tired of expressing: Wordsworth and Keats, Pater and Poe, Hardy and Dostoievsky, Rabelais, Laotze, Dickens, and so on. Yet though these enthusiasms and obsessions place him squarely in the visionary context I have just been surveying, he is his own man. The speculations and philosophies of his non-fiction, the sprawling, rambling, digressive novels - they are the product of an individual and inimitable genius. If one is looking for a closer comparison, the search is best conducted, I would suggest, beyond the confines of literature, in the painting of Stanley Spencer and the music of Arnold Bax. A detailed study of such analogies, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Golding's too, is an individual voice in contemporary literature. Of course, for the early novels, there are the 'source' texts, *The Coral Island*, the *Outline of History*, *Pincher Martin* O.D. by 'Taffrail' or *Robinson Crusoe*. More consistently, as Golding has frequently pointed out, there is the shaping influence of Greek tragedy. Yet Golding's work is as unlike that of any of his contemporaries as Powys' was of his.

So, then, I am making a case for the parallel study of two defiantly individual practitioners of the art of novel-writing, whose work nevertheless displays enough shared visionary sensibility for the yoking together to be powerfully mutually illuminating. For each author I have chosen seven areas of analysis which seem to encompass the various

manifestations of 'the visionary element' as it can be identified in the writing, non-fiction as well as novels, of both men. Those areas are:

- i) a study of autobiographical detail, and the use which both writers make of it;
- ii) a detailed anatomy of man, as the species is seen by Powys and Golding;
- iii) an analysis of place, and the visionary significance of particular localities;
- iv) an examination of each writer's social perspective;
- v) a critique of their aesthetic and novelistic theories;
- vi) a broader survey of the 'world view' of the two authors;
- vii) an exploration of the visionary moments evoked by both men, and an assessment of the value of such moments in their work.

It is, of course, a novelist's truism that a novel both does and does not come out of life. In the case of Powys and Golding, personal history undergoes a kind of metamorphosis, a mythologising process. It is more marked in Powys' work: the novels are full of self-portraits, and portraits of his close family. What both novelists share is the contradictory tension between this patternmaking instinct, that shapes autobiographical detail into mythic meaning, and a recognition of patternlessness in personal history and character. It is a very fruitful tension, generating Richard Storm, Wolf Solent, John Crow, Dud No-man, Pincher Martin, Sammy Mountjoy, Oliver, Sim Goodchild, Edwin Bell and, perversely, Wilf Barclay.

These characters share those aspects of the human condition central to almost all visionary thought - they see themselves as fragmented, partitioned, divided within. Both novelists emphasise man's isolation, his sense of existing at the 'centre' of a composite being, dominated by a ravaging ego. There is a difference here - Powys advocates the cultivation

of will as a means of defying the adverse circumstances of existence, where Golding proposes a greater passivity and selflessness - but on the consequences of this state of fragmentation they are agreed. These are the feelings of shame, self-loathing, fear and loneliness, leading to the exploitation of others (especially by sexual means) and the urge towards possessiveness.

There are, however, for both novelists, ways of escape from this cycle of despairing emotions. Both acknowledge the role of humour, and the power of man's creative imagination. Both are aware of the potential fruitfulness of cultivating a sensual sensitivity, though Powys undoubtedly takes this to greater, and paradoxically more sterile, extremes. Finally, though the nature of the 'divine' in man is differently perceived by both men, there is nevertheless an understanding of the need to develop this visionary channel of perception if fulfilment is to be achieved.

I have already remarked on the response of both novelists to the locally numinous, and a detailed study of the impact of place on their thought bears this out. For both, certain places have an inherent elementalism, a 'mana'. Both view the earth's surface as a palimpsest, a rich, multi-layered patchwork of living communication. Both have particular localities (Dorset and Wales, Wiltshire and the Nile delta) that are heavy with profound personal significance in this respect.

Just as the visionary novelist sees levels of existence within man, so Powys and Golding display visionary characteristics in perceiving and depicting a highly stratified society. Both novelists are profoundly class-conscious, and guilty about their place and role in this hierarchy. Both struggle to integrate individual vision within a framework of social responsibility. Interestingly this leads them in opposing directions: Golding's social perspective in his novels becomes more complex as his

certainty about the limits of individual responsibility becomes more tentative; Powys' early work, peaking at *A Glastonbury Romance*, is relatively subtle and panoramic in social range, after which there is a long process of gradual retreat into fantasy worlds in which an idiosyncratic individual vision expands at the expense of social precision.

Given the enormous disparity in volume between Powys' output and Golding's (measured either in total or in terms of the length of individual works) one would expect the greatest divergence between the two authors to be found in their comments on the theory and their practice of writing. Golding's novels are notable for their taut precision: only *The Paper Men* and possibly *The Pyramid* could be said to ramble, and their tendency towards digression and incoherence is as nothing beside Powys' fictions. Likewise Golding's essays may seem quaintly belletristic at times, but even the most dogmatic of pieces in *A Moving Target* can scarcely be called opinionated when set against the torrential rhetoric of Powys' 'tracts for the times'. Nevertheless, common visionary ground is to be found: in both writers' view of their art as purgative, potentially restorative; in their realisation that it is only through the 'letting go' of authorial control that visionary moments take on their own life and power; ultimately, in their cultivation of these moments as the peak experiences of their fiction, when narrative climaxes are infused with a sustained freight of imagery and a hypnotically eloquent and reiterated vocabulary.

For both Powys and Golding, the beliefs and philosophies discussed so far add up to broad 'world views' of striking similarity. Both conceive of levels or layers of existence within and beyond this earthly plane. Powys proposes a 'multiverse', Golding parallel universes. Golding sees 'split' worlds of matter and spirit, and looks for 'bridges' to unite them; Powys

similarly sees 'duality' and aspires towards a quasi-Wordsworthian wholeness. Both sense a world in flux, evoke a Heraclitan mutability. Both assent to a Golden Age, and look forward to a similar paradisaal state. In this context, both demonstrate the visionary's apocalyptic imagination. Both stand at odds with the 'modern' world, in particular as it manifests itself in a trust in rationalism, intellectualism, science. Instead Powys and Golding stand by an essentially religious (though fluidly uncommitted) world view, and both find a close link between religious and sexual impulses. In the last analysis, both intuit meaning and purpose, in life as in fiction, in moments of vision.

In exploring visionary experiences, Powys and Golding take an essentially ritualistic view of human existence. Both see as a prerequisite an attitude of mind and spirit focused on something akin to prayer, broadly emphasising humility, silence, patience and faith. Nevertheless, for both writers, vision is invasive and unpredictable, revolutionary and overwhelming at the moment of revelation. Though the potential for visionary awareness is in principle in all men, Golding and Powys see a special sensitivity in artists, in the paradoxical similarities of the genius and the fool, and especially in the saint or 'Christ' figure. Such recipients of vision seem, both writers suggest, more aware of the essential mystery of vision - the mysterious is a quality repeatedly noted as vision impinges. Visionary moments themselves are articulated in terms of dance, music and colours. Finally Powys and Golding alike see the outworking of visionary insight as extremely complex. Rarely is it offered as a clear moral imperative capable of translation into simple direct action. More often it is painful, seemingly ambiguous or contradictory, but inescapably necessary and ultimately transfiguring.

III

The remainder of this thesis is drawn up in two mirrored halves. Chapters Two and Five are constructed in parallel. They attempt to provide a coherent interpretation of the diverse and often fragmentary non-fiction of the two writers. Powys' non-fiction has received passing attention from his critics, but apart from essays on individual texts, such as *The Complex Vision* or the *Autobiography*, an attempt to synthesise the content of so much of the non-fiction within the framework of a single essay has never been made. Golding's non-fiction has received even less attention, and Chapter Five makes, I believe, a major contribution to Golding scholarship in drawing together for the first time the diverse threads of Golding's increasingly substantial non-fiction, which, in particular, powerfully illuminates the later novels.

Chapters Three and Four take up the ideas and arguments of the second chapter, endeavouring to show how Powys' vision is translated into his fictional world. The main impetus behind the third chapter was a desire to discuss *After My Fashion* which (at the time of writing) was, in terms of criticism, virgin territory. I include with it an examination of the other early novels, with the intention of illustrating how Powys' search for a fictional embodiment of his metaphysic began to take shape. Despite the claims some critics have made for *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*, I am convinced that the four 'Wessex' novels stand as the peak of Powys' fiction, and Chapter Four, again based on the principles revealed in Chapter Two, offers an over-view of what I take to be the main achievements of the four novels under discussion.

My approach to Golding's fiction has been rather different. On the one hand I have been anxious to avoid the redundant repetition of the insights of other critics, and Golding's first five novels have been very

thoroughly mapped, charted, probed and otherwise scrutinised, as recent bibliographies show. Most of this criticism is ephemeral: retain the volumes by Gregor and Kinkead Weekes and Virginia Tiger, and a handful of essays, and the rest can be disposed of. On the other hand, Golding's recent fertile burst of fictional creativity demands comment.¹ *Darkness Visible*, I am convinced, is a major (perhaps the major) Golding fiction. I have departed from the structural format of my other chapters to deal more adequately with that novel's intricacies on their own terms, but the same principles are affirmed in my conclusions about that novel's meaning and vision. Finally, Chapter Seven looks at the other later fiction. Given Golding's recent relaxed and humorous tone in *Rites of Passage* and *The Paper Men*, it seemed appropriate to include some discussion of that earlier, critically neglected comic fiction, *The Pyramid*. These three novels develop Golding's vision, and his fictional technique, in genial but subtle ways, from the earlier climax of *The Spire*, and taken in conjunction with *Darkness Visible* they demonstrate that the visionary novel, in Golding's hands, continues to flourish.

¹Again, at the time of writing, there was virtually none of this around, but see the Note to my Bibliography.

Chapter Two

Powys: The Non-Fiction

*"I regard myself as a voice crying in the wilderness"*¹

Powys considered that his "writings - novels and all - are simply so much propaganda for my philosophy of life."² Elsewhere, his non-fictional works are characterised as "lay-sermons", in explicit recognition of his desire to preach.³ Yet his preaching is both voluble and inarticulate, naive and obscure, committed and self-deprecating. He sees himself as a prophet and a clown.

His sermons fall into a number of overlapping categories. He wrote one straight philosophical treatise, **The Complex Vision**, a work of apparent high seriousness and considerable self-restraint.⁴ Later came a long series of more personal meditations, rambling soliloquies on aspects of Powys' own beliefs.⁵ Powys also produced several volumes of literary criticism, which, owing to his highly personalised and idiosyncratic approach to this activity, reveal much more about Powys than his subjects. Finally, he eloquently mythologised his own first sixty years in the superb **Autobiography**: as a work which purports to give the facts of Powys' life, it conceals easily as much as it reveals, but as a creative application of his philosophy of life to his own favourite subject, it is vital to any understanding of Powys' personal vision.

¹Autobiography, p.225.

²Autobiography, p. 641.

³See the 'Preface' (1953) to **A Glastonbury Romance**, p. xiv.

⁴However, in a letter to his brother Llewelyn (October 1924), he referred to it as "that scholastic compendium of hawering". (See **Letters to His Brother Llewelyn**, Vol. 1, p. 356.)

⁵Of these, the most important are **In Defence of Sensuality** (1930), **The Art of Happiness** (1935), **Mortal Strife** (1942), **Obstinate Cymric** (1947) and **In Spite Of** (1953). These works are spontaneous, unguarded and repetitive. **The Times Literary Supplement**, reviewing **The Art of Happiness** in 1935 (p. 629), commented with consummate tact: "Mr Powys believes that a good thing cannot be repeated too often".

In *Mortal Strife* (p. 7) Powys wrote that practising a philosophy is not a matter of theory but of continuity. The works considered in this chapter display a continuous reworking of Powys' own complex vision, from which a total (though of necessity never totally finished) perspective can be drawn. For Powys, vision was always moving, always changing. The attempt, in *The Complex Vision*, to reach conclusions, led to the tantalising escape of the essence of vision from the barriers of definition that Powys erected around it. Ultimately, like all visionaries, he strives to describe the indescribable.

I

*"Derbyshire born Derbyshire bred strong in the arm and weak in the head."*¹

From his own life, and from what must by any standards be seen as a quite remarkable family background, Powys developed the view of life that permeates all his writing. Members of his family, and always Powys himself, are easily recognisable in the novels. What is interesting is the way in which his father and brothers are reduced in his fiction to complementary or contradictory attitudes. Even in such seemingly informal circumstances as family letters, Powys reveals an urge to classify or define members of his family by such an approach.² This tendency to categorise is held in tension by an unwillingness to define himself except in terms of the utmost fluidity. "My father was a man of rock. I am a worshipper of the wind," wrote Powys in the *Autobiography* (529). In the early pages of the book, his father looms solidly, embodying 'incarnate

¹From a letter to Derek Langridge (4/11/54), quoted in Langridge, *John Cowper Powys*, p. 184.

²See, for example, the letter to Littleton Powys (9/1/51) which compares "the entirely personal and private attitude of each one of us to Our Maker". Quoted in ed. Humfrey, *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, p. 270.

omniscience' as overwhelmingly as does Golding's father in *The Hot Gates*. He remains static, a man of rock. Powys himself melts, flows, is a shapeshifter: "I have never liked being held, not even by the wisest and most affectionate of human hands. I am like the wind. I have to blow where I list."¹ Even more revealingly, in a letter to Louis Wilkinson, he writes: "The rapidity of my movements gives a false impression of subtlety. I am an *acrobat!* as well as a *Medium!*"²

This perhaps suggests that Powys strove not to commit himself, but, on the contrary, he was only too willing to accept the challenge. In these moments he is too obviously self-deprecating, or naively melodramatic. The long and moody self-portrait in *Confessions* (p. 41) is a good example. It exudes the tortured and morbid sensibility of 1890's, excessively 'literary' despair. However, in the light of his later work, this book should not be taken too seriously: it is the portrait of an actor posing for a portrait of an artist as a young aesthete. Powys remained a writer of unreliable memoirs not because of undue reticence (for example, over women in the *Autobiography*),³ but out of a desire to play as many parts as possible, as a means of camouflage or self-defence.⁴

¹*Autobiography*, p. 529.

²In a letter dated 19/2/46. See the *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson, 1935-56*, p. 197.

³See, for example, the letters to his sister Marian (of 14/8/33, quoted on p. xix of the Picador edition of the *Autobiography*) and especially to Theodore (of 4/8/33, quoted in ed. Humfrey, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 337).

⁴The *Autobiography* attests to this, as do many letters. Naturally, when Powys claims to be acting in order to fool or escape from others, the very claims themselves may be part of the act. Nevertheless, some expressions of this fear are undoubtedly genuine: see, for example, the letter to Louis Wilkinson of 21/1/46, and, in more lighthearted terms, that of 19/4/47 (both quoted in *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, pp. 194, 225).

Many critics see in Powys' role-playing and self-caricature a clue to the practical outworkings of his philosophy.¹ Counselling his readers to "Enjoy - Defy - Forget",² Powys commends stoical endurance in the face of suffering, but prefers escape and the abandonment of all but the most fundamental responsibilities. The *Autobiography* celebrates this, blending grandiose claims for Powys' own genius with self-mocking confessions of charlatantry. As Hooker sympathetically observes, "Without his absurdities Powys would be ridiculous; with them he is both very human and a great liberator".³

This goes to the root of the visionary imagination. Powys believed passionately, yet it was only vivisection that he treated as a personal issue.⁴ Accepting the multiplicity of human apprehensions, he blended his own visionary convictions with an almost militant self-effacement. Transcending this was his insight into the redemptive power of the imagination - for which Powys adopted the role of Taliessin as his own.⁵ Thus, to counteract socially-conditioned points of view, Powys advocates the imaginative leap into the visionary element, bringing back into this earthbound world sustaining glimpses of the complex vision that can transform the relationship between the individual consciousness and its hitherto fragmented and multi-layered environment. To this end Powys lived as well as wrote, at once awesome and absurd, dedicated to his complex vision.

¹Notably Jeremy Hooker (see 'A Touch of the Caricature' in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 47-56), but there are useful references too in Chapter 1 of Glen Cavaliero's *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, and Belinda Humfrey's 'Introduction' to *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*.

²See *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 277, and elsewhere.

³*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 53.

⁴The contrast with, say, Lawrence's personal animosities is acute, considering their remarkably similar views on certain subjects.

⁵The significance of the myth of Taliessin is explained by Hooker, in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 51.

II

"We are not fish; we are not foxes; we are not sheep. We are worse. We are men."¹

Achieved vision is a momentary coming together. By definition, most of life is not passed in that state. Powys, like other visionary writers, seeks a model which will explain not only how this state can be rediscovered, but also how man can be defined in its absence. Traditionally, this involves a recognition of the existence of sin, or at least an explanation of the fragmented consciousness which limits ordinary human perception. Where Golding is content to accept a framework which recognises inherent evil in humanity, Powys is troubled by a desire to deny the existence of original sin² while at the same time recognising the fruits of that concept. The results are apt to be complicated: "When we approach such complicated, treacherous and inflammable material as our attitude to ourselves the safest course is to combine savage self-laceration with a certain profane and blasphemous and humorous suspicion of all consecrated and sanctified remorse."³

Powys begins, as do most visionary writers,⁴ with the language of fragmentation. The early *Confessions* describe man as "a loosely-tied knot of sense and mind and fancy." (31) The more mature work, notably *The Complex Vision*, takes this up. Powys breaks down sentient humanity into its constituent parts: "reason, self-consciousness, will, the aesthetic sense, or 'taste', imagination, memory, conscience, sensation, instinct, intuition and emotion." (20) Even this does not reach to the roots of the issue. Inside everything else there is the essence of self:

¹In *Defence of Sensuality*, p. 80.

²See, for example, *Rabelais*, pp. 337-8.

³*Mortal Strife*, p. 144.

⁴Cf. Golding (see Chapter 5), Lawrence in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and elsewhere, Conrad's 'Prefaces' to his novels, etc.

"Whatever this 'something' may be which is the centre and core of our living personality, it must at least be a definite irreducible 'monad', 'something' that cannot be resolved into anything else." ¹

Powys exploits this concept usefully in his defence of stubborn individualism, which he extols *In Spite Of* all opposition. But here, the tidy schematism begins to break down. Powys is attached to the inviolable concept of self in spite of the fact that he actively preaches the loss of that self in order to attain vision. He celebrates the continued existence of the adult "I am I"² or "Ichthyosaurus-ego"³ in (usually) splendid isolation.⁴

In all this Powys shows a somewhat less than visionary attachment to the will. In *The Art of Happiness* the ultimate self-defence is an act of willed defiance. *In Spite Of* reveals a clear contrast between, say, Golding and Powys on the matter. Powys' aim is to cultivate the will until it has total control of the personality - as in this whole business of "forcing oneself to enjoy" every circumstance of life. For Golding, the will indeed feeds the self, but in so doing it abuses others.

However, once more, the theory is rendered more complex by a very visionary duality in operation at this heart of things. Within the personality, this unresolvable something, there is the same duality, the same Empedoclean war of love and malice, as is found beyond the boundary of the self.⁵ To arrive at this judgment, Powys makes conscious use of

¹*The Complex Vision*, p. 75. This image is used not only in Powys' fiction (*Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 381), but is reproduced in exactly the same sense by Golding (in *Pincher Martin* and elsewhere).

²*The Complex Vision*, p. 24.

³*In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 33-5, 243-4, etc.

⁴*In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 7, 9, etc. Note also *In Spite Of*, p. 239: "There is only you and the universe. There is only you against the universe. Therefore fight!"

⁵See *The Complex Vision*, pp. 34-6; *In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 42, 90; *The Art of Happiness*, p. 6, etc.

irrationality, to such an extent that reasoned discourse is not only frowned upon but is positively discouraged.¹ This makes studied examination of his 'arguments' rather difficult, as Powys himself acknowledged.² 'Duality' is not only the subject of his work: it is exhibited in its very substance. We can observe what Powys has to say, but there is no framework within which we can ask **how he knows** what he knows, for his work is defiantly solipsistic.

So then, there is fragmentation within the self, as well as between the self and its surroundings. Powys, like Golding, Lawrence and Dostoievsky, concentrates on those emotions which are the product of this 'fallen' state: shame, possessiveness, self-loathing, guilt, sexual exploitation. The **Autobiography** lays bare the neuroses of sexual insecurity, and its attendant physical horrors (pp. 222-3). Adulthood brought the burning embarrassment of shame, deepening into guilt.³ The recurrent impression is of Powys obsessed by the very sexuality that most threatened the existence of his life-illusion.

Yet he strove to articulate a vision of unity out of this duality, a unity that would take account of the contradictions. In relation to his view of man, this meant offering a creative tension rather than a synthesis of opposites. According to **The Complex Vision** the struggle can never be resolved, because existence is only thinkable in terms of conflict.⁴ Therefore love must be continually in the process of overcoming

¹See **The Complex Vision**, pp. 10, 12, etc. This distrust of rationality runs throughout Powys' work - see, for example, the defence of conscious irrationality in **In Defence of Sensuality**, p. 10, and the rather more eccentric defence of madness in **In Spite Of**, pp. 132, 151, etc.

²For example, in the letter to Louis Wilkinson (5/10/44), on his "absolutely irresponsible and unscrupulous" acceptance of chance and illogicality in the writing of his non-fiction as well as his novels. (See **Letters to Louis Wilkinson**, p. 160.)

³**Autobiography**, pp. 79, 191, 495, 628-9.

⁴See pp. 23, 195, 280, etc.

malice, but must never finally overcome it. To achieve this creative tension Powys advocated the exercise of "imaginative reason",¹ an activity as satisfactorily unsuited to explanation (since, in the terms outlined above, it would then cease to exist) as Powys' much vaunted lecturing style based on "Dithyrambic Analysis".² If the struggle was to be resolved at all, it was only in terms of arbitrary images: the drop of perspiration in *Mortal Strife* (p. 88) or the rising and falling telegraph wires in the *Autobiography* (p. 17). In neither case does the image bear a sustained freight of meaning, as this would give too clear an impression of systematic thought, which Powys wished at all costs to avoid.

Nevertheless, certain human characteristics are repeatedly stressed. One is to surrender to moments of intense perception, made more positive on Powys' part by a willed imagining and active contemplation of that moment. This Keatsian sensationalism³ is seen by Powys as a merging of the self in the "not-self" without any dangerous loss of personality.⁴ Like Lawrence in *The Rainbow*, describing the joining of two personalities in sexual union as the building of a new thing (imaged as an arch) in which the individuality of both participants is retained, Powys stressed identification without dissolution. However, since in Powys' actively animistic universe this mysterious rapport existed with all creation, this visionary potential could be exploited at all times and in all places. Hence Powys' most intense moments of vision (described in the *Autobiography*) occur on seashores or on walls.

¹In *The Complex Vision*, p. xix.

²In the *Autobiography*, pp. 285-8, and elsewhere.

³Commented on by Belinda Humfrey (in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 19) and articulated by Powys in *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 88.

⁴This is lyrically evoked, in the rhetoric of high romanticism, in *The Complex Vision*, pp. xv-xvi.

Powys goes much further than other visionary writers in advocating this kind of vegetative sensationalism. Of course, there are moments of valuable purely human identification,¹ but Powys' preferred experience is of a kind of erotic vegetative embrace,² characterised by a "sinking back" or a "lying back" onto this sentient "world-stuff". But though it is described in the language of passivity, it is achieved by the willed contemplation referred to above. The key text explaining the working of this activity is the *Autobiography*, in which Powys describes in terms of his own behaviour this joint action of the imagination and the will to half-perceive and half-create 'reality'.³

In concluding this anatomy of humanity as perceived by Powys, particular note should be taken of the function of memory in storing and subsequently recreating these visionary moments. Memory is significant in two ways: as a means of ordering experience, after the fashion of traditional Romantic thought; and, in a quasi-Jungian sense, as a reservoir of the 'collective unconscious'. Powys, like all visionaries, has an image of a 'Golden Age' in which things simply existed, in an undifferentiated continuity. For Powys, this was the Saturnian period, and as with other paradisaic states, it awaits rediscovery by the visionary. Normally, however, things are fragmented, but at certain epiphanic moments, the lost unity is rediscovered. This is the "eternal vision"⁴ - upon the memory of which, according to Powys, our true perceptions of 'reality' should be built.⁵ The connections with diverse literary thinkers,

¹In, for example, the *Autobiography*, pp. 168-9.

²There are many examples in Powys' non-fiction, ranging from the early *Confessions* (pp. 170-1) through to *In Spite Of* (pp. 91, 198).

³The idea was first proposed in *The Complex Vision*, but finds personal expression in the *Autobiography*, pp. 359-61, and (in what may be regarded as the archetypal Powysian sentence) in a letter to Louis Wilkinson (of 12/1/41) in *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p. 88.

⁴See *The Complex Vision*, p.viii.

⁵Powys is astonishingly like Golding here - cf. his dissection of childhood memories in the *Autobiography* (pp. 36-7) with Golding's picture of Sammy in *Free Fall*.

from Blake and Wordsworth through to Proust, help place Powys in the context of tradition, but Powys' individual cosmology precludes any sense of metaphysical development, based on this transcendent vision. Nevertheless, as Cavaliero notes,¹ the cultivation of these moments is the key to happiness. Here, the dim 'race-memories' come flooding back in the Powysian "direct embrace of life",² memories that, for Powys, unite human with sub-human and super-human life.

III

"Just treat this bloody West Country and its Rampant Regionalisms to a little Classic Universalism!"³

From Romantic tradition, and especially from Wordsworth,⁴ Powys took the concept of Nature as the shaping force of consciousness. But much of his thought was dominated not by the natural world in the abstract, but by a sense of the locally numinous. Here, as A.S. Byatt notes in a perceptive review⁵ he joins "the local British-visionary tradition", a tradition which includes Golding, Lawrence, Hughes, Garner, as well as poets and painters such as Clare, Palmer and Spencer. His non-fiction repeatedly shows the influence of place, and the linked theme of residual racial memory in connection with particular places, on the development of human nature.

In his time, Powys was known as a 'regional' writer in both Wessex and Wales. In later life, as the pieces in *Obstinate Cymric* show, he took the Welsh tradition (despite his dubious historical claim to find his

¹John Cowper Powys: *Novelist*, pp. 9-10.

²See *In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 158, 169.

³*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p. 225.

⁴Especially the early books of *The Prelude*. A clear connection is discernible between this work and the *Autobiography*, whose first few chapters depict the growth of a poet's mind under the influence of the environment.

⁵*The Times*, 13/8/81.

roots there) very seriously, while he mocked (see the quotation heading this section) his Wessex connections. It is possible to show that his less historically and geographically accurate view of Wales was exploited because it gave him greater freedom to invent it anew as an idealised 'landscape of the mind'.¹

Above all else, landscape is not passive; it communicates eloquently. In part, this is simply the product of Powys' late Romantic sensibility, which saw all appearance as though burdened with lyrical emotion.² Yet, through the mists of "lonely" "deserted" "melancholy" landscapes, there emerges a special predilection for certain types of location suited to definite transmissions of emotion: hilltops, damp and marshy lowlands, barren moorlands, ponds and dense forests.³ Choosing just one to analyse in detail, seashores are particularly important in Powys' mythology. Weymouth seashore provided Powys with one of his first visionary experiences,⁴ and was the setting to which he returned in *Weymouth Sands*, in which he makes much out of the borderland of sand and sea, and of the significance of wet and dry sand. Undoubtedly, it was the fact that this interface was a living margin that attracted Powys, with its connotations of balance and poise between states, therefore being neither one thing nor the other. He was attracted to Conrad's work for this reason,⁵ and in his own life, according to the *Autobiography*, it came to be part of him (p. 157). What began as a vividly apprehended object becomes a living metaphor: "I have always been one for margins, for edges, borders and

¹This is evident in the declining physical reality of landscape in *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*, when compared to the Wessex novels. The contrast is fruitfully considered by Roland Mathias (in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 238-45).

²My study of the novels will show this clearly. In the non-fiction, a good example is the torrential evocation of landscape in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (see *Suspended Judgments*, especially pp. 316-7).

³References can be found throughout his work, but especially in the *Confessions*, the *Autobiography*, *In Defence of Sensuality* and *The Art of Happiness*.

⁴*Autobiography*, p. 29.

⁵See *Suspended Judgments*, p. 344.

thresholds." (328).

This vibrant interdependence of perceiver and perceived is given extra importance in Powys' thought by the animist or elemental nature of his universe. It is a habit of mind he observes in other authors¹ and defends vigorously in his own work. The 'Preface' to **A Glastonbury Romance** describes the book as "the effect of a particular legend, a special myth, a unique tradition, from the remotest past in human history, upon a particular spot on the surface of this planet." (xi) Glastonbury Tor is not just the setting: it participates in the action. The same is true of Weymouth, Maiden Castle, and so on. The landscape has a sentient existence of its own, and at the same time is it 'charged' with association. (Powys is always careful not to commit himself to one explanation exclusively.)

I commented above on the interconnection of race and place. This occupied Powys for some time in his writing. His very early work (such as **The Menace of German Culture**) draws explicit parallels between, for example, the German land, its people and its "over-soul", and the Russian equivalents. There is an instructive comparison to be made with Eliot's concept of a "mind of Europe", formulated at around the same time.² This work makes broad appeals about national character, formulated in terms of "soil" and "tradition", very often with no real basis in historical or geographical truth.³ Of course, this book was written during the war, and it makes ready use of the crude national fervour evoked at the time, down to the malignantly glowering German military figure on the front cover. **Mortal Strife** (1942) was written at a similar time of national crisis, but

¹In **Visions and Revisions**, Powys notes this quality in Dickens (pp. 96-101) and Hardy (pp. 165-8).

²In fact, Powys still thought in such terms in 1953 - see the 'Preface' to **A Glastonbury Romance**, p. ix.

³For example the lyrical picture of 'Russia' (**The Menace of German Culture**, p. 75).

this time Powys' arguments about race and place are fused more carefully into his overall argument.¹ His writing in this context reveals all of the visionary's tendency to think in abstract categories (cf. his analysis of his family, above), in sharp contrast to his fluid and inconsistent view of himself.² In fact, his inclinations in these matters were not always consistent - *Mortal Strife* supports the 'mixed' nature of the English race against the Aryan purity of the regimented Germans; less than five years later, in *Obstinate Cymric*, he is extolling Welsh racial purity!³ Nevertheless, the patterns can be easily distinguished, and point to an active and meaningful relationship between man and the environment.

IV

"I'd like my next non-fiction Tract for the Times to be on class - 'Class & how to destroy it in Oneself!'"⁴

The visionary novelist is traditionally committed to the championship of the individual and his instinctual return to the roots of the Golden Age in man, against the communal pressures of modernised, mechanised society. Powys' writing, no less than that of, for example, Lawrence, was a personal crusade against a machine-dominated society. Beneath the nationalistic rhetoric of *The Menace of German Culture*, Powys sees the

¹See pp. 9-15, but especially p. 9, in which the war is described as "a struggle for the mastery of a large portion of the earth between an old, slowly-evolved, complicated system of life and a new oppressively-organised, logically rounded-off system of life".

²These temperamental oppositions appear in his fiction too as national characteristics - for example in *Morwyn*, which contrasts the "mystical agitation" of the Welsh with the stoical, obstinately humorous and hopeful Greeks. This is reminiscent of Golding's similar use of national types (see Chapter 5).

³Contrast *Mortal Strife* (pp. 12-15) with Chapters 3, 5 and 6 of *Obstinate Cymric*.

⁴Letters to Louis Wilkinson, p. 208.

social consequences of conflicting visions: his fundamental objection to the German "Idea" is that it turns races into a machine,¹ in contrast with the Russian "Soul".²

This tendency to settle for broad national generalities is mirrored in his approach to class differences within a given society. His social analysis is crude: he exploits the visionary's inclination to classify and stratify in such a way as to indicate a very naive approach to society and to class differences. Hooker³ laments Powys' inability to set against each other in a convincing manner the major ideologies of his day: "He is almost totally unconvincing, a manipulator of large ideas which solidify his very acute intelligence into a number of static poses." The embarrassing stream of Communists and Anarchists who populate the fringes of his major novels testifies to the truth of that, but even his theoretical and philosophical work succumbs to this rigid and clumsy method of social commentary. His fondness for "the idea of Communism",⁴ based largely on an association of malice with the impulse to own private property, remains untainted by any reference to the social and political realities of his age. Elsewhere, he describes his personal view of property as though he were both an anarchist and a communist⁵ which strengthens the impression that he is a fervent individualist living in and writing about a society that was losing touch with such individualism.⁶

¹"A living and formidable organism, a terrific and irresistible machine" is how he describes the German state (*The Menace of German Culture*, p. 24).

²"A freer, more organic, more spontaneous, more popular spirit." (*The Menace of German Culture*, p. 30).

³*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 50.

⁴See *The Complex Vision*, p. xix and Chapter 14.

⁵See his *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, especially pp. 55-6, 208.

⁶It is possible to regard his social and political confusions as the result of the disappearance of the social class from which he came. He was a 'gentleman', of very limited independent means, who eked out a living by teaching or private tutoring, combining a life of great learning with one of often extreme poverty. Hence the social displacement and the consequent philosophy of intense individualism, upon which these grand social gospels sat very uneasily.

To such a man, the distinctions of class were at once essential and tediously irrelevant to the real business of life. They were essential in that Powys regarded class, and especially consciousness of engendered inferiority, as one of the basic hindrances to his gospel of enjoyment.¹ Yet, because Powys' main argument against the existence of class-induced frustration is precisely this turning inward and contemplative self-delusion observed above, social conditions should become irrelevant. The fact that these conditions do not disappear from Powys' argument implies that in his writing insight gives way all too easily to caricature. Therefore, in the novels and elsewhere, the end product is 'rigged', as a direct consequence of the fact that Powys tries to impose a model of a pre-industrial culture (his Saturnian age of gold) onto the contemporary world of telegrams and anger.

In the end, because of his extreme individualism, the social aspects of Powys' vision appear to be unsatisfactorily half-baked. His belief in Progress appears shallow and inconsistent, an assumption that the Aquarian age² will dawn painlessly, of its own accord, bringing back the 'Golden Age' values, without any serious consideration of how such a world relates to the present one. Out of the pain of reconciling the two, Golding has observed that he is "a cosmic optimist and a universal pessimist"³ - Powys does not make such a distinction.

V

"My grand writing motto is: The More the Better."⁴

Powys' all-embracing vision, his enthusiasm for unsystematic thought,

¹See Chapter 6 of *In Spite Of*, and, for practical illustrations, pp. 495-7 of the *Autobiography*.

²See the essay 'Pair Dadeni' in *Obstinate Cymric*.

³*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 11.

⁴*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 28/8/44, p. 155.

and his essentially 'Romantic' view of creativity (especially on the subject of the superiority of Aeolian spontaneity over formal composition) can all be seen to have a direct influence on his discussion of the nature of art, and particularly writing, in relation to his philosophical ideas studied thus far. His philosophy and criticism, quite as much as his novels, embody structurally the passionate formlessness of his argument. It is this that makes his non-fiction difficult to read, and even more difficult to criticise: the volatile unpredictability which could be interpreted as being thematically meaningful in a novel is surprising in genres which normally rely on clarity and sequentially-ordered thought in order to persuade the reader. Powys is willing to grasp the nettle of his convictions.¹

There is much evidence to support the view that Powys regarded writing, and all creativity, as something that should take place at moments of great inspiration, during which the artist should be a 'medium',² a channel through which the inspiration could flow. Thus, the act of creation is both spontaneous and revelatory.³ Moreover, this

¹Of course, this argument should not be subjected to a 'reductio ad absurdum'. Powys' work is not literally formless, and indeed, taken overall, has themes which recur fairly consistently. But time and again his writing is unargued, spontaneous, digressive - consciously or unconsciously mirroring his subject - and, even in works like *The Complex Vision*, the top-dressing of 'therefores' and 'thusers' cannot disguise the consistent inconsequentiality of the text.

²This is one of Powys' favourite words to describe the creative process. As for *Dud No-man* in *Maiden Castle*, the term retains its occult senses in Powys' work. See the *Autobiography* and the *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, and, for a discussion of Powys' mediumship in writing, Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* and Belinda Humfrey's 'Introduction' to the *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 29-30.

³See the *Autobiography*, pp. 225-6, and *Obstinate Cymric*, pp. 35, 113-23. This last reference, to the essay 'The Simple Vision', is on the subject of Powys' critical introduction to the poetry of Huw Menai: like so much else of Powys' criticism, what is actually being described here is Powys' own approach to art and writing. For Powys' view that writing should be a revelation of something hitherto obscured, see his letter to Iorwerth C. Peate (*John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54*, p. 35).

creation is both a setting forth to something new and a return to a lost 'original', in the re-illumination of a mythic pattern.¹ However, the pattern is never regarded as an external framework over which the immediate subject is stretched; rather, it is seen as emerging, as it were, organically out of the very act of creation, passing unmediated through the transparent interface of the writer's art.

This helps to explain the relationship between style and function in Powys' view of art. Style is in most cases a term of opprobrium,² implying a distortion of the 'natural' flow of the text, but Powys was of course aware, often self-mockingly, that his own style was contorted and rhetorical.³ A distinction needs to be made between precision and selection (which Powys scorned) and an unbuttoned largesse, the latter style, in Powys' terms, approaching most closely to no style at all.⁴ Powys writes under the pressure of a compulsion,⁵ but a generous compulsion.⁶

Powys' aesthetic sense was shaped under the influence of Pater,

¹See *The Complex Vision*, p. 7, and Morine Krissdottir's interpretation of the Powysian quest in *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (especially Chapters 1 and 2).

²See for example *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 113.

³There are many references to this, especially in the *Autobiography*.

⁴The quotation heading this section sums up the point. Elsewhere (in the 'Preface' to Llewelyn Powys' *A Baker's Dozen*) Powys notes that style, in the former sense, has never been his to command.

⁵See *Mortal Strife* (p. 126) and the *Autobiography* (p. 581). Powys wrote 'My Philosophy', the final essay in *Obstinate Cymric*, spontaneously in longhand, confessing to Iorwerth C. Peate (16/11/47) that this "accounts for the fact that my usual *rush of platform awen* so overwhelming as speech but so upsetting to all good craftsmanship *in style* is even more in evidence than usual!" (*Letters 1937-54*, p. 73.)

⁶The 'Preface' to *Wood and Stone* contains Powys' artistic credo as a novelist. Particularly relevant is the phrase commending "large tolerant after-thoughts" (see Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, pp. 21-2). Bernard Jones' essay 'Style and the Man' (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 149-77) discusses sensitively the relationship between creative impulse and style in Powys' work, though I would dispute his description of Powys' "Schubertian, or Brucknerian, heavenly length" (p. 152). Taking formal, structural, and indeed aesthetic, issues into consideration, I would propose 'Mahlerian' as a more appropriate adjective.

especially in its passionate obeisance to the twin goals of "beauty" and "poetry".¹ In *The Complex Vision*, the chapter 'The Nature of Art' defines "principles" upon which beauty in art may be judged, and these illuminate the Powysian technique (pp. 186-7). The immensities, physical and conceptual, of Powys' theme clearly indicate that in order to be beautiful, it is necessary to leave nothing out. Elsewhere in the chapter, he observes that "art is, and always must be, penetrated through and through by the spirit of contradiction." (163)

Hence, the philosophy of "The More the Better" unites the artistic impulse with visionary beliefs. There is little point in bewailing the absence, however frustrating the result may be, of coherence.² Powys regarded the production of every work of art as cathartic, and the act of purgation is not an orderly one.³ He enlarges on the theme in a number of letters to Louis Wilkinson, from which several points emerge: that he consciously chose never to omit anything from his work by subsequently editing it out; that "all of the talent I possess is always *digression*"; that after constructing a "very simple" scaffolding for his work (both fiction and non-fiction) "*I let the chance moment have its*

¹On Powys and Pater, see Jones (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 163-70).

²This does not mean that critics have not done so. Virtually every review of Powys' non-fiction, except those written by Wilson Knight, in the *Times Literary Supplement* laments the linguistic obscurity and structural confusion of the book under review. See, among many examples, *Suspended Judgments* (29/11/23, p. 806), *The Meaning of Culture* (3/4/30, p. 293), *The Pleasures of Literature* (12/11/38, p. 729). More frustrating, and less theoretically justifiable, are those passages in Powys' work which take refuge in his self-proclaimed ignorance at moments when some hint of coherence seems to be promised. See, for example, the anecdote of the two brothers, in *Mortal Strife*, pp. 135-9.

³See *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 24. For a discussion of Powys' work as a sublimation of this personal purgation into a universal 'mythology', see Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest*, and especially Krissdottir's *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, pp. 50-2.

way"; and that, in consequence, his work is "at the best Mediumistic, and at the worst, *both* silly and dull!"¹

These principles have important consequences for Powys' view of technique, and relate quite closely to his reverence for certain literary ancestors with whom he identifies. Broadly, he is obviously aligned with 'mystical' against 'scientific' traditions.² More particularly, he is attracted to writers and thinkers who espouse beliefs in individual spiritual illumination, especially if this is accompanied by the distancing effect of a kind of 'positive' scepticism. The most frequent objects of his worship are Shakespeare, Dostoievsky and Rabelais.³ Whereas in his criticism of Proust he uses "artist" perjoratively with reference to a primary concern with technique, he describes Shakespeare and Dostoievsky as true "artists" because their work is true to "the startling corrosive, explosive stuff of our universal experience."⁴ After **Wolf Solent** Powys turned away from the approaches of the post-Jamesian novelist⁵ to produce fictions which are strikingly contemporary as well as clearly anachronistic,⁶ in their self-conscious instability and their self-advertised fictionality, or 'writteness'.

¹See the **Letters to Louis Wilkinson**, 12/3/44; 28/8/44; 5/10/44, pp. 142-60. Cf. letters to others (such as to Iorwerth C. Peate, 16/11/47, quoted in **Review of English Literature**, January 1963, p. 40) which illustrate that this was a perennial theme, and a matter of conscious aesthetic choice.

²Krissdottir, **John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest**, pp. 20-2.

³The whole question of influences on Powys is too immense to go into here. He acknowledges Keats, Shelley, Hardy, Wordsworth and Poe in the **Autobiography** (pp. 225-8), and elsewhere Coleridge, De Quincey and Blake, especially on the subject of illumination through dream vision (see Humfrey, **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, pp. 42-3). His criticism reveals other artists whose names figure in a kind of incantatory roll-call through the texts: Homer, Pater, Whitman, Goethe, Arnold, Dickens, Nietzsche, Charlie Chaplin, El Greco. I will comment later on his talent for turning these subjects of his criticism into so many versions of himself.

⁴Quoted by Humfrey, **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, pp. 33-4.

⁵**Autobiography**, p. 544.

⁶This will emerge further when I go on to discuss his fictional technique. Meanwhile, note simply that he abandons the mimetic novel for a view of the novelist as magician (with all its connotations for the 'reality' of the perceived and invented worlds) while his models and his rhetoric hark back to the nineteenth century.

The consequence of this advocacy of authorial irresponsibility, this desire to be a magician and a clown, was that Powys lacked a thoroughly coherent aesthetic sense, and he seemed never to have thought through the formal problems that his vision generated.¹ It was not just that he remained a worshipper of colour in an age of form.² Instead, he appeared to retain a body of unexamined assumptions about the writing of fiction which survived right up until the science-fiction fantasies of his 'second childhood'. Until then, he tinkered with the 'romance' idiom inherited from a blending of Pater, Poe and Hardy without apparently noticing that it was not the sort of medium that would accommodate his vision.³

A study of his literary criticism bears out this view. Though he was an eloquent interpreter of visions as a critic, he ignored the relationship between imagination and form, which in turn led to his concentration on those aspects of his subject towards which he was himself temperamentally inclined. His view of criticism was intensely subjective: he once observed that hate and love should be the critic's only motivations.⁴ Not surprisingly, criticism on such principles denies that the head, the intellect, is capable of sensitive discrimination: hence the frequent illogicality of Powys' criticism, and its reliance on "nerves" and gut reactions.⁵ He finds a place for the weight of tradition in criticism, but only to check the wilder excesses of "taste".⁶ The final

¹See Hooker, *John Cowper Powys and David Jones*, p. 12.

²Powys proclaims this preference in the *Autobiography* several times (see pp. 225, 413, 449, 518, 559, etc.). His other prose writings equally testify to it. See, for example, *Confessions* (pp. 120, 127-8); *Dorothy M. Richardson; Visions and Revisions* (p. 134).

³I shall discuss this further in my chapters on Powys' fiction. Nowhere, in Powys' non-fiction, is there any discussion about formal questions, except for the comments to Louis Wilkinson (quoted above) about the operations of chance.

⁴*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 25/12/43, p. 131.

⁵See *Suspended Judgments* (pp. 6-9). The following is especially illuminating: "The head cannot love nor hate, it can only observe and register What we need is the head and the nerves together, playing up to one another." Throughout his work Powys is concerned to be an affective critic.

⁶In the 'Introduction' to *One Hundred Best Books*.

arbiter, though, is the critic's prowess at "conjuring": it is possible, Powys asserts, simply to know where an author's authentic voice can be heard, though it remains impossible to explain why.¹

Powys earned his living as an itinerant lecturer, and therefore as a critic of sorts, until he was almost sixty, giving his extraordinary displays of "dithyrambic analysis". In the *Autobiography* this "great new art" appears to consist of imitating the words, thoughts, gestures of his subject - becoming that subject - attaining in the end a kind of transmigration of the soul.² Whatever the case may have been on the stage, in print the converse is true, namely that the subjects of Powys' criticism become versions of Powys, unless common ground between author and subject is so difficult to find that hate takes over from love, leaving only a litany of abuse.³ Time and again, quite diverse literary figures take on the characteristics of a Powysian visionary - Dostoievsky, Rabelais, Homer, Pater, Nietzsche, Dante, William James, and so on - as Powys discovers in them aspects of his own thought. For examples of this process in action, one need only consider his discussion of Rabelais' views on sex, race, religion, humour, and polytheistic pluralism,⁴ or of the motivation, themes and style of a poet like Huw Menai.⁵ Occasionally, an implicit identification becomes explicit: that the aether is Powys (in

¹The process is superbly illustrated in *Dostoievsky*, pp. 161-70. For example: "Even now as I try to conjure up a few at least of the feelings of this greatest of all psychologists as he lay dying on this 9th of February 1881"

²See the *Autobiography* (pp. 449, 457, etc.). For eyewitness accounts of Powys' lecturing style, not always sympathetically relayed, see Langridge, *John Cowper Powys*.

³For example, see *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 6/11/42, pp. 116-7. Occasionally it is true, Powys' invective becomes humorous: "I can't bear Donne. His very name is like a shower of dry bits of mud thrown at me" (quoted in the *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 13/6/58, p. 324). He was particularly enraged by writers of Christian persuasion - see his comments on Greene (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 13/9/45 and 14-6/9/45, pp. 188-90) and C.S. Lewis (*John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54*, 10/5/44, p. 29).

⁴*Rabelais*, pp. 36, 290, 337-8, 364, 370, 392, etc.

⁵*Obstinate Cymric*, pp. 113-23.

Homer and the Aether) can be shown not just by the Powysian preoccupations of the aether's introductory speech, but by the kind of textual slackness by which Powys allows the aether to number itself among "we mortals".¹

Powys offered no critique of the novel, or of the art of writing fiction. His 'theory of the novel' must be constructed from asides occurring elsewhere in his non-fiction, and from numerous lengthy digressions in his mature novels.² Writing about his own work, he was too self-deprecating to be taken seriously.³ Writing about Dostoievsky's fiction, he is much more illuminating, praising his refusal to round off his philosophical themes by structural patterning, and his desire to obscure and disfigure his "personal vision" by remaining faithful to the irreconcilabilities of Nature, "the Supreme Novelist".⁴ Moreover, because to Powys philosophy itself was fluid and pluralistic, it was therefore essentially fictive. Hence, Powys argued, the novel, in striving for "real actuality", must necessarily throw off the conventions of human tradition and embrace the "ghastly monotonies and sublime surprises" of Nature.⁵ Clearly, Powys' interpretation of the 'real' bears scarcely any resemblance to the social realist tradition in the novel, since the apprehension of what is real is a pluralist, subjective fantasy.

¹Homer and the Aether, pp. 23-4, 178, etc.

²By these, I mean the Wessex and Welsh novels.

³For example, in the Letters to Louis Wilkinson. See those already quoted (note 1, p. 41) and cf. the letter of 21/1/46 (p. 195). See too comments made at the end of his life in Letters to Nicholas Ross, 24/9/58, p. 195: "I have never in all my days invented a plot or known in advance how it was all going to end. I leave all that entirely to my characters. THAT is MY excitement in writing stories."

⁴Dostoievsky, p. 100.

⁵See the commentary in A Glastonbury Romance, from which these quotations are taken.

It is on this basis that Powys' preference for the 'romance' idiom is best understood.¹ It is instinctive and undogmatic in its pursuit of the formless, catching spontaneous glimpses of 'reality'.² Yet it is also, such is the nature of the Powysian duality, a romance in the sense of a consciously told story, a fiction. Here, romance is a subjective fantasy in the sense of a daydream, an exercise in wish-fulfilment.³ But romance also had for Powys a timeless ballad-like quality, in which man's perception of his relationship with the environment included a diffused sense of the supernatural. It is in the blending of all these partial and occasionally contradictory descriptions of the form that Powys' extraordinary breadth of vision can be seen. In the world of romance, as in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys juggles microscopic analysis of physical detail with vast metaphysical speculation: this is what he means by "imaginative realism".⁴

However, for all Powys' modern (and indeed, modernist) fictional themes and objectives, there remain the 'unexamined assumptions' referred to above. Belinda Humfrey deals at some length with the awkward relationship between Powys' fictional preoccupations (comparable to those of Proust, Woolf, Joyce and more recent 'anti-novelists') and a conception of style and technique that appear to be naive and dated in comparison.⁵ Powys' novels do contain speculations about multipersonal representations of consciousness, the disintegration of the continuity of exterior events,

¹On the meaning, and value, of the term 'romance' in relation to Powys' work, see 'John Cowper Powys and Romance' by Francis Berry (in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 179-88). He argues that the romance is freer than the novel to disregard questions of aesthetic verisimilitude, and can therefore lend itself more flexibly to the pursuit of vision.

²In this, his programme is very similar to Lawrence's, who, in 'Morality and the Novel' argued that "the business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment".

³This was an activity crucial to the success of the Powysian way of life. See the final chapter of *Obstinate Cymric* or *The Art of Happiness*.

⁴*Suspended Judgments*, p. 122.

⁵See her 'Introduction' to *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, especially pp. 18-21, 32-4, 41-3.

the shifting of narrative viewpoints, the collapse of the relationship between 'interior' and 'exterior' time, a solipsistic concern with the making of fiction as an artefact. Yet for all this, as Humfrey notes, his temperamental sympathy is with the great eccentrics of fiction, such as Rabelais, Cervantes and Sterne.¹ His modernity is thus an almost accidental product of his metaphysic wedded to an anarchic fascination with the more subversive aspects of the fiction-making processes of these predecessors. And, enshrined in this fortuitously modern edifice, there can be found a devotion to "poetry" and the "creative imagination" that runs, via Pater, back to the roots of English Romanticism.

For Powys, the apprehension of "poetry" was the touchstone of reality. It could be distinguished, by its "imaginative element", from the "speculative ether" of philosophy and other intellect-based formulations.² It was Powys' defence against not only scientific thought but also any propositions couched in terms of objectivity which might threaten his "life-illusion".³ Poetry was not merely a literary form: it was that atmosphere through which the whole of life, in all its levels of existence, could be apprehended. Wilson Knight writes of the "poetic core" at the heart of Powys' work⁴ derived from Wordsworth's theories about the relationship between mind and matter. Like Wordsworth too, Powys meditates on solitude, on the power of the imagination, and on the wisdom of outsiders and idiots. From Coleridge too there came thoughts on the influence of dreams and the power of the individual's consciousness (and subconscious) to control time and space.⁵ Using the rhetoric of these and later Romantic writers, Powys' vision of poetry expands into this

¹Essays on John Cowper Powys, p. 21.

²See the essay 'Pair Dadeni' in *Obstinate Cymric*, especially p. 98.

³For example, see *In Spite Of*, pp. 28, 232.

⁴Chapter 1 of *The Saturnian Quest*. Note especially his emphasis on Powys' Wordsworthianism in the 'love-union' of mind and matter.

⁵This is most cogently argued by Belinda Humfrey, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 42-3.

all-embracing 'atmosphere'; for him, as for Arnold, it has sapped the life-blood of, and eventually substituted itself for, religion.¹ From this position Powys' 'unexamined assumptions' become more comprehensible: they are part of the rhetoric of "poetry" which, coloured by his Saturnian nostalgia, dominates the language as well as the form of all his work, both fiction and non-fiction.²

Powys' understanding of the relationship between language and meaning is very revealing in its demonstration of the connection between vision and its communication. It has already been shown that Powys did not regard vision as being communicable through structural patterning.³ He believed instead in inspirational communication.⁴ Yet the vehicle for this was the very same language that raised the barriers to communication in the first place. *Mortal Strife* proposes an ideal environment, achieved in babyhood and extreme old age, in which the limitations of words are laid aside in favour of non-verbal sensation.⁵ For Powys, words become fossilised by the

¹See Powys' essay on Arnold in *Visions and Revisions*, especially pp. 117-26. Powys' own statement of faith in poetry, in this context, can be found in the essay 'In Spite of Belief' (*In Spite Of*, especially pp. 231-2).

²Powys' instinctive old-fashionedness, in his poetic tastes, is revealed in many places, such as the letter to Iorwerth C. Peate of 1/3/45 (*John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54*, p. 52). His fondness of ballads, and their 'atmospheres' (see *In Spite Of*, p. 232) is of course directly comparable to Wordsworth's. His emotionally-coloured language is a general inheritance from nineteenth-century literature.

³See note 3, p. 42, above. Powys was particularly wary of techniques such as allegory (as, for example, his letter to Theodore, of April 1910, states: see *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 317-9). Nevertheless, the didactic strain in Powys was evidently strong: in his 1953 'Preface' to *A Glastonbury Romance* he refers to himself as a "fabulist" (*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. x).

⁴See notes 2 & 3, p. 38 above. Elsewhere, as might be expected, his critical preference was for the 'prophetic voice' of Romantic writers and poets (e.g., the essay on Blake in *Suspended Judgments*, especially p. 257).

⁵*Mortal Strife*, p. 101. This might, to an extent, explain the structural and linguistic disintegration evidenced in the extreme babyishness of Powys' very late fiction. Earlier syntactic and semantic disintegration (e.g., *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 8) seems, on the other hand, to be simply a failure to keep his extreme prolixity under control.

accretions of meaning that they acquire in the course of human exchange, making for a resultant distortion of the original intention.¹ However, for all Powys' distrust of structure, he saw words, ideally, as symbols, and the communication of vision as essentially a symbolic process.² The **Autobiography** contains a description of Powys' ideal landscape painting: in it, the build up of meaningful detail contributes to a statement of intention which transcends the general 'atmosphere' of the piece (pp.413-4). It is a heightened moment of perception ('epiphanic', in the Joycean sense) in which meaning is caught, for an instant, outside time. Powys' theory of art, and indeed of "the complex vision", works in the same way.

VI

*"A universe the opposite of 'closed' or 'explained'."*³

Having traced out some of the details of Powys' developing views on such subjects as Powys' personality and family background, his relationship towards nature and society, and his understanding of art and the nature of creativity, it is possible now to show how these were blended into a wide-ranging 'world view', which will in turn be seen to provide the most appropriate foundation for a discussion of Powys' sense of vision.

If the touchstone of Powys' sense of reality was a faith in the creative power of the personal imagination, it is nevertheless true that

¹See **The Art of Happiness**, p. 128. Cf. **The Complex Vision**, p. 130, in which any communication is seen as an act of faith between two people who can never precisely know that the other has grasped fully the meaning in the message.

²Both in the early **Confessions** (p. 145) and the mature **Autobiography** (pp. 104, 328, 343, etc.) this is basic to Powys' understanding of language.

³**Visions and Revisions**, p. 190.

in much of his writing he was preoccupied with the spiritual ramifications of existence, from a point of view that is fundamentally religious. During his writing career, this understanding was neither consistent nor particularly coherent, but it coloured all his analyses of the relationships between man and 'the gods'. In his early works¹ his voice assumes the tones of late-Romantic pantheism, but in his mature philosophy this gives way to a defiant polytheism, based on uncertainty and an unwillingness to deny any possible interpretation of existence as long as it acknowledged in some degree a spiritual dimension. His understanding of a 'First Cause' as uncaring and dualistic is very similar to Hardy's 'Immanent Will' but on other levels of his violently animistic multiverse (since every creature and indeed every object possesses its own creative consciousness) the active relationship between human and sub- and super-human personalities is based very much on personal choice. His faith in the existence of "the immortal companions" is something he does not attempt to prove; rather, in *The Complex Vision*, he tries to overwhelm the reader with the inevitability of such a concept.² Indeed, partly because of an instinctive sympathy with the poor, oppressed and powerless, he defends his concept of an animate universe fuelled by the spiritual activities of personality even though he himself admits its second-ratedness and inadequacy as a philosophical explanation ("can be defeated even by Catholic theologians!").³

In this context, his attitudes towards Christianity are complex and revealing. He vehemently rejects the Christian view of God as Father,⁴ but

¹Confessions, p. 48; Letters to his Brother Llewelyn, e.g. of 7/10/02, p. 17.

²See *The Complex Vision*, pp. xi, 121ff, etc. For a very sympathetic study of this work, see Wilson Knight's essay in *Mosaic*, Vol. 10 No. 2, 1977, pp. 97-107.

³See *Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 21/1/46, p. 195.

⁴This position he held throughout his lifetime. See, for example, his letter to Littleton Powys, 9/1/51 (quoted in ed. Humfrey, *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, p. 270).

his spiritual thought remains imbued with a sense of 'Christian conscience'.¹ This is retained even though his response to Christian love (even as practised by Jesus) is antagonistic.² The figure of Christ (not the historical Jesus but the "Intermediary between the transitory and the permanent")³ holds a special place in Powys' thought, and is the main focal point at which his pluralism and multiplicity are integrated into consonant vision.⁴

For Powys, all levels of existence, from the First Cause down to wood and stones, participated in the activity of half-creating and half-perceiving the universe. From this sprang Powys' openly dualist approach to existence. However, this duality existed within, rather than between, different objects, and consequently it was this internal struggle that literally animated his universe. He once claimed that he was a Manichean,⁵ but this seems improbable since he found nothing to suggest that matter was inherently totally evil. Moreover, it would also imply that Powys could set against this some spiritual ideal of goodness, and this he

¹The outburst in his letter to Llewelyn, 7/3/08, (*Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, p. 43) is repeated many times elsewhere.

²Again, this was a life-long hatred, though why it should have provoked such an intensity of feeling is obscure. Perhaps, since his philosophy was based on the preservation of the individual personality through self-will, the idea of selfless service repelled him. Nevertheless, some of his outbursts appear to be rather unbalanced, reflecting his own obsessions: for example, in *Obstinate Cymric* (p. 140), he declaims against Christian love, which is "so soaked in sex, so soaked in a sodden, sublimated, sob-suppurating, anti-seminal sex".

³*The Complex Vision*, p. 224.

⁴On this subject, Michael Greenwald's essay on *The Complex Vision* (in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, especially pp. 75-6) is very useful, particularly as it links Powys' attitudes here to those of Lawrence (*The Man Who Died*), Eliot (*The Waste Land*), and the pervasive influence of Frazer and Jessie L. Weston.

⁵*Autobiography*, p. 353.

consistently refused to do. Admittedly, he did conceptualise certain formal ideals,¹ but in general he recoiled from the coldness of Platonic abstractions.² Instead he proposed a Heraclitan view of the continuous struggle in existence between love and malice.³ In such a cosmology as this the boundaries between concrete and abstract lose their precision.⁴

As the opposite of love ("the creative apprehension of life") is not hate but malice ("dull and insensitive hostility"), so the opposite of creation is not destruction but an inert and passive resistance to creation.⁵ One consequence of this is that Powys, both in thought and writing, notes the existence of specific and active centres of evil.⁶ As Wilson Knight shows, evil tends to centre around sadism, and its powerful allure is probably autobiographical.⁷ Nevertheless, its active existence, both within and without the individual consciousness, is for Powys essential to any understanding of the self, and it forms a vital part in the development of vision.⁸

¹See for example what Wilson Knight terms 'the seraphic', which is referred to regularly in *The Saturnian Quest*, and, more particularly, in his essay 'Sadism and the Seraphic', in *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, especially pp. 230-5.

²See, for example, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 109; *In Defence of Sensuality*, pp. 42, 90, etc. Despite this, Platonists are treated quite sympathetically in his novels (for example, Teucer Wye in *Maiden Castle*).

³In *The Art of Happiness*, pp. 55-60, and, centrally, in *The Complex Vision*, pp. xiv-xv, 34-6. For the background to Powys' terminology, see Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, pp. 31-3.

⁴See *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 59-60, and, for an illustration of the theory in novelistic practice, the arguments of Christie Malakite in *Wolf Solent*.

⁵Again, see Greenwald's essay in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 67. The quotations are from *The Complex Vision*, pp. 195, 214.

⁶This is rare in the English novel, though not in the tradition of visionary writing. For a discussion of Powys' (and Golding's) relation to this subject, see Angus Wilson's 'Evil in the English Novel' (*Kenyon Review*, March 1967, especially pp. 188-91).

⁷See *The Saturnian Quest*, p. 21, etc., and the essay 'Sadism and the Seraphic' in *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*.

⁸Belinda Humfrey, in the 'Introduction' to the *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, notes the positive role and function of "the Abyss" in Powys' thought, which vividly illustrates this idea (pp. 27-8).

Powys' animism, too, is a direct consequence of his dualistic cosmology.¹ On this subject, Powys was eloquent, tracing a fraternal relationship with Homer, Rabelais, Laotze and Keats.² This led him to a species of anthropomorphism based even more strongly on feelings and self-identification than is usually the case with such views.³ Powys does not merely assert that all existence is animate and sentient, but that all existence is animate and sentient in precisely the same way that he is.⁴

It is on this basis that Powys begins to bring into conjunction the forces that are set in opposition in his dualistic outlook. Both Wilson Knight and Greenwald⁵ describe the synthesis as Wordsworthian, which is certainly true in that vision occurs at ecstatic moments of perception, or "spots of time". Yet the two 'halves' of Powys' cosmology never merge; they exist in constant tension, poised, at these moments, in a revelatory equilibrium.⁶ Thus, often, Powys appears to place these insights at moments where perverse or distasteful events are taking place; here the duality is most perfectly yoked, and at such moments, Powys strives to get between or beyond it to reach consonant vision.⁷

In these moments, the essential unreasonableness of Powys' opinions is apparent. I noted earlier the violent strain of anti-rationalism which informs Powys' view of humanity. This sentiment has wider ramifications: it produces a 'world view' which is profoundly antagonistic towards

¹On the theoretical background to this, and the relationship between Powys' ideas and those of William James, Fechner and Bergson, see Greenwald's essay in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 66-7.

²See for example his *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, 8/5/48, pp. 88-9; *Autobiography*, pp. 214, 275; *The Complex Vision*, p. xvii.

³*The Complex Vision*, pp. 227, 251.

⁴This is most eloquently evoked in *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 249: "I am perfectly prepared for any captious logician to press me to inform him how I come to know so well what plants and stones are feeling. I answer that *I know from what I feel myself.*"

⁵Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, pp. 19-21; Greenwald, in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 62.

⁶Again, see Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, pp. 32-3.

⁷See the "between the stars and the urinal" episode in the *Autobiography* (p. 140), and the many revelatory episodes in the novels, perhaps most famously the insights of Sam Dekker in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

intellectualism, and its contemporary expression, a belief in Science. Powys consciously cultivated irrationality.¹ His anti-rationalism was in part a reaction against an over-developed sense of determinism which this naive faith in science produced.² But above all it expressed itself as a strident opposition to all things modern (scientific, industrial, mechanical) which would impair individual spiritual and imaginative faculties.³ For Powys, truth resided not in a scientific view of 'reality' but in the combined perceptions of all the faculties that made up the fragmented human nature.⁴ This culminating vision, called by Powys the "apex thought", was one in which reason and intellect played some part, but their roles were evidently minor in comparison with, for example, sensation and imagination.⁵

As a corrective to this imaginative straitjacket of rationalism, Powys proposed the cultivation of three other aspects of human nature, though in each case his interpretation of how they should be cultivated was obscurely personal. These were the comic, religious and sexual

¹See *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 10, which advocates the superiority of private solipsism; and *Obstinate Cymric*, which states Powys' preference for "an escape by feeling" over "a conviction by understanding". This prompted the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (20/10/47 - p. 662) to note "He feels deeply, but he hardly thinks at all; in consequence his book is extremely hard to read."

²See, for instance, his championship of chance over against purposiveness in events, in the *Autobiography*, pp. 6, 135. This is an interesting visionary characteristic (exhibited equally well in Golding's work, such as *Darkness Visible*), which is held in tension by a contradictory belief, aired especially in the fiction, of personal passivity in the face of the premeditated malign activity of the 'First Cause'.

³Illustrations abound: see, amongst others, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 87, on the tyranny of science against philosophical speculation; *The Menace of German Culture*, pp. 66-7, on science's debilitating effect on the emotions; *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 90, on the equally detrimental properties of "modern democracy and modern machinery"; *The Complex vision*, p. 177, on the stunted growth of contemplation and insight in a society which functions on the basis of commerce. Many critics, such as Wilson Knight (*The Saturnian Quest*, p. 123), have noted this recurrent theme in his fiction, often based round what Powys regarded as the worst horror perpetrated in the name of scientific thought, vivisection.

⁴On Science and Truth, see the *Autobiography*, p. 428, and *In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 158.

⁵See *The Complex Vision*, pp. 10, 23, 59, etc.

impulses. For Powys, comedy was at once an act of defiance and a means of salvation. It was the saving gesture of 'the little man' against larger forces, whether they were wielded by the state or the First Cause. The theme interested him particularly during the war of 1939-45, and **Mortal Strife** (1942) and the works which immediately followed the war are full of references to the traditional British individualist humour, exemplified by the addition of Charlie Chaplin to Powys' usual roll call of great artists. This humour is at heart a celebration of disorder and chaos, and not the exploitative humour of jokes told at the individual's expense.¹ Verbal humour is largely absent from Powys' work (the famous pun in **Maiden Castle** is memorable for this reason), as is any reference to social humour ('comedy of manners'). What remains is the stoic humour of individual survival.

As was observed above, Powys' attitude towards organised religion, and particularly the local manifestations of organised Christianity, was vehemently antagonistic.² From an early and somewhat immature period fascination with the more melancholy aspects of religious faith³ he moved on to an attitude which blended scepticism with a sincere religious individualism. His scepticism was reserved for the complacent systematising of apologetics on behalf of 'official' religion, which roused in Powys an antagonism similar to that caused by the equally sweeping claims of scientific thought.⁴ Yet he was apparently capable of exercising

¹On this subject, **Mortal Strife** is the key text. See particularly Chapter 1, 'However!', Chapter 11, 'The Humours of the Democratic Man', and Chapter 13, 'Imperial Individualism'.

²Note, for example, the bitter and malicious outburst against C.S. Lewis and "this New Orthodoxy" in a letter to Iorwerth C. Peate (**John Cowper Powys: Letters 1937-54**), 10/5/44, p. 29).

³The following melodramatic outburst, from a letter dated 7/3/08, is not untypical: "Fuck my soul, but I wish I wish I wish that Christianity were true. Damn the stars! damn damn damn the stars damn the stars! drunk! mad!" (**Letters to his Brother Llewelyn**, p. 43).

⁴This attitude was apparent even as early as the **Confessions**: "A rational religion is a contradiction in terms." (p. 57) In the much later **Obstinate Cymric** he defends his conception of the Jamesian pluralistic universe against "the whole totalitarian, Trinitarian rounded-off universe

some kind of paranormal gifts of his own, and followed the rituals of a well-developed private mythology.⁵ In advocating this kind of private faith, Powys was quite happy to rewrite the scriptures to reach the desired ends.⁶ Here Powys' cultivation of the religious impulse reaches its most obscure and personal ends, preaching the efficacy of prayer to sundry self-invented 'gods', despite the fact that it is possible to believe that these gods do not exist.⁷ The true goal of such a faith becomes the acquisition of an absolute humility, a recognition that everybody (indeed, everything) has an equal value; this, however, does not prevent Powys from urging defiance of anything that might threaten individual identity, or impede the individual's "will to enjoy".⁸

For Powys, the religious impulse and the sexual were closely allied: he proposed the acquisition of a quasi-spiritual insight derived from an idealised sexual relationship. However, the means by which this end was attained were once again obscure and original. 'Normal' sexual relations, apparently, were to Powys at best a distraction and at worst physically and emotionally repulsive.⁹ Pursuing this in theory in *The Complex Vision* he observed that sexual passion was closely allied to hatred and the passion of possession.¹⁰ Yet, Powys argued, there was a positive place for

of Christian apologetics" (pp. 139-40). In *Mortal Strife*, religion and science are tarred with the same brush (p. 41). The attitude of his last years was that religion should be ignored by the follower of his philosophy, a philosophy which has no dogma and no claims on truth (see *In Spite Of*, p. 91).

⁵For references to something akin to 'astral projection', see Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest*, pp. 127-8. Mention of his daily prayer rituals can be found in the *Autobiography* (pp. 324, 373, 630, etc.) and in the *Letters to Louis Wilkinson* (p. 238).

⁶"Thou shalt worship the God in thine own breast and Him only shalt thou serve", which, Powys claims, is an accurate paraphrase! (*Mortal Strife*, p. 19)

⁷*Mortal Strife*, pp. 41-4, 283.

⁸See Chapter 4 of *Mortal Strife*. For example: "Everybody is a Nobody; and every Nobody is God." (p. 63) This whole subject is immensely complex, and hinges around Powys' paradoxical selfish humility.

⁹See the *Autobiography*, pp. 33-4, 222-3, etc.

¹⁰It is possible that much of this line of thought was stirred by the sadistic impulse which he recognised in himself. See *The Complex Vision*, p. 286, and Greenwald's essay in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 71-2.

sexuality in the attainment of vision. This lay in what Wilson Knight calls "the seraphic", and what Powys, in the *Autobiography* calls "the Platonic ideal of girlhood".¹ Powys denied that he was a homosexual² yet he holds a clear sympathy for homosexual figures in his novels.³ His ideal tended towards bisexuality: his heroes are sexually ambiguous figures who are attracted towards boyish girls. This pattern is repeatedly enacted in the *Autobiography* also.⁴ Yet though this elemental ethereal sylph-like being remained painfully inaccessible, he/she gave to Powys, cerebrally at least, "my religion, my beatific ideal, my rapturous initiation into the mysteries" (207).

Out of the raw material of these imaginative and sensationalist speculations, Powys fashioned the tools he would use to acquire an achieved and consonant vision. These included a selective re-interpretation of the past, an apocalyptic hope for the future and a paradoxically active contemplation of the present. Powys escaped from the nightmare of history by evaluating it anew within the dreamlike framework of myth.⁵ The distant past becomes the Saturnian 'Age of Gold', and Powys

¹See Wilson Knight's 'Sadism and the Seraphic' in *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, especially pp. 228-30, and his *Neglected Powers*, p. 192; and also the *Autobiography*, pp. 172-4 (and cf. pp. 205-6, 241).

²In the *Autobiography*; however, note his interesting definition of himself as "a sort of Homosexual, not physically but mentally - or, even shall we hazard that tricky word - spiritually". (*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, p. 252)

³In this respect, he is much like Golding, as I will show later (see Chapters 6 and 7).

⁴See the impassioned voyeuristic episodes (pp. 216-7, 319, etc.) and the remarkable Venetian idyll (pp. 406-14).

⁵See the essay 'Pair Dadeni' in *Obstinate Cymric*, especially pp. 87-95.

shows the traditional visionary attachment to such primitive cultures as have survived and which can be used as propaganda for this golden age.¹ Hooker comments astutely on the fact that golden ages are evoked in periods of decline or decadence. The weaknesses of Powys' retrospective myth-making are thus its escapism, its morbid eroticism and its '90's sentimentality; its strengths lie in its search for a myth of origins, and a quest for the 'oneness' of all life. If one consequence is that, in his novels, Powys lacks a historical sense (projecting his life-illusions onto medieval Wales in *Owen Glendower*), this is also more generally true of his criticism, and indeed of his whole philosophy, in the broadest sense.² Powys' shaping of Welsh history (for instance in *Obstinate Cymric*) is a good illustration of this technique in action, in this case in order to promote those aspects of primitive imaginative or religious experience which Powys wishes to rediscover in the Welsh mythic heritage.³

As his view of the past is dominated by this quest for an undifferentiated ('unfallen') Golden Age, so Powys' outlook for the future is shaped by his sense of an ending. Here again myth is the decisive factor, in particular the myth of the cauldron of rebirth.⁴ This provides

¹On the Saturnian in Powys, see (obviously) Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest*, especially pp. 17-9. His sympathy with primitive cultures is illustrated by his attitude towards the North American Indians (*Autobiography*, p. 548), though Powys, unlike Lawrence, sees in their beliefs the key to an individual spiritual regeneration rather than a racial religious one. Part of this sympathy was undoubtedly simply an identification with all those out of step with contemporary attitudes: for his opinions on and identification with Neanderthals (rather unlike Golding's!) see *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, p. 249.

²Hooker, *John Cowper Powys and David Jones*, is very perceptive on this subject, especially pp. 19-28.

³On the transformation of history into myth, providing a useful counterweight to Wilson Knight's eulogies on this subject, see Roland Mathias' 'The Sacrificial Prince', in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 233-61.

⁴The essay 'Pair Dadeni, or the Cauldron of Rebirth' (*Obstinate Cymric*, pp. 86-110) contains Powys' most eloquently apocalyptic pronouncements on this subject.

Powys with a basic continuity in his view of human history, and an assurance of progress to a future 'Aquarian' age.¹ In fact, as I noted earlier, Powys' belief in progress appears to bear little relationship to the world in which he lived. Frequently his apocalyptic passages are more noteworthy for the extreme lyricism of their tone than for the weight of their argument.² The importance of these and similar passages, as Krissdottir perhaps suggests, lies in the quest itself, rather than its goal.³

These visions of past and future are brought into focus in Powys' active contemplation of the present. At the heart of this lies an attitude to existence which accepts the essentially unsystematic, unfinished contradictory nature of life. Childhood, and especially the memory of childhood, attracted Powys (in this a thoroughgoing visionary imbued with

¹See Belinda Humfrey's 'Introduction' to *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 21-3, for an analysis of Powys' visionary hope, based on these mythic allusions. Especially revealing is her contrast between Powys and Golding in this matter.

²It would perhaps be unreasonable to expect anything else, since predictions about paradisaical futures rarely offer it. Yet passages like this, from *In Defence of Sensuality*, promise a great deal without any reference to the 'signs of the times' which Powys is claiming to read: "But it will not last. A new springtime will come. The darkest hour is just before the dawn. A new wave of religious and cosmic feeling, different in psychic temper from any that our race has known, is even now rolling in from unfathomable depths and threatening to change the whole outlook." (p. 172)

³Morine Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, especially the 'Foreword' and Chapter 1.

the spirit of Romanticism) as that period of life most passionately in touch with that instinctive and undifferentiated sense of reality.¹ Yet adolescence brings strife, and an awareness of contradictions.² Powys sought for a process (rather than a system) of thought that would provide the continuity of perception necessary to make sense of, but not to do away with, these contradictions.³ This he found in "that bold polytheistic pluralism of William James".⁴ He wrote elsewhere of the futility of trying to solve life's mystery with a system; instead this mystery is revealed, though not resolved, only in the momentary apprehension of vision.⁵

VII

*"The beginning forever of the Peace paradisiac,
The 'I feel' without question, the 'I am' without purpose,
The 'It is' that leads nowhere, the life with no climax,
The 'Enough' that leads forward to no consummation,
The answer to all things that yet answers nothing."*⁶

¹**Autobiography**, pp. 28-9,, 36-7. This subject is commonplace in visionary literature. In Chapter 1 of the **Autobiography**, the adult Powys dissecting his memories bears a remarkable resemblance to Sammy in **Free Fall**. In both cases the problem is not only to articulate a sense of loss, but to find a clue that might lead back to wholeness.

²The contradictions (as might be expected from a knowledge of Powys' dualist views) are within the self - **The Complex Vision**, p. 117. One fascinating contradiction (which again might be expected, given Powys' attachment to selfhood defended by the will) is the frequency with which Powys tries to **externalise** this struggle: "There is only you against the universe. Therefore fight!" (**In Spite Of**, p. 239). This is as good a warning as any against the urge to systematise Powys' thought!

³See **Mortal Strife**, pp. 7-9, 95-8. His eloquent defence of Dostoevsky's philosophy and novelistic style was precisely that he had discovered how to **avoid** rounding off his spiritual insights and his novels successfully. See **Dostoevsky**, pp. 98-9.

⁴**Rabelais**, p. 370. The chief attraction, I feel, was the **unsystematic** nature of existence which this model proposed. He also talked of "these organic, living, and beautifully unsystematized ideas of Jesus and Paul" (**Rabelais**, p. 392) - ideas which, if nothing else, were resoundingly monotheist!

⁵See **Visions and Revisions**, p. 193, and cf. **The Complex Vision**, p. 102: "These moments of difficulty and obscurity, these vague and impalpable links in the chain, are only to be found in the process by which we arrive at our conclusion."

⁶Taliessin's poem, in **Porius**. Quoted by Humfrey, **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, p. 22.

The acquisition of vision, based on the exercise of those temperamental faculties discussed in the previous section, began, for Powys, with the recognition of the value of certain mental and spiritual habits. One such habit was prayer, which offered a way of keeping alive "our secret personal life".¹ It mattered little to whom such prayers were addressed,² since the importance lay in the gesture. However, it was not regarded as an empty ritual, since, he wrote, "I believe it's possible to send out waves of magnetic energy that have a very good effect".³ But it does give evidence of Powys' profoundly ritualist sensibility: like most visionaries, his goal here is a ritual which has not been fossilised into a system. He ensured this for himself by inventing his own objects, or personalities, to which he could pray.⁴ The importance of such gestures lay not so much in their efficacy as in the illumination they offer of a personality prepared for, and equipped to receive, the invading vision.

This ritualism was not reserved for certain actions or moments; rather it was embodied in all the activities of human behaviour. Powys regarded it as evidence of a kind of Paterian sacramentalism in his attitude to even the most homely details of life - breaking bread, poking the fire, turning out the light before going to sleep.⁵ His description of his daily life in upstate New York⁶ makes every gesture, every action, vibrant with a sort of rhythmic energy. In fact, rhythm and music were the (typically late nineteenth-century) terms Powys used to describe this

¹*Mortal Strife*, p. 41.

²In *Obstinate Cymric*, for example, he offers them "to whom it may concern" (p. 140).

³*Letters to Louis Wilkinson*, 9/10/47, p. 238. Such "waves", he was convinced could also have a very bad effect. The *Autobiography* refers repeatedly to his conscious decision to avoid thinking ill of people, in order to save them from the effect of some occult malign power.

⁴He explains this in a letter of 9/3/45, to Iorwerth C. Peate (see *Review of English Literature*, January 1963, p. 39). The *Autobiography* contains equally tantalising references to this habit. Twice (pp. 373, 630) this involves addressing himself to "variously coloured angels", a habit astonishingly like Matty's in *Darkness Visible*.

⁵See especially the chapter 'Works and Days' in *The Art of Happiness*.

⁶In the *Autobiography*, pp. 632-8.

ritualist embrace of life. In a (relatively) early essay on Verlaine such language harmonises the dualist oppositions of existence.¹ The result of these activities was to make apparent to Powys the power of the ritualistic image, not as a synthesis of opposites but as "a concrete expression of the complexity of life".² And to perceive and make use of the ritualistic image required the exercise of a creative faith, a faith which, Powys argued, would only develop as it was exercised, and which needed a revelatory prompting if it was to be stirred into existence at all.³ It could be activated, Powys reasoned (here, if anywhere, the disciple of Wordsworth) either by the contemplation of nature or by the example of some other (usually humble) visionary. This was the function of the saint.

It appears from his writing that Powys was attracted to the role of the saint while at the same time he was vaguely intimidated by the actual personal existence of such an individual. The *Confessions* evoke the misty allure of the saintly life-style; *The Complex Vision* is irritably antagonistic towards the intensity of spiritual conviction which might prompt such a way of life.⁴ In moments of self-recognition, he openly states that this is because his 'tao', or life-way, is based upon evasion:

¹*Visions and Revisions*, pp. 203-4: music in life "is the secret cause of why things are as they are; the music which is their end and their beginning; it is the old deep Pythagorean mystery of the rhythm of the universe, and its laws are the laws of sun and moon and night and day and birth and death and good and evil."

²*The Complex Vision*, p. 105.

³*The Complex Vision*, pp. 12, 122.

⁴*Confessions*, p. 110: "I have a queer inexplicable penchant for a saint's life How lovely to possess nothing, and to have no ties." *The Complex Vision*, pp. 165-6: "How thin, how strained, how morbid, how ungracious, how inhuman, these so-called 'saints' become, when they persist in following their capricious, subjective, fantastic, individual dreams, out of all concrete relation to the actual world we live in." One does not need to be especially uncharitable to note that the sort of behaviour here vilified is precisely what Powys did advocate in much of his non-fiction.

he is ruffled by Christ, or Christ-like saints, recognising in them a strength and nobility greater than his own.¹ Yet, suitably redefined by Powys himself, the condition of sanctity becomes highly prized, and one of the consequences of that state is that it provides access to vision.² His argument, in *In Defence of Sensuality*, runs as follows: the saint, in renouncing Property in favour of Life, aspires towards "the life of the gods"; yet, in the absolute simplicity of his life-style, he reverts towards "the life of the plants"; thus, he is best placed to achieve "this ecstatic happiness, to reach which both extremes of our nature have to play their part, without being at all moderated into any 'golden mean'." (69) The familiar Powysian dualism reappears. The privilege of the saint is to discover that dualism in himself more easily, and thus to manipulate it more creatively, than the normal run of humanity.

However, as Powys' repeated references to the works of Dostoievsky show, the saint is not unique: his insight can be gained by the 'holy fool', or even the straightforward idiot. Most interesting perhaps is the connection between the saint and the artist. Here, once again, Powys refutes the Romantic notion of the Artist as God,³ in favour of the more visionary notion of the Artist as Medium, uttering "his oracles across a crack in the cosmos of cause and effect".⁴ In any case, the point which is repeated over and over again is that this way of life, this way of seeing,

¹Especially in *In Defence of Sensuality*, Chapters 4 and 9. Note too the shrewd comments in the *Times Literary Supplement* review of this book (6/11/30 - p. 906).

²*In Defence of Sensuality*, p. 63: "It is a great mistake to think that the condition of being a saint depends on any definite religious belief. It does not even depend on believing in God The condition of being a saint implies in the first place a passionate faith in the possibility of a certain kind of thrilling happiness."

³Though playing at being God was one of Powys' favourite pastimes - see the *Autobiography*, p. 638, for example.

⁴Dostoievsky, p. 163. In this context, Chapter 5 ('The Melodrama of Reality') is also relevant. This substitution of artist in place of saint illuminates the growing 'secularisation' of the visionary tradition. Cf. Sammy's conception of his role in *Free Fall*, and especially the primacy of Tuami's position at the end of *The Inheritors*.

involves an inversion of orthodox human behaviour and values. In his essay on Dostoievsky in *Visions and Revisions*, Powys summarises this superbly, advocating the substitution of "what might be called 'sanctity' for what is usually termed 'morality', as an ideal of life The secret of it, beyond repentance and remorse, lies in the transforming power of 'love'; lies, in fact, in 'vision' purged by pity and terror." (185)

This transforming power renders everyday experience miraculous.¹ A favourite word (as it is for Golding) to describe this world is "mystery",² and Powys writes regularly of the need to defend this mystery from the traps of simplified belief.³ Moreover, the mystery remains not only inexplicable, but also largely inarticulate. In theory, this might be as expected, given Powys' views on language outlined earlier, and he proceeds by way of the ritualistic image, probing away at the gap across to the unsayable.⁴ In this way, he arrives at his vision of the "apex thought", the final, mysterious resolution of the mystery. This explanation makes use of another characteristic image, in the contrast between darkness and light.⁵ In *The Complex Vision* he describes it thus:

"A wavering mass of flames, taking the shape of what might be called a 'horizontal pyramid', the apex of which, where the

¹The *Philosophy of Solitude*, pp. 46-7; and note Frederick Davies' commentary on this in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 116. Hence Powys' personal declaration: "It is in fact on the inscrutable mysteriousness of the world that I take my stand." (*Confessions*, p. 45)

²"My world remains a world under the sway of an inscrutable mystery" (*Autobiography*, p. 55).

³For example: in *Obstinate Cymric*, pp. 175-80, on the need to cultivate wonder and awe in order to "be liberated from every hypothetical system"; in *In Spite Of*, pp. 230-1, claiming that belief will only confuse and confound our delight in mystery.

⁴"All I can do is to indicate, by one clumsy analogy after another, the gap, the lacuna, the niche in our daily psychology where this mystery dwells like an unseen picture in a magic crystal." (*Autobiography*, p. 61; and cf. p. 625). Unfortunately, however, such is Powys' natural and unrestrained verbosity, he becomes, in Humfrey's words, "an over-emphatic imagist, too extravagantly articulate" (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 45). This, for me, is one of the essential flaws of Powys' fiction, and indeed his non-fiction also. It is entirely explicable, given his temperament, but it lies between him and greatness.

⁵Cf. especially *Darkness Visible* (see Chapter 6).

flames are fused and lost in one another, is continually clearing the darkness like the point of a fiery arrow moving from darkness to darkness from mystery to mystery."¹

In aspiring towards this 'ultimate' image, Powys might be thought to be contradicting the pluralist tendencies in his work, since it is precisely here that William James locates the difference between monism and pluralism.² However, Powys skirts the issue by emphasising the tentative and arbitrary nature of such an image, and by locating outside or beyond this image further realms of existence.³ Nevertheless, with this picturing of the "apex thought", the objective mystery is discovered, and consonant vision is achieved.

Powys praises Dostoievsky's art not for "any one coherent vision of life, but **several** contradictory visions".⁴ But that praise was for his art; in art the tentativeness of one achieved vision all too easily succumbs to the urge to turn into a fossil. Life can sustain such momentary illuminations since with the passing of that moment they are lost to all except the assiduous resuscitation of memory. But such moments can neither be snatched at before they arrive nor afterwards be preserved in formalin.⁵ However, by the exercise of preparation referred to above, it was, Powys claimed, possible to focus "the full rhythmic play of our complete identity" on this otherwise undigested mass of impressions.⁶ In this way is achieved what Hyman calls "a totality of meaning"; and, though that totality may be immediately shattered (as it frequently is in the

1Pp 15-18. On the possible mystical significance of the image, see Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, p. 16.

2William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 321-3.

3See especially *The Complex Vision*, pp. 83-5.

⁴Dostoievsky, p. 8.

⁵On the temptations to do so, see *The Complex Vision*, p. 59.

⁶See *The Complex Vision*, p. 260. Focusing is a very visionary characteristic: cf. Chapter 6 for a study of the emphasis Golding lays on this activity in *Darkness Visible*.

novels) it prompts a reconciliation of the fragments of current brokenness in the light of this ultimate vision.¹ Moreover, in theory at least, Powys was able to conceive of each person's "complex vision" interlocking to form "nothing less than the eternal vision".²

On two occasions in the **Autobiography** Powys illustrates from his own experience such moments of vision. The first of these, the ecstatic onslaught of the sun glittering on the sea in the early morning, is a pure Wordsworthian youthful experience, similar to so many in the first book of **The Prelude** (p. 29). The second is richer, more complex, more comprehensively illustrative of Powys' thought. This "Vision on the Road to Damascus" was the episode of the "spot on the wall".³ After the fashion of the incidents described in the non-fiction, this episode was trivial, yet it was burdened with a fragile meaning out of all proportion to the event. It was the meeting place of the temporal and the eternal.

In fact, Powys' eternal moments, his ritualistic images, were not all totally arbitrary. In his theoretical writings, and particularly in **The Complex Vision**, he focused on one unique image, that of Christ, "standing between all that is mortal and all that is immortal in the world, and by means of the love and pity that is in him partaking of the nature of every living thing." (220-1) It must be stressed again that by Christ Powys did not refer specifically to the historical person of Jesus: rather he

¹See Hyman, **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, especially pp. 145-6. He is, it seems to me, too aware of the archetypes shadowing the 'real'; Powys' instinctive anti-Platonism leads me to think that, for him, vision was never that abstract, or divorced from the messy contingencies of 'reality'.

²**The Complex Vision**, p. 361. For comments on this, see Greenwald's essay in **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, especially p. 64. I think Powys overstates his case here. **The Complex Vision** has, in the light of his later work, dangerously monist tendencies - for example, in the conversion of visionary moments into universal truths (pp. viii, xv). Elsewhere (in the **Autobiography**, and later philosophical books) he draws back, and an innate scepticism takes over.

³**Autobiography**, pp. 199-200. Later Powys used the germ of the incident, rather unsuccessfully, in a short story, 'The Spot on the Wall' - see Chapter 3. Again, the analogies with Golding's thought (and fictional practice) are precise; cf. Matty's experiences, discussed in Chapter 6.

intended some kind of composite image containing aspects of Jesus, Prometheus, Dionysus, Osiris, Balder and Pan.¹ According to Greenwald, Powys' use of a Christ-figure "suggests that complementing his desire to revel in multiplicity was a need to relate his pluralism to a single and integral personality in whom objectivity could be incarnated. Thus his immortals have not visions, but vision."²

Vision, however, it must be stressed, remained fragile and tentative. It offered glimpses of transcendence.³ Indeed, by the logic of *The Complex Vision* (in which the eternal warring of love and malice precluded the existence of absolutes) transcendence remained just out of reach, just beyond, "a vanishing point of sensation".⁴ Here, finally, is the last of Powys' contradictory dualisms: the eternal vision is revealed as "neither an absolute in whose identity all difference is lost, nor a stream of 'states of consciousness' which is suspended, as it were, in a vacuum." (311) The solution, if there is one, lies in movement. Vision is momentary, changing, always moving, always poised (p. 65). And in that movement, and at that moment, the revelatory equilibrium is reached: "the consummation of the complex vision a meeting place of desperate and violent extremes." (23)

¹*The Complex Vision*, p. 236f. The influence of Frazer here is particularly strong in shaping Powys' own conception of a sacrificial hero myth.

²*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 76. This is acute, yet, I feel, it is another example of overstatement. It is too complete, too final.

³See, for example, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 15; *The Complex Vision*, pp. 277-80.

⁴*The Complex Vision*, p. 195. This returns us to the ideas Powys acquired from Croce about the concept of struggle: "all virtue must be imperfect virtue since virtue is the condition of struggling with the opposite of virtue" (*Mortal Strife*, p. 100).

Chapter Three

Powys: The Early Novels

*"It was not that he wished to find some mere mystical sensation, inchoate and indistinct, and try to express the feeling of just that, in lulled and monotonous rhythms. It was that he wished to take the many poignant 'little things', bitter and sweet, tragic and grotesque, common and fantastic, such as the earth affords us all in our confused wayfaring, and to associate these, as each generation is aware of them before it passes away, as he himself was aware of them in his own hour, with some dimly conceived immortal consciousness that gave them all an enduring value and dropped none of them by the way."*¹

When Powys' first published novel, **Wood and Stone**, appeared in 1915, he was already forty-three. He had behind him a literary apprenticeship which consisted of two fairly slight books of verse, a long unpublished poem entitled **Lucifer**, a handful of unpublished short stories, a "huge unprintable" novel, as well as at least one unfinished "normal - or as normal as I could make it - Romance".² Over the next ten years, along with three more books of verse, his share in the **Confessions**, the philosophical treatise **The Complex Vision**, and a number of essays on aspects of philosophy and literary criticism, he produced three more novels, **Rodmoor**, **After My Fashion** and **Ducdame**.³ These four novels, or 'romances' as Powys called them, constitute his early fiction.

¹John Cowper Powys, **After My Fashion**, pp. 89-90.

²The published poetry appeared as **Odes and Other Poems** (1896) and **Poems** (1899). The verse-epic **Lucifer** finally appeared in 1956. Three other short stories were published by the Toucan Press in Guernsey in 1974. The quotations about his novels are from p. 327 of the **Autobiography**.

³**Rodmoor** (1916) and **Ducdame** (1925) were published during his lifetime. **After My Fashion**, written between 1916-18, was apparently turned down by Powys' publisher, and remained neglected until 1980, when it was published by Picador. The complete silence which fell on this book up to that date (not only in critical studies but in Powys' letters of the time - he held his fictional cards very close to his chest) means that there may well have been other 'apprentice' novels written during these years, but subsequently lost. Powys certainly wrote at this time with a kind of reckless fertility. There are references from other sources to a lost critical study on Keats, a stage version of Dostoievsky's **The Idiot** and an original three-act play, **Paddock Calls**.

These books reveal a novelist already largely possessed of his vision but only in the first stages of discovering the formal and structural richness necessary to express it. Brief visionary moments flickeringly illuminate long stretches of a conventional and imitated delineation of the landscapes of fiction. Value lies not in the assured consonance of vision and rhetoric, but in the sense of striving necessary to forge that language in the first place. In this sense, the novels are important in that they point towards the achieved vision of the Wessex quartet.

In this chapter I wish to survey the embryonic expressions of the mature Powysian themes over the four novels as a whole, and then to discuss in detail *After My Fashion* as a representative illustration of those themes and as a precursor, in many important ways, of *Wolf Solent*.¹

I

Broadly speaking, Powys' fiction reveals a movement from the simple to the complex, from certainty (even if it is the certainty that nothing is certain) to uncertainty. This is true within the individual novel (in *Owen Glendower*, for example, which on one level portrays a concrete, explicable perception of the world metamorphosing into an intangible, ultimately inexplicable one) and within the oeuvre as a whole (in which structural coherence crumbles into individual myth-making and anarchic imagining). These terms are necessarily relative. The early novels possess their own uncertainty but it is not of that kind. The philosophical bases of Powys' thought remain (relatively) stable. What makes the whole edifice unstable is a formal uncertainty, a weakness for inherited models which sometimes lie uneasily under Powys' arguments, and sometimes flatly

¹In addition to the case I hope to make for this course of action, the opportunity to do a little critical spadework on hitherto virgin territory may go some way to justify this approach!

contradict them. It has been argued that the Powys novel commits suicide in order to gain life.¹ In his mature fiction² there is a sense in which that is true. *Wolf Solent*, for instance, could be said to default on the bargain Wolf appeared to have struck with life in order to show that the currency in which he (and therefore the novel) deals cannot purchase the ultimate insight he acquires. In the early fiction, however, the suicidal tendencies appear to be largely inadvertent : changing the metaphor, they are the consequence of creating an aesthetic atmosphere inhospitable to vision. Such vision as they give birth to is generally stillborn. What remains is "a collection of fragments of lyrical prose, of philosophical speculation, of entertaining characterisation".³

i

In these early novels, Powys' mature views on humanity and human nature are fairly well established, probably because he had by this time passed what he himself regarded as a crucial temperamental barrier, his fortieth birthday.⁴ True, his work and thought do noticeably evolve over the next fifty-odd years, but this happens largely as a consequence of his awareness of the ramifications of technique and other means of expression, rather than as a result of any fundamental reevaluation of belief. In the early novels, the subtleties of Powys' understanding of man may be present only in embryo, but they are nonetheless recognisable for that.

The first thing that needs to be said is that Powys' writing is imbued with the pressures and contradictions of his own personality. The

¹Hyman, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 129-31.

²By which I mean primarily the Wessex novels, though some would also include *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*.

³This is Brebner on *Wood and Stone* (*The Demon Within*, p. 9); with a little qualification, it could stand for any of these four novels.

⁴*Autobiography*, p. 403.

Autobiography (itself wilful, partial, contradictory) portrays a man hedged round by ambiguity, burdened by duality. In the novels, the central protagonist occasionally labours (and collapses) under these intractable pressures; more often Powys implants into two or even three characters aspects of that embattled personality and proceeds to play out the conflict. Into this world of Heraclitan strife, Powys projects temperamental attributes of other members of his family (especially the hedonistic scepticism of his brother Llewelyn), characters in the ambiguous grip of 'world-views' (especially portraying a perverse, distorted Christianity or a naive Communism), and those who offer or are on the brink of discovering a fresh perceptual coherence, or vision (notably dubious bisexual figures, Powysian saints, and inevitably, artists). With a subsidiary cast of rustic grotesques and purveyors of timeless wisdom, Powys' gallery of humanity is complete.

The main consequence of creating vehicles of personality under the intense pressure of Powys' contradictory nature is that the central protagonist is ambiguously drawn, often to the point of instability. Adrian Sorio, in *Rodmoor*, is pulled in opposite directions by his love for his son Baptiste and his projected book on "how the essence of life is found in the instinct of destruction" (pp. 111-2). This negative urge frequently manifests itself as an instinct for self-destruction, as is the case when Sorio teeters on the brink of insanity (324-5). Yet, in Powys' tortuous metaphysic, this yearning towards annihilation becomes an active search for a purgative transformation, when the dross of earth-bound contradictions is burnt off.¹ Unfortunately, there are times when this emotional and psychological instability threatens the novel's coherent

¹Again, *Rodmoor* provides a good illustration. See Diane Fernandez's essay 'Whiteness' (especially pp. 109-10) in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*. Powys' treatment of the death of Mr Moreton in *After My Fashion* (pp. 145-7) is another example of this ambiguously attractive attitude towards annihilation.

existence. This is certainly true of *Rodmoor*, and of *After My Fashion* (which is thrown off balance by Storm's eccentricities), and perhaps too of *Ducdame*, despite the fact that it was composed under Llewelyn's restraining hand.¹

In this early fiction the essential themes of Powys' mature work are quite eloquently deployed, when it comes to the related subjects of man's fundamental isolation, his need for a "life-illusion" and the necessity to be rooted in an emotional and geographical community. Here again there is an uneasy ambivalence in Powys' treatment, since all these themes relate to the visionary's attachment to a lost golden age. Community and rootedness are the property of Powys' rustics, the villagers in *Wood and Stone*, *Rodmoor* and *After My Fashion*. They have tasted corruption (many of them in grotesque ways, like the equally eccentric characters of T.F. Powys' *Mr Weston's Good Wine*) but there is an essential simplicity and naivety about their evil which links them in Powys' work with the timeless rituals of rural life. Yet when those roots are cut off, as they clearly are in the modern world of America in *After My Fashion*, the effect is either to turn his characters into the soulless mechanised ants of urban and industrial life or (if, like Powys' central characters, they are intellectuals) to thrust them back onto the sustenance of their "life-illusion". This favourite phrase of Powys, taken from Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, bears only a passing resemblance to truth; rather, it refers to those subjective checks and balances, fantasies and unsystematic mythologies, by which these protagonists attempt to order their lives. Always present is a sense of loss (of that timeless community of rural life) and a sense of that life-illusion under threat. Powys' novels, even

¹The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer (13.8.25 - p. 532) complained that the author was not sufficiently disengaged from Rook's bewilderment, and that as a consequence, the novel was "introspective to a degree hardly sane".

at this early stage, are vivified by a delineation of process and struggle, though it does not necessarily follow that this process has direction or consequence. Powys' abhorrence of doctrines and systems, and, as I shall show, his uncertainty over formal models in his early fiction, put paid to that. However, in that process, the protagonist does discover his basic 'alone-ness'. This is the case when Storm finds his life-illusion under attack in *After My Fashion*, and when Rook Ashover retreats from the social world into his cult of sensations in *Ducdame*. Moreover, at precisely this point, that old continuity of the rural characters is seen to be irrelevant : the central protagonists cannot unlearn their knowledge or deny their self-consciousness. The process embarked on appears to demand (and in the later novels it obtains) a new consonance and continuity, a new vision.

For Powys to arrive at this goal, it seems necessary for his characters to overcome an instinctive hatred for humanity, or, at least, an instinctive hatred for physicality. The yearning towards disembodied states is already present, in Storm's negative hatred for human life¹ and Sorio's dangerous attraction to the bisexual sylph-like Philippa. Powys' own physical fastidiousness is echoed in Sorio's behaviour.² Even the positive side of such abhorrence, as evidenced in Powys' paradoxical cultivated sterility in *Ducdame*, leads only to the uneasy coalescence of man and environment, and not to the creative community of man and his companions. The traditional dichotomy between self and not-self, inner and outer, is tentatively brought back into wholeness here, in, for example, the description of the swan (pp. 330-2), and, centrally, in the mystical meeting of Rook and his unborn son (Chapter 19). Powys delicately suggests other, mysteriously apprehended dimensions opening out of time and space. However, though this does have ramifications for Powys' view of human

¹*After My Fashion*, pp. 138, 240-2, etc.

²*Rodmoor*, p. 288.

relationships, it is fundamentally concerned with a rapport with the seasonal world.

In these works, too, Powys attempts to show man coming to terms with death, and the dead. In the early short stories, such as 'Romer Mowl' and 'The Spot on the Wall', death haunts the consciousness of the central character. Occasionally Powys channels his negative sentiments into one character (like the nihilist Hastings in *Ducdame*, with his "cosmic unravelling"),¹ but more often than not death (and what lies after it) is simply another of the terrible uncertainties his people have to face. The deaths of James Andersen, in *Wood and Stone* (p. 570) and of Mr Moreton, in *After My Fashion*, are laden with ambiguity. Beneath the suffused atmosphere of religiosity, Powys is distinctly unwilling to commit himself. However, this is not an unwillingness born of a defence of his system of thought; rather, it is a positive unwillingness not to speculate and to make tentative open-ended proposals. Thus, the supernaturally creative power of consciousness transcends conventional barriers in *Ducdame*: the dead and the unborn participate in the decisions and actions of the living.

As I noted earlier, Powys frequently separated out aspects of his own fragmented consciousness among a number of protagonists : chiefly this occurred when a novel did not have, as its controlling centre, a 'Powys-hero'.² In the 'Preface' to *Wood and Stone*, Powys refers to the

¹This sentiment is very like Sophy's in *Darkness Visible*.

²Cavaliero (John Cowper Powys : *Novelist*, p. 26) makes the useful distinction between "panoramic" novels, such as *Wood and Stone*, *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Weymouth Sands*, which explore parallel dramas of power and weakness against a specific geographic background, and novels like *Rodmoor*, *Ducdame*, *Wolf Solent* and *Maiden Castle*, which centre round a single individual (the 'Powys-hero') and explore that man's private world in relation to his environment and personal relationships. Though this limits interpretation too strictly (for instance, *Maiden Castle* is frequently a 'debate' novel in the former category, while *A Glastonbury Romance* contains an authentic 'Powys-hero' in John Crow, and *After My Fashion* does not fit easily into either category) this does provide a useful rule of thumb. In relation to my discussion here, it is in the

conflict of aggression and passivity, converted, as Cavaliero notes, into highly personalised terms.³ In this debate between the mystic stonemason James Andersen and the materialist Romer⁴ it appears that the triumph lies, in death, with the mystic. But Powys' inherent scepticism prevails. A third figure, the disbelieving younger brother Luke Andersen (obviously a Llewelyn-figure) remains at the end, offering, if not a balance between opposing forces, then a selfish withdrawal from the scene of the action (shades here of the self-preservatory cowardice of Powys' counsel to "Enjoy-Defy-Forget"). In cases like this (and the same is true, for example, of *Weymouth Sands*) it is the overall movement of the novel, and not the individual progress of any of the characters, that points the clue to the novel's statement of authorial intention. Though, as I shall argue, this is obscured in the early novels by Powys' structural uncertainty, there is enough evidence in *Wood and Stone* of the enduring Powysian pattern : a slight tendency to advocate obscure mystical and spiritual illumination, very strongly tempered by a defensive scepticism. Lurking in the background is the threat of cruelty caused by repression of certain aggressive energies.⁵ That a recognisable physical world has not yet been invaded by levels of super- and sub-human consciousness (and these only begin to appear with any conviction in *Ducdame*) is, I would claim, solely due to the literary inexperience of the Powysian voice.

'panoramic' novels that Powys indulges most often in the division of personal characteristics among several characters.

³John Cowper Powys : *Novelist*, p. 21.

⁴This was a highly personal reference to a contemporary who tyrannised Powys at school (see his letter to Llewelyn Powys of 4.8.33., in ed. Humphrey, *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 337, on the writing on the *Autobiography*) and who he daringly put into the early story 'Romer Mowl'. It seems that the name conjured up in Powys all the sadistic violence he felt to be lurking in himself.

⁵This is almost always the cause of evil in Powys' world. Evil is thus physical and localised but never absolute - see my discussion of love and malice in Chapter 2.

It might seem from the catalogue of repressed grotesques, that Powys was ultimately misanthropic in his attitude to humanity. However, though his work is heavily charged with the melancholy and the tragic (partly a product of the historical period in which his aesthetic sense was moulded, and partly a consequence of his own eccentric personality), a note of tentative optimism is occasionally evident. Most often it is sounded by those still in touch with their roots - by the wise woman Vennie Seldom in *Wood and Stone*, by Mrs Renshaw in *Rodmoor*, by the almost witch-like Betsy Cooper in *Ducdame*. These, and others like them, retain a stubborn optimism in survival in the midst of tragedy.¹ Like Wordsworth's outcasts and vagrants, Powys' elderly female eccentrics possess a wisdom denied to the intellectual. In *Ducdame*, Betsy Cooper's recollections (dim, racial, quasi-mythic) of Cimmery Land "where folks do live like unborn babes" are authorially endorsed by the overall movement of the novel, most notably, of course, in the similarly evoked encounter of Rook and his son-to-be.

However, as I have noted already, those who possess a degree of self-knowledge and self-consciousness, are cut off from this primal innocence irrevocably. It serves only to remind them of the degree of their loss. In Powys' world, these people embark on another quest, in search of another pattern that will reconcile the factions within their being. It is in the articulation of this progress, in the early novels, that Powys begins to be troubled by formal uncertainties. Bluntly, his moments of consonance, his apotheoses, lack conviction. The fatal attraction of the tragic hero of melodrama, for whom all conflicts end in death, is too strong. This involves Powys in a lot of frantic plotting² in which the progress of the individual protagonist towards the thematically-

¹Mrs Renshaw's stoic resistance (*Rodmoor*, p. 252) is typical: "We were made to bear, to endure, to submit, to suffer."

²The endings of *Ducdame* and *After My Fashion*, in their different ways, detract crudely from the progress towards visionary illumination of Rook Ashover and Richard Storm.

required visionary illumination is neglected or even contradicted.

What is left is merely the sense of an ending, hints towards wholeness which are only clearly articulated in Powys' later work. Most fully developed are those dubious bisexual figures who populate Powys' fiction, beings in whom at least one of Powys' pressing contradictions, the sexual, meet. In *After My Fashion*, Catherine offers Storm at least some moments of repose from the two other women who objectify the conflicts within him, but in his uncertainty Powys appears to be unable to recognise that still point of the turning world for what it is. Elsewhere, Powys' restraining ambiguity keeps his visionary speculation in check. In *Rodmoor* there are two such figures : Baptiste, the potential saviour, and Philippa, the darker, more threatening. destroyer. Both possess the androgynous characteristics of the type referred to in Powys' sexual fantasies in the *Autobiography* and elsewhere. They point towards Powys' more fully thought-out later contention that wholeness lies not in fusion or merging, but in the holding in tension of opposites.

The particular attraction of these figures is that their sexuality is either absent, or sublimated into a cold, bloodless (almost passionless) companionship. Once again the early novels show in embryo what will later be developed more fully. Powys contends that love (in the 'normal' physical and emotional sense) is possessive and destructive. Hence, he is fascinated by the ritualist and cerebral aspects of relationships. This is true, for instance, of Sorio's relationships with Philippa and Nance in *Rodmoor*. This cerebral attitude permits Powys too to extend his erotic awareness into objects, and particularly the natural world. Exploring this hypothesis in the early novels, Powys arrives at the cloying sensationalism of Rook Ashover in *Ducdame*. He is in many respects a prototype for Wolf Solent, a personality in whom Powys can celebrate the creative power of consciousness. However, in *Ducdame*, the reconciliation

towards which Rook (and Powys) strive remains purely mental: there is little sense, as there is for Wolf, of working out the practical ramifications of, for example, the illumination he receives in the dream-like meeting with his son.

In the early novels, then, Powys sees man alone, with a fragmented consciousness, and with an as yet only vaguely defined sense of his spiritual predicament. However, in the tentative aspirations of his characters towards wholeness, Powys provides glimpses of that visionary illumination that becomes more and more evident in his later work.

ii

Earlier I commented on the fact that, in *Ducdame*, the moments of intense communion that Rook is granted bring him into a harmonious relationship with the natural world. In actual fact this relationship between man and his environment is one of Powys' major and enduring themes. On one level, he is a writer in the English rural tradition: as a chronicler of village life and community, and of man's intimate relationship with the rhythms and modulations of nature, he stands with Crabbe, Clare, Wordsworth. Yet there is more in his writing than simple anti-pastoral realism. Nature in Powys' work is immanent, the natural world is sacramental; landscape participates in the shaping of personality and perception, rather than merely reflecting it. This involves more than simply a severe attack of the pathetic fallacy: landscape mediates in the living relationship Powys sees man as having, not only with the sub-human world (even, the inanimate world) but also with the presences and personalities of supernatural existence.

Because, as I have already noted, the overtly supernatural does not become a commonplace element in Powys' fiction until *Ducdame*, landscape

remains largely, in these early novels, a sounding board for the exploration of merely human values. The environment shapes society, and gives proportion to relationships : hence, the evocation of rural community, and the distinct lack of such values in the urban America of **After My Fashion**. Powys suggests, in the manner of George Eliot, how those relationships are linked to the vaster organic processes of nature. Even these early fictions are saturated by landscape directly and emotionally experienced. Cavaliero suggests how, like Lawrence, Powys uses landscape not merely to blend in with character and incident, but to further his protagonist's self-awareness.¹ It is true that at times Powys evokes natural settings with a kind of gratuitous emotiveness. There is the suspicion, at least, that in **Wood and Stone** and **Rodmoor** Powys paints a sinister and malignant view of nature in order to toy with his characters' tortured sense of helplessness, after the fashion of Hardy or Poe. Yet even here a sense of place both reflects and controls the action, when Powys approaches the issue more subtly. The two hills, for example, in **Wood and Stone**, exert a conspicuous but complex influence on what takes place on them, an influence more full of shading and nuance than, say, the oppressive weight of Egdon Heath in Hardy's work.

Throughout his life, in common with other visionary writers, Powys placed a strong emphasis on the significance of a very specific sense of place. Though the early novels contain nothing remotely like the descriptions (and the psychic influences) of Glastonbury Tor or Maiden Castle, they do have their own local resonances. The two hills that dominate Nevilton in **Wood and Stone**, Nevilton Hill and Leo's Hill, can be directly related to Montacute Tor and Ham Hill, which overlook Montacute Vicarage, the home of Powys' youth. These hills participate in a kind of spiritual conflict, the one the scene of quarrying and commercial

¹See his **John Cowper Powys : Novelist**, especially pp. 157-62.

exploitation in the "Will to Power", the other associated with a legendary piece of the True Cross, and the "Will to Sacrifice". They are sources, as well as examples, of the conflict of wood and stone. In *Ducdame* the landscape is identifiably that of Dorset, but the moods and tones of that world show Powys beginning to develop the extensive range of interpretative interaction of man and environment that the Wessex novels celebrate. The value of place is also apparent in *After My Fashion*, in the Sussex countryside in which Powys first set up home. The contrast between this traditional milieu and the harsh metal-and-concrete world of New York is blunt, but to the point.

As Powys' fictional technique matures, landscape and personality are seen to be inextricably linked. This is, in a sense, the inevitable consequence of a view of life which sees the fundamental unit of existence as personality. As I have shown, *The Complex Vision* preaches the "creative gesture" of perceiving the universe as half-created and half-discovered, a gesture which is not solely the property of human beings. In the early novels, the more bizarre consequences of this idea rarely emerge from Powys' fairly traditional narrative technique. However, evidence for it can be discerned in the sensual and yet somewhat sterile atmospherics of *Ducdame*. It is by no means clear how much the claustrophobic oppressiveness of that novel is due to the landscape's influence on Rook, and how much is due to his overcharged imagination in perceiving that landscape. Similarly, *After My Fashion* depicts the complex interaction of Storm's changing moods in relation to the environment in which he finds himself.¹ In both novels, the natural world is used to provide the symbols and the mythic patterns around which the central figures develop their

¹Note, for example, fluid changes of scene and temperament on pp. 28 or 159 of that novel. Cavaliero's essay 'Landscape and Personality in the Early Novels' (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 85-101) documents quite thoroughly Powys' developing technical powers in *Wood and Stone*, *Rodmoor* and *Ducdame*.

"life-illusions", and this again takes place very much in the way Powys himself describes it in the non-fiction.

The importance, and the meaningfulness, of place is of course more vital to some of Powys' characters than to others. One pattern that is repeated consistently in the novels is that of the return home of the 'Powys-hero'. The value of home is again likely to be autobiographical in origin. From his mid-thirties until he was nearly sixty Powys was an itinerant lecturer in America, making only infrequent journeys back across the Atlantic. The intensity with which he visualised and imagined himself back into the important places of his own past is evident not only in the non-fiction (and most obviously, of course, the **Autobiography**). It provides him with the starting point for **Rodmoor**, **After My Fashion** and **Ducdame** (and, later, for all the Wessex novels). What Gwyneth Miles calls "the pattern of homecoming"¹ colours these novels with the pathos of the 'Powys-hero' rediscovering and confronting the lost roots of his past, a pathos that exploits the often immense distance that separates those figures psychologically (armed with their current life-illusions) from what they were. Here landscape takes up a more obviously active role, in shaping the subsequent revaluation of vision, the progress of which each of Powys' books charts. In **After My Fashion** Storm discovers, on his return to England from the continent, that the country possesses a kind of mana, almost a magnetism, that attracts aspects of his current psychological state whilst repelling foreign (in both senses) influences that had gone into making him what he was.

In this way, the plunging back into an old environment becomes part of a pattern of initiation (indeed, a rite of passage) whereby the protagonist emerges matured, in theory, at least. Once more it is Powys' uncertain structural grasp, in these early works, that upsets the

¹Essays on John Cowper Powys, pp. 219-31.

precision of this process. The principle, however, emerges with sufficient clarity : the concrete existence of the environment and the abstract conceptualising of the 'life-illusion' merge into 'atmosphere', or into what Wilson Knight calls "etherealising". Of the novels at present under consideration, it is **Ducdame** which best illustrates this in practice, in, for example, the two episodes already referred to - the mysterious description of the swan, and the mystical description of Rook's unborn son.

Reference to this 'nature mysticism' is, in fact, what lifts Powys' work on the relation between man and the environment out of the naturalistic realm of traditional English nature poetry and prose and into the visionary world where the supernatural intrudes without apology into the natural, and the boundary between the two shades almost into non-existence.

Given a view of existence which places its greatest stress on personality and the creative power of the imagination, it is not surprising that there is considerable ambiguity in Powys' work about the 'real' existence of supernatural entities. In fact, in the non-fiction, there is a marked discrepancy between Powys' assent to the existence of some kind of First Cause and the "Immortal Companions" as a philosophical proposition, and his quotidian insistence on regarding everything as some aspect or other of the creative power of mind. It is probably simplest, in these early novels at least, to regard Powys' probing of the relationship between the supernatural and the natural world as a study of the more obscure aspects of the human psyche, and particularly, given Powys' somewhat eccentric views on sexuality and the religious impulse, on realms outside the conventional norms of the social or (broadly) realist tradition of the novel.

Therefore, many of the supernatural 'vibrations' evoked in these early works may be regarded as the physical objectification of psychic states. This is true, for instance, of the mysteriously perceived spot on the wall, in the short story of that name.¹ Landscape becomes, in this way, part of the personal mythos (or "life-illusion") of Powys; and of those of his characters who most obviously resemble him. Wilson Knight, in a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*² alludes to Powys' place in a long occult tradition in observing the spiritual properties of natural phenomena, a tradition including Blake and Wordsworth, and running through to Lawrence and Powys. It is interesting that the appeal of ancient societies is strong in this respect : Lawrence turned to Etruscan and Aztec culture, Powys to the Celts (and, I would add, Golding to the Egyptians).

However, not a great deal of this occult interest emerges in the first few of Powys' novels. Such evidence as does exist tends to take the form of a conflict between Christian and pre-Christian cultures. I have already mentioned how the opposing hills in *Wood and Stone* exemplify the contrast of mysticism and materialism; they also raise the opposition of Christian and Celtic (or even pre-Celtic). But Powys resists a simple schematic structure : in *Wood and Stone* the reality of spiritual forces existing in and through these landscapes is clouded in ambiguity. As Cavaliero comments, the actual evocation of the supernatural in this novel (in, for instance, the 'Amber Lake' chapter) is contrived and literary, very much in the manner of Poe.³ Elsewhere, the book contains natural

¹See *Romer Mowl and Other Stories*, pp. 17-24. This is quite evidently influenced by the strange epiphanic moment which Powys describes as happening to himself in the *Autobiography* (p. 199). Echoes of it survive in *Wolf Solent* (p. 461), and this provides an interesting comparison with Sophy's experience with the Rorschach ink-blot test in Golding's *Darkness Visible*.

²*Times Literary Supplement* 11.10.57 - pp. 601-2.

³*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 87-8.

images of death and decay, and a connection with explicitly evil forces seems to be implied. But, either because of Powys' inherent reticence and scepticism, or because of an inability to control the events he has set in motion,¹ the novel is in the end frustratingly unhelpful. In *After My Fashion*, too, the contrast between landscapes evoking Christian and pre-Christian auras is only tentatively accomplished. Nevertheless, at moments like Storm's pause to pray in the village church at Littlegate, evidence can be seen for the mature Powysian attitude that was to come, in that Storm craves for, and is apparently rewarded with, a sense of an earth-rooted pre-Christian 'vibration' beneath the superficial 'religious' veneer of the place. And finally, in *Ducdame*, the achieved and authentic intimation of mystically-apprehended unity is supplied. The sacramental significance of landscape is present in Powys' work from then on.

iii

In commenting, in passing, on the importance of community in Powys' view of life, I made note of the contrast between the rustic, village tradition and the educated, urban tradition. Like many visionaries, Powys concentrated primarily on the plight of the individual, and his salvation by individual spiritual illumination. But whatever the attraction that hermits, eccentrics and social misfits might have had for Powys (and I have shown in my second chapter how strong Powys' temperamental affinity was to such people), he recognised man's communal responsibilities, and, in his novels, attempted to come to terms with the often conflicting interests that tied the individual to his social group.

Like Golding's, Powys' social perspective is markedly stratified.

¹This has been put forward as a serious suggestion, and is, I think, in the light of what I shall make of *After My Fashion*, not an unfair assumption. See Brebner, *The Demon Within*, p. 5.

However, because even in these early novels Powys paints on a much broader canvas than Golding, filling out an immense amount of circumstantial detail, he seems, on the face of it, less prone to a schematic or overtly stylised handling of the issues of class and social relationships. Nevertheless, many of the same preconceptions emerge. One is for men to be in harmony with the environment if they are to relate to one another. It is from this root that the cherishing of rural community grows. In **After My Fashion** the farm workers with whom Canyot associates share not only a sense of mutual trust, but also an intuitive sensitivity to 'fate'. The curious piece of Hardyian plotting by which Canyot learns of his mother's death, however appallingly handled it might be in other respects, at least illuminates this central point.

This has its necessary corollary : that those who for whatever reason have broken with this community live fractured and incomplete lives not only with regard to each other, but also in relation to that 'fate' which drives them, and which, as a consequence, seems directly antagonistic and malign. This, in Powys' work, is the bitterest fruit of modernity. Despite the lip-service he pays to the inexorable upward spirals of progress in **Obstinate Cymric**, the modern, in almost all its aspects, is unequivocally reviled in Powys' writing. In **Wood and Stone** (in this a foretaste of **A Glastonbury Romance**) the modern is associated with mining and quarrying, in this case a violation of that environment which had hitherto safeguarded social stability. The American scenes in **After My Fashion** visualise the erection of the city as a quasi-sexual assault on the virgin land.¹

If this urban environment gives birth to new vision at all, it is only a weak and sickly child. In the second half of **After My Fashion** Powys stages a debate between conflicting views on society, and despite the

¹After My Fashion, Chapter 13.

attraction of certain ideologies, it is clear that none of them has the breadth or scope to re-create community - at the end of that novel Powys has settled for individual vision, or none at all. In fact, Powys felt a strong instinctive attraction to 'the idea of communism', but communism of a very idiosyncratic turn. In this respect, Powys' attempts to grapple with the complex social problems of twentieth-century man are crude and insensitive. His communists and working class agitators are caricatures : Karmakoff in *After My Fashion* is darkly mysterious, attractive more on account of his 'Russian soul' than of his ideology; and if the working-class representatives in *Wood and Stone* have not yet been burdened with the urban accents and glib catch-phrases of the hapless Red Robinson in *A Glastonbury Romance*, they put a sore strain on credibility. This is also true, in fact, of many of those whose job it is to articulate certain Powysian social values from the lower strata of society. Like Jobber Skald in *Weymouth Sands*, the Andersen brothers in *Wood and Stone* are too eloquent, too literate, too bourgeois. It is not surprising that in his later work Powys retreated from the modern world, into mythic histories, celebrations of the democracy of insanity and naive science-fiction fantasies. In the evocation of what is always a very personal cosmology, Powys found the claims of society a disturbing intrusion.¹ He was generous in his treatment of those who espoused values contrary to his own, handling his economic and political exploiters with humorous detachment and a certain sympathy. But his vision found no means to accommodate them. In his ideal moments, as I have shown in Chapter Two, he reverts back to a

¹Some, like Brebner, (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 267), argue that certain of Powys' later works reconcile the claims of society and the individual : he says of Porius: "Powys has broadened his conception of personal salvation. It is now apparent that imaginative creation involves society as well as the individual". I would argue that Powys is only able to do this by inventing society in his own image, in the obscurity of dark-ages Britain, or by interpreting it as an asylum, as in *The Inmates*.

novels does he begin to come to terms with the relationship between that model and the world he ostensibly sets out to describe.

iv

Though it would be unwise to lay at the door of technical inexperience all the shortcomings evident in Powys' early novels, it is undoubtedly the case that the formal and aesthetic problems in the four novels under discussion contribute substantially to the failure of the early fiction to match up to the Wessex novels. Powys clearly knew what he was aiming for - a linking of humorous detachment with an all-embracing sympathy. But it was one thing to be philosophically generous ("large tolerant after-thoughts"), quite another to embody this practically in a work of fiction.

Defenders of the Powysian faith have seen the relationship between form and content in the novels as being largely dependent on his metaphysical 'system'.¹ However, as I have observed in the previous chapter, Powys' attachment to the romance idiom seems not to have had any philosophical basis, except for one important matter. This concerns the relationships between the novel, the romance and 'reality'. Francis Berry argues,² rightly I think, that whereas the traditional novel tends towards limiting its subject matter to the socially 'realistic', the romance (at least in its medieval and renaissance manifestations) allows and even encourages the writer (or narrator) to 'break into' the narrative with explanations, to interweave into the dimensions of space and time deeper levels of significant action through dreams, visions, and so on. Yet if this goes some way towards explaining the Powysian method, it cannot

¹For instance, Angus Wilson in *A Review of English Literature*, January 1963, pp. 9-13.

²*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, especially pp. 186-8.

excuse the structural quirks of the early novels. On one level, as Cavaliero observes, the novels are pictorial rather than dramatic in conception.¹ Hence, the early novels are structured in static 'scenes' or episodes. *Wood and Stone* and *Rodmoor* are noticeably episodic. Yet running parallel with this mode of construction is one that has its roots in nineteenth-century melodrama, focussing on the progress of a tragic hero. Often in *After My Fashion* (see below) and *Ducdame*, Powys leads the reader away from what seem like weighty symbolic moments towards obscure details relating to his central protagonist.

In these early novels there is little to suggest that Powys was cultivating deliberately anarchistic 'anti-novelist' tendencies. These do occur in the later fiction, but such subversion as is evident in the works up to *Wolf Solent* seems more likely to be accidental than planned. Clearly it will be difficult to prove this in any detail; in the ensuing discussion of *After My Fashion* I will suggest why I believe this to be the case.

Of these few early works, only *After My Fashion* discusses the nature of art and writing within the framework of its own chosen theme, but much that is written there could be applied to the whole of this period of Powys' fictional career. And in fact, the inconclusiveness of the debates about art in the novel (or at least in the failure of Powys to embody **structurally** the conclusions that the novel seems to suggest) stands as the neatest illustration of the gap between the aim and the achievement of these few works. The strongest pull is between a nostalgic ritualism in art and a rather more modernist tendency to think (and write) with a concentration on images (in the manner of, say, Lawrence's *Women in Love*). Powys' dilemma is intensified here because, I think, he associates this ritual aspect (both in language and thought) with the over-ripe tones of

¹Essays on John Cowper Powys, p. 89.

late romanticism. Thus, in the novel, Powys seems to side with the 'modern' (triumphantly embodied in Elise Angel's New Year's Eve dance) yet at the same time Storm (the 'I' of the novel, and in many ways a 'Powys-hero') is shown pursuing his fate as the tragic figure of melodrama. Even more perversely, Storm's theories of art (the 'official' Powys ones, at least at the start of the novel) lead to sterility. Now, Powys made a philosophy out of cultivating sterility, but in art its logical consequence is silence, or at least a novel which shows how silence can be achieved. It is this that distinguishes most significantly the success of *Wolf Solent* from the failure of *After My Fashion* : in this early novel Powys does not seem to have grasped the logical conclusion to which his art was leading.

So there is here a discrepancy between form and content, between tenor and thought.¹ For example, the painter Canyot takes over our attention from Storm, as Lexie does from Rook in *Ducdame*. Both novels end in anti-climactic vagueness. Having promised a sense of release, if not of closure, these novels seem to end by being accidentally undogmatic, just as *Wood and Stone* drifted to a close with Luke Andersen and Francis Taxater talking.

What Powys seems to be aiming for, in these early works, is a sense of unbuttoned largesse that the mature novels did actually achieve. He wanted art "to keep the horizons open (to) hold fast to poetry and humour, and about her creations there must be a certain spirit of liberation and the presence of large tolerant after-thoughts."² It seems churlish to complain, in this mood of spontaneity and optimism, about the lack of precision or control in Powys' early work. The opening passage of *Wood and Stone* is typical of Powys' method; it unfolds slowly and

¹For comments on a similar conflict in the other three novels under discussion, see Brebner's *The Demon Within* (pp. 1-40, 227-8).

²Quoted in *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 101.

ponderously, taking in circumstantial details about the history of natural forms and their timelessness. It is not surprising, given this approach, that his writing betrays more than occasional lapses of style. At its best, in the early fiction, Powys' writing flows with a kind of instinctive imagery, in a construction that mirrors the relationship between nature and men's moods. It is in this light that Powys' decision to call his 1925 novel *Ducdame* is best understood. If we as readers are expecting a resolution, then we will be consciously and deliberately frustrated, victims of Jacques' jest in *As You Like It*, listening to "a Greek invocation to call fools into a circle".

v

So far, I have examined the early novels in the context of Powys' attitude to humanity, to nature and the supernatural, to society, and to his theories of art. Before looking at how vision is communicated in these works, what can be said about the way they depict Powys' 'world-view'?

It is perhaps not surprising, given the formal uncertainties referred to above, that Powys' early fiction reflects the mature 'authentic' Powysian world-view only intermittently. This is the case despite the fact that *The Complex Vision*, the philosophical treatise in which Powys laid down the theoretical framework on which he based his mature thought, is roughly contemporary with *After My Fashion*. Only with *Wolf Solent* did Powys begin to discover an appropriate fictional model for the vision he wished to communicate. Hence the four novels under discussion here rarely offer more than a glimpse of the characteristic sweep and breadth of perspective of the Wessex quartet.

Of Powys' view that the fundamental unit of existence is personality, and that all living creatures and all inanimates take part in the act of

creation, there is little evidence. In this area, his central interest as revealed in these novels is the relationship between the personalities of his characters and their environment, especially in moments of intense perception or at death. Here Powys' writing is suffused with a cloying religiosity, making use of the language of religion, and especially of Christianity, without the trappings of dogma or traditional meaning. This occurs especially at moments like Storm's contemplative reverie about the relationship between himself and "the *something else* for which there is no other name but the name of *God*",¹ and into which he thinks that his 'self' will pass on his death.

Powys' later aversion to Christianity is also not especially prominent in these novels, though the 'religious' aspects are sufficiently vague as to avoid the specificities of faith. In *After My Fashion*, the rhetoric of Christianity is blended with that of Greek myth (crucially on pp. 15-6, 252, etc.), and I have already commented on how the Christian and Celtic auras surrounding the two hills permeate the whole fabric of *Wood and Stone*.

This opposition is typical of Powys' dualist outlook, and in this at least the early novels are at one with the mature work. The fiction does not suggest that opposing forces are isolated from one another (there are rarely uniformly 'good' or 'evil' characters, for example); rather duality is exhibited within personality, in a state of, as it were, continuous warfare. It is, of course, present on the outside in the obsessive 'pairing' of characters and place settings in *Rodmoor*, for instance. But, as Brebner sensibly notes, "It is not towards the solution of any of these opposites that this novel is moving; instead it attempts to depict meaning in the very tensions it describes."²

¹*After My Fashion*, p. 110.

²Brebner, *The Demon Within*, p. 18.

Yet though it was not Powys' intention to show one side triumphing over another, these early novels display, perhaps inadvertently, signs of a pervasive mood (almost of an attitude towards the fictional world he is creating) that would suggest some overall emphasis on decline, decay, collapse, and the bitter-sweet resonance of loss. It is interesting to consider why this should be so. In part, it seems likely to be the product of the historical period in which Powys' aesthetic sensibility was formed - the morbid, sensationalist exoticism of the turn of the century, fed on Pater and Poe. But, more than this, it reflects early indications of Powys' yearnings for passivity and for a sterile sensuality. Thus, *Rodmoor* is full of moods of isolation, and obliquely threatening 'atmospheres'. The place itself, Rodmoor, is a run-down port menaced by bleak salt-marshes and worn away by the sea.

Therefore, though *The Complex Vision* portrays the necessarily never-ending opposition of love and malice, it is often malice that appears to have the last word in these novels. This frequently takes the form of exploitation, either physical (usually with sadistic overtones) or social and financial. Both aspects are exhibited in the tyranny of Romer and his daughter over Maurice Quincunx and the aptly named Lacrima in *Wood and Stone*. Moreover, it is difficult not to feel that Powys is revelling in such descriptions of grotesque deformity as this picture of rural 'reality': "This child, whose half-articulate utterances and facial distortions would have been horrible in a city, fell naturally into his place among wilting hemlocks and lightning struck trees and birds eaten by hawks and rabbits eaten by weasels."¹ Here (and this passage is not unusual) Powys' world seems gratuitously horrible. At the end of the pathway along which this leads stands a character like Hastings in *Ducdame*. He is Powys' first genuinely Manichean figure (Mr Moreton in

¹*Ducdame*, p. 36.

After My Fashion seems in many ways a preliminary sketch). He embodies a principle drawn almost directly from **The Complex Vision** - that of opposing anything positive with passive malignant thought. Moreover, the language in which his attitude is described is given an authority by its direct echoing of Powys' own language - in childhood, Hastings claimed that it was possible "to think the whole world away and to sink back, back, far back, into the comfortable arms of the infinite Nothingness" (210).

Yet, if this yearning for annihilation is one of the strongest forces in these novels, it is not, ultimately, where Powys wishes to leave his characters, or his readers. For beyond annihilation, having plumbed the depths of (self-)destruction, there is recreation. But in the early fiction Powys does not seem capable of showing recreation, as he later does with the hero (anti-hero?) of **Owen Glendower**. Instead he is reduced to telling us about it, as in Sorio's thoughts about his projected book in **Rodmoor**:

"What I'm aiming at in my book is a revelation of how the essence of life is found in the instinct of destruction Out of destruction alone - out of the rending and tearing of something - of something in the way - does new life spring to birth Pure destruction (is) a burning and devouring flame. It's a mad splendid revel of glaring whiteness What the saints and mystics seek is the destruction of everything within reach - of everything that sticks out, that obtrudes, that is simply *there*."(111-2)

This urge to get 'beyond' recurs from this point onwards.¹ The method by which this might be achieved is only sketchily described at this early stage. Rook Ashover in **Ducdame** applies it most explicitly, seeking for attraction without attendant emotion - hence his inclination towards union with 'cold' vegetable or elemental life.

In the non-fiction Powys advocates the cultivation (albeit in bizarre ways) of three basic impulses on the route towards this new sterile

¹See, for example, pp. 324-5 of **Rodmoor**, in which the familiar language of this aspiration can again be found.

passive existence - the comic, the sexual and the religious. Comedy scarcely features in the early novels - except perhaps in the conscious subversion of the more portentous passages of 'insight', such as the way the 'swan' passage in *Ducdane* is punctured. This however pales in comparison to the clash of worlds in Powys' mature work - in, for example, the 'Mark's Court' episode in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

The religious and sexual routes are explored rather more thoroughly. Overtones of religiosity I have already discussed, but it is perhaps appropriate at this stage to note how closely Powys ties this in with the insight afforded by androgynous boy/girls or 'sylphs'. These figure significantly in Powys' fiction from as early as the short story 'Romer Mowl'. But it is in *Rodmoor* that they begin to have a major impact on the 'Powys-hero', offering him a way beyond the impasse of passive sterility into wholeness. Unusually though, this novel contains two such characters, Sorio's son Baptiste and Philippa, the dangerous 'darker' embodiment of the bisexual figure. Finally, in death, Sorio is described in a language more aligned to that used in the novel to describe both Baptiste and the sea, in which Sorio meets his end, but any note of 'positive' affirmation is only tentative in this brooding, predominantly dark-hued novel.

vi

The journey towards wholeness begins, appropriately enough in the light of Powys' cultivation of passivity, in a moment of stillness and silence, approximating to prayer. There are frequent examples in the early novels - the mystic reveries of James Andersen, Adrian Sorio's silent contemplation of the sea, Richard Storm's pause in the church at Littlegate - examples which serve to show that for Powys this was a characteristic gesture. Its essential value lay in the 'opening' of the

characters' spiritual awareness to the (usually 'earth-rooted') "vibration" of the locality. We return again to the importance of a sense of place, for Powys, as for other visionaries. But in order to become, as it were, in tune with this mana it is necessary to abandon the claims of self-seeking and to adopt a passive role.

Though ritualistic elements that might enhance their state have little significant part in these novels, there is substantial evidence that even at this stage Powys regarded the visionary tendency as being associated with certain character types. Two roles in particular - the saint and, to a lesser extent, the artist - were deemed especially receptive. Powys' first saint, Major Charles James Shales, V.C., in 'Romer Mowl', is typical - an amateur, even a sceptic, but sentient at crucial moments to "an electric vibration" which signals the presence of occult forces. Another such 'transcendant' type, Vennie Seldom, ensures the collapse of the malign Romers in *Wood and Stone*. The artist, too, has his role to play, most notably in *After My Fashion*, as we shall see. Art, at its most exalted, aspires towards similar insights, in the sanctification of all things.¹

In the non-fiction Powys writes at length about the moment of revelation itself, and the "mystery" of the "apex-thought". In the early fiction he is rarely so explicit, largely I think because in life such moments pass instantly, retained only imperfectly in memory; in art they are preserved, fossilised almost, which is itself a denial of their transience. So Powys goes out of his way to stress their seeming inconsequentiality - Storm's chance glimpse of the statue in *After My Fashion*, for example. In this way the specific concrete 'reality' of such moments is immediately transformed into the protagonist's subjective interpretation of them - most strikingly in the mystical nineteenth

¹See *After My Fashion*, pp. 89-90.

chapter of *Ducdame*. In fact the practical implications of capturing such moments caused Powys some difficulty, as *After My Fashion* will well illustrate. But, as Rook Ashover is confronted by his as yet unborn child in *Ducdame*, we have such a moment as Powys' later fiction scarcely equalled, a moment of absolute inclusiveness, when the contradictions of different levels of reality are reconciled at this fleeting point of vision. Afterwards, and inevitably, the worlds slide apart again, but the impact of that moment resonates throughout the novel.

II

After My Fashion is both an illuminating and an infuriating novel. It deserves detailed consideration for a number of reasons : because it is the only novel in which Powys writes in depth about the impact of urban America on his artistic consciousness; because it handles the dualist theme of his non-fiction in a way that casts fresh light on Powys' thought; because one of its themes is a debate about the nature of art, a debate that the novel structurally enacts; because it contains, in Richard Storm, a 'Powys-hero' who reveals the author simultaneously to be impressively honest and remarkably blind about his own ideas, and the way they should be communicated; and finally, because it demonstrates, in Storm's progress towards a moment of visionary insight (and the manner in which that is handled) precisely the mixture of mature thought and immature technique that, I would claim, characterises all of the early fiction.

If I concentrate on the progress of Richard Storm in this half of my chapter on the early fiction, it is because an understanding of the process to which Powys subjects him is crucial to any understanding of

this novel as a whole, and as a representative of Powys' immature art. His progress enacts (and occasionally contradicts) Powys' essential statement here about the relationship between vision and art and the life of the individual. It covers, in passing, Powys' ideas about the motivations that individuals bring to their relationships with others, and his views on society in both rural and urban traditions.

The traditional Powys preoccupations occur mainly in the novel's long first section, and are focused mainly on Richard Storm, after whose fashion the book progresses. Like Wolf Solent, he is returning to his roots, engaged in the task of rediscovering in himself the connections with a timeless quasi-religious cultural background, which will animate his vision, and hence his work as an artist. Like Wolf too, he brings with him the "life-illusions" which have sustained him up to this point, though unlike Wolf's they are neither so fully developed (and hence are less difficult to break down), nor so well articulated. It is difficult to avoid the assumption that the reason for this is that Powys himself is not particularly interested in them. The Paris background counts for very little apart from dignifying Storm with the appellation "author of the *Life of Verlaine*", and an understanding of Symbolist aesthetics, or even a cogent defence of what is 'new' and 'daring', is scarcely hinted at in the 'Storm in a Tea Shop' episode. The opening paragraphs establish his dissatisfaction with French culture, and prepare us for his quest for the usual Powys goal, "some really adequate contribution to the bitter-sweet cup of the world's hard wrung wisdom" (9). Soon after this he begins to conform to the 'dualist' opinions that play such a large part in Powys' philosophical and theological ideas, and to search for a fusion of the two in a synthesising perspective (p. 17).

In Powys' work the dualist view that the central protagonist holds is often given an objective referent in the characters to whom he relates.

Thus Wolf's vacillation between Gerda and Christie was an outward projection of an inward conflict. Similarly, Storm's emotional crisis at the end of the first chapter is conceptualised as a dream vision of two women that are to be central to his life, the dancer Elise Angel, and the newly-met Nelly Moreton:

"After all, he thought, the more complicated pattern of our modern days has not liberated us from the old accursed duality. Will the balance, the rhythm, the lovely poise of things, *never* be obtained by luckless humanity, torn and divided between the two natures?" (24)

A dualist perception is not solely the prerogative of Richard in this book. A familiar Powys voice is heard in Mr Moreton's articulation of the 'religious' aspects of this confrontation. This Manichean approach to life, involving a belief that God is essentially evil, but that the forces of light, led by Christ, will eventually triumph, is unusually clearly articulated in Moreton's decision to renounce his living. The debate between him and Richard allows Powys the opportunity to treat this issue in some depth. Moreton's stance is outlined in terms remarkably similar to Powys' own in the non-fiction, (pp. 75-7) and concludes,

"To my mind the world is an arena of perpetual conflict between these two forces, one of which I renounce and defy; the other I worship in the Mass."

As a solution "to the great 'Sphinx problem' of the unknown reality" Richard opposes this with a fusionist view of "some fundamental unity in things", challenging Moreton to deny that "our Lord himself believed in what we usually mean when we use the expression God". It is a confrontation which Powys deliberately does not resolve in words, but in action. They break off to study a butterfly (that it should be a "Painted Lady" is an added irony), which is old Moreton's abiding passion. Powys here gently introduces this incident as a preparation for the treatment of

Moreton's death, when the analogy linking butterflies and souls (both 'psyche' in the Greek) will provide the answer to the problem.¹

The process of Moreton's death is carefully charted. It begins with the defusing of the philosophical antagonism that had sustained his life - God ceases to be "the great illusion of humanity", but instead "He felt inclined to bid it ('the Eidolon Vulgaris') goodbye and to apologise to it." This is followed immediately by a vision of Christ, but again it is not as Moreton usually imagines but is transformed into a butterfly:

"The only thing that puzzled him was that the human arms of the crucifix which hovered just above poor Gracie's head were not fastened to anything but were waving in the air like the wings of a butterfly." (145)

The butterfly wings induce a feeling of tranquility, and announce the peaceful relationship of all things, The wings fan him, draw him out of his body, and introduce him to annihilation, revealing to him the absurdity of his philosophical debates:

"He wished this being annihilated would never stop. It was the happiest sensation he had ever known. He loved everyone; only he couldn't speak to tell them so. Annihilation had something to do with love, then? It must have. And it was beautiful beyond expression. But what was the connection between annihilation and the immortality of the soul? He wished he could remember what the immortality of the soul meant. It was a musical sentence. It must have meant something once to him when his brain was clouded. But his brain was clear now and it meant nothing at all." (146)

Thus John Moreton is carried forward towards death, while gradually being released from the conceptualisations which had plagued him during his life, until finally, "He was going to sleep going to sleep upon velvet-black butterfly wings." (147) The implications, in the context of the debate the old man and Storm had earlier, are clear. The synthesis

¹It is interesting, in passing, to note that in *Lord of the Flies* Golding uses precisely this symbol in the central scene in which Simon 'converses' with the pig's head. Here, butterflies dance in the clearing while flies buzz round the stick, and continue to do so when Simon has fainted. The implication, that both maintain their existence in the spiritual realm, that both are present potentially in man, confirms the 'visionary' link between Golding and Powys in this sphere.

which will resolve the ex-vicar's temperamental dualism is both a linking of those oppositions and at the same time beyond them, revealing to him the absurdity of the distinctions he had held in his life. Equally inevitably this culminating vision comes too late to be communicated to those he is leaving behind. Like Jocelin's deathbed cry in *The Spire*, Moreton's words are lost in a kind of death rattle, to be interpreted by his observers as they see fit.

However, Mr Moreton's movement towards a resolution of his dualities is only one, minor strand in the fabric of the novel. The more complex journey is Storm's. The first movement on this journey is the return to England, placing Richard in contact with a kind of mana emanating from this fountain of culture and history:

"There must, he began to think, be some sort of unchangeable emanation proceeding from that which, more than any ritual, had the power to call one's mind back to its lost rhythm, to its broken balance." (22)

This is familiar Powys territory, the natural landscape and its inhabitants acting not just as a repository of values but as an energising force, spiritually and culturally. The affirmation of the positive qualities of this environment comes with Richard's response, a sinking back into the comforts of the eternal rhythm, endorsed by Powys' richest, most poetical and hypnotic prose:

"He dimly regretted the fierce pattern of his struggles to articulate and intellectualise his life. Why should he articulate anything, or analyse anything, when it was possible to let his soul sink peacefully into the being of these old calm eternal things, until it became a portion of them and live their life, large-flowing, placid, deep, ruminating, unruffled, content?" (28)

Powys' heroes aspire to a kind of vegetable life, a life of passive and total dependence on the land. But what will be the consequences for art? Richard's artistic credo, which seems at this stage to be Powys' also, tends towards individual silence, and towards acting as the amanuensis of

a natural (though by its very nature inexpressible) language:

"Too long, he decided, had he occupied himself with questions of technique, with problems of style. The work which he would do now, the poetry he should write, should primarily concern itself with some definite vision of things that should be left to evoke its own method of expression, its own music, in accordance with the intensity of its accumulative purpose."
(22-3)

What Richard (Powys?) does not realise at this point is that "its own method of expression" is silence, or at least is not an expression in words.

If not in words, then perhaps it is in painting that this is expressed. Richard's reverie is disturbed by the painter Robert Canyot, and in the debate which follows it is Canyot who comes closest to the vision of art that Richard has just set himself. Canyot is a traditionalist, not an experimenter, setting his store in attention to technique rather than the amorphous inner promptings that Richard evokes. Canyot is not presented with any great sympathy, yet neither, Powys is careful to demonstrate, is Richard. The touchstone in the debate is Nelly, who recognises the sheer absurdity of the doctrinaire posturing that they indulge in, like animals in a ritual fight over territory. Yet there is an importance in the argument that goes beyond their posturing, both for Storm's psychological development and for Powys' creative and constructive instincts in forming the novel. Richard's argument is essentially 'Make it new', but though mentally he cites the authorities to defend his position (from Blake through Verlaine to Laforgue) he is verbally limited to mere taunts, and Powys does not allow him to demonstrate an intellectual superiority. The result is again a kind of passivity, and the details of the action following the argument underline this. First, it is Canyot who pays for their meal, and then Richard deceives himself into thinking that he has got the better of the argument (which he clearly has not) until Nelly again forestalls his plans. From the point of view of

Powys' attitude to novel-making, the argument is frustratingly inconclusive, which may be deliberate (to show that Powys the maker is not Richard the maker) but which could equally well be a further failure to focus properly the object of his fiction.

Richard embarks on a tentative friendship with Canyot, but receives a petulant letter about his relationship with Nelly. Again, Richard thinks of himself, and of others, as fitting into a stereotyped pattern, this time, as 'the artist':

"It seemed an incredible letter from one artist to another artist, from one nomadic Bohemian to another nomadic Bohemian." (86)

This is comic : not only does it define Canyot in a way totally unsuited to him, but it also shows Richard himself as totally lacking in self-knowledge. Yet at precisely this time Richard is permitted a lengthy meditation on the nature of art, and creativity, which again appears to be a 'straight' transposition of Powys' beliefs:

"What he sought to give an enduring expression to, as he took his available words and squeezed out their subtler meanings and tried to make his thought clothe itself, rhythm within rhythm, with these delicate essences, was the large flowing tide of human experience as it gathered in great reiterated waves, under the old pressure of the old dilemmas, and rolled forward and drew back along the sea banks of necessity growing more and more responsive to deeper vibrations from the Unknown, more and more aware of itself as the true Son of Man, as the true logos, into whose being had been poured all the thwarted and baffled aspirations of all souls." (89)

The voice of these paragraphs, resonant, dreamy, incantatory, is the voice of the visionary. Richard's goal is the sanctification of all things. Richard/Powys is clear that he wishes to dissociate himself from vacuous late-Romantic yearnings and rather to focus on specificities. But at the same time these details do not have value in themselves, but only as they are transfigured by association with some unifying perception that exists outside the limitations of time and space:

"It was not that he wished to find some mere mystical sensation, inchoate and indistinct, and try to express the feeling of just that, in lulled and monotonous rhythms. It was that he wished to take the many poignant 'little things', bitter and sweet, tragic and grotesque, common and fantastic, such as the earth affords us all in our confused wayfaring, and to associate these, as each generation is aware of them before it passes away, as he himself was aware of them in his own hour, with some dimly conceived immortal consciousness that gave them all an enduring value and dropped none of them by the way." (89-90)

The above quotation is essential to our understanding of Powys' art. In it the narrator (if we shirk from calling him Powys) steps outside Richard's consciousness and addresses us direct, endorsing Richard's meditation. So much of this and surrounding paragraphs abound with proofs that this is the 'authentic' voice of Powys himself (not just thematically, but in the 'secret signature' that Proust talks about as identifiably linking the oeuvre of a particular writer), and yet the whole of this oration rings false. It is false because Powys uses a language of success to illustrate a story of failure. It is not simply that Richard's private life is chaotic - many artists leave a trail of human wreckage along with their great works of art. Powys allows us no glimpse of Richard the successful artist, using or even merely learning from these perceptions. In **Wolf Solent** we see Wolf gradually shedding his 'life-illusions', in a process that the narrative illustrates, until the visionary 'signature' is revealed at the end. Here the process is irrelevant. Richard on the one hand possesses the vision from the very start, and on the other his actions are described not only as though he did not possess it, but as though it did not matter. Hence the lack of focus, the lack of narrative drive.

Further on Richard is given another of Powys' rhapsodic meditations on the relationship of self to the universe. And again, there is the clash between an endorsement of Powys' thoughts, and a denial of them in the description of Richard's subsequent behaviour. Indeed Richard's thoughts

tend so strongly towards a nebulous sensation that the conclusion seems almost to contradict the path by which Richard has arrived at it:

"'I am nothing in myself', he said to his heart' I am merely one momentary pulse of consciousness of the great earth-life that struggles to purge itself, to free itself, to enrich itself with a thousand new subtleties, to pass into the *something else* for which there is no name but the name of God.

'This perilous woman and this rare child are mere incidents in the love life of a wretched chance-driven wanderer. I take one. I take the other. I leave them both. It matters nothing in the final issue. All that matters is that this personal life of mine should lose itself in the larger life that flows down the generations; that I should *become* that life and let it become me. And then that I should express its beauty, its tragic wonderful cool-breathing eternal beauty, in such words as I can hammer out!'" (110-11)

After such a display it seems almost unfair to ask what this eloquence actually means. Richard wishes to lose his own identity and yet at the same time ("a wretched chance-driven wanderer") he is building an image for himself which allows him to indulge in a maudlin self-pity that contradicts this aspiration. Then the goal, vacuous and indistinct, is overruled immediately because Nelly and Elise cannot be reduced to mere shades of being; they are frustratingly and irrevocably *there*. Richard is being forced to walk along the visionary's impossible tightrope between thing and essence, never really able to retain his balance while Powys' overbearing prose buffets him from side to side. The novel appears to have reached an impasse. To achieve a resolution, Powys spreads the net wider, takes in other points of view.

At this time, we receive the first authorial descriptions of Canyon's attitude to his art, one of many new approaches that are to be offered in the next few pages. The paragraph is cool, by Powys' standards, but it illustrates a richer balance between the literal and the eternal, between thing and essence, than any of Richard's rhapsodies:

"He held, like Moliere, that the first test of good art was that it should arrest the attention of the simplest. He had

concentrated all his powers upon the reflection in the water of that rank herbage and those mossy walls, indicating as well as he could the shadowed presence there of a spirit of the spot, carrying the mind down a long dim vista of obscure memories, gathering itself, out of the colours and shapes of the moment, into a kind of eternal vision - a platonic archetype, that was more than a crumbling wall and a bank of hemlocks." (124)

This is the first of many instances when we are made aware that it is Canyon, and not Richard, who is the successful artist in this novel, though it is the only instance when his artistic theory is discussed. And his theory is remarkably like Powys' own discussion of the best art in the *Autobiography*. We are entering upon dangerous ground, as the novel's inconsistencies become more glaring. Powys explicitly juxtaposes descriptions of the two men, which catch accurately their differences:

"(Robert) stayed on therefore at the farm, painting as he had never painted before, painting at a furious speed and with a gathering weight of feeling and intensity He dreaded to lose the peculiar power which was now coming to him, snatched out of the air of his relations with Nelly

Richard himself was making at that time a concentrated effort to recover the interrupted sequence of his own work. He found this surprisingly difficult. The roots of the thing were there, firmly planted in his new feeling; but the temptation to enjoy that lovely countryside, to fall into a sort of vague half-sensual dreaming over the sounds and scents of those unequalled fields, was still fatally strong." (156)

The writer is often (even unknowingly) his own best critic. So here, Powys characterises precisely those flaws in this novel which make it so frustrating : the roots are there, but are buried in the vagueness which blurs the distinctions Powys wishes to make.

New York erupts onto the canvas of the novel with a refreshing dynamism after the lethargy of Sussex. This contrast, in its way the novel's geographical equivalent of the contrast between Nelly and Elise, is, I feel, the book's most successful feature, as New York acts like a hothouse environment, forcing a change in characters and relationships, similar in a way to the impact of Bath or London on Jane Austen's characters. New York is a melting pot, a genuinely cosmopolitan

environment, and the novel is perhaps above all else a portrait of the artist in this literal new world. Powys writes about America with the animated zest of personal experience, and his response to America is complex and fascinating, a mixture of excitement and fear, hope and despair. In **Wolf Solent** the modern in all its aspects is vilified. It destroys individuality, murders silence, and performs grotesque abortions on the beauty of the earth's face. But for Powys America does not have the mystical timeless heritage of rural England, and so there is accordingly less to destroy. America is a blank page upon which modern life writes what it wants without the pain of erasure. In **After My Fashion** America means New York, or Atlantic City; it means the 'civilised' urban east coast, not the unchecked sprawl of the rest of the continent. 'The gods' of this nation, the indigenous culture of the American Indian, rate scarcely a mention. The difference between Powys and, say, Lawrence here is astounding. Lawrence's work reveals the true modernist's fascination with primitive cultures. In Powys' canon only Britain possesses this magnetic charm.

It is Richard's response which portrays the contrast between New York and Sussex at its most extreme:

"Like some great wedge of iron this tremendous new world bored its way through the thick sensuousness of his nature and laid his deeper instincts bare. It was a process of spiritual surgery, painful but liberating. There were no lovely fields or leafy lanes here in Manhattan; as he trod its hot pavements and passed down its echoing canyons of iron and stone he was compelled to fall back upon his own soul for vision and illumination." (172)

New York cuts its inhabitants off from the earth forces, and in this new environment, man has to rely on self alone. The question remains: is it enough? The answer, for which Powys probes in this second section of the book, is that it is only enough if you are a new creature, a child of the times. This Richard most clearly is not. Neither is Nelly; and neither,

underneath the veneer of success, is Canyon. The representatives of the new age, Ivan, Catherine, and especially Elise are different in kind from the Sussex emigrants. Brought together in the glowing world of stylish artistic circles, the debate, in word and deed, is begun.

Canyon is the least affected, as might be expected, as he is the most emotionally stable. But a significant departure is mentioned when, for the only time in America, we see him at work. Now, instead of transfiguring landscapes, he is painting a model, another shift from the earth to people that the big city imposes. Nelly too turns inward, becomes more defensive. In part this is due to her pregnancy, and the operation of maternal protective instincts. But her natural and spontaneous generosity has disappeared. Inevitably however, it is Richard who suffers most, and whose artistic vision is most seriously threatened. This brings with it glimpses of self-knowledge, the stripping away of the layers of illusion that Richard had built in which to cocoon himself. Powys' attitude, however, is rather ambivalent. Once again we get the sense that he is prepared to forgive Richard anything in order to preserve his vision. There is no evidence here that Powys regards the privations of an urban environment as a necessary purgative, which might cause Richard a certain amount of discomfort but which will, in the long term, lead to the emergence of a greater artist, if not a more balanced human being. Instead, the city life is just a torture to be endured:

"There were no fields or lanes in Manhattan where he could recover his spirit by drawing upon the deep earth forces. All about him were iron girders and iron cog wheels and iron spikes. All about him were the iron foreheads of such as partook of the nature of the machinery whose slaves they were. And the iron that entered his soul found no force that could resist it; for all the days of his life he had been an epicurean: when the hour called for stoicism he could only answer with a dogged despair." (177)

Into this void comes Elise Angel, and if Richard's surname, Storm, denotes something of the violent instability of his character, Elise

remains a very peculiar breed of angel. Powys modelled her on Isadora Duncan, and he undoubtedly captured many of the fascinations and contradictions of the great dancer. Nevertheless, her place in Powys' scheme of ideas fluctuates uncertainly. Richard's response on first seeing her dance in New York is one of the rediscovery of vision within himself. Again here we must ask: is the narration reliable? Are the flowing adjectives merely Richard's, or does Powys endorse them? The evidence, I think, both from outside the text (in what we know of Powys' reaction to Isadora Duncan), and within it (in the similarity of this description to the triumphal Christmas Eve dance), implies that this is indeed one of the touchstones that Powys intends us to hold onto in Richard's wanderings:

"She danced to some great classical rhapsody, tragic, passionate, world-destroying, world-creating Once more, as if all between this moment and when he had last seen her were a dark and troubled dream, she lifted for him the veil of Isis. In the power of her austere and olympian art, all the superficial impressions that had dominated him through that long summer dissolved like a cloud of vapour.

This was what he had been aiming at in his own blundering way; this was what he was born to understand! The softness of ancient lawns under immemorial trees, the passion of great winds in lonely places, the washing of sea tides under melancholy harbour walls, the retreats of beaten armies, the uprising of the multitudinous oppressed, the thunder of the wings of destroying angels, the 'still small voice' of the creative spirit brooding upon the foundations of new worlds - all these things rose up upon him as he watched her, all these things were in the gestures of her outspread arms, in the leap and the fall and the monumental balance of her divine white limbs." (179-80)

Perhaps the most important thing to draw from this description is the realisation that Romanticism and Modernism are not two distinct phenomena, but that there is a vast grey area where the two are blurred together. In *After My Fashion*, and indeed to an extent in all of Powys' work, this blurring is definitely present. Elise's dance is described as "austere and olympian", the implication being that there is about it that refined concentration that denotes a modern concern with form. Yet look at Richard's response: wave upon wave of late romantic cliches, the inclusion

of explicitly 'emotive' words ("melancholy harbour walls"), an obsession with mood painting that gushes onto the page with the true romantic's passion for wallowing in sensation. And Richard sees all this in "the monumental balance of her divine white limbs", so that Powys can claim of Richard that:

"All the complicated weight of sensual sensations, of refined sensuous sensations even, which had hitherto meant so much, seemed to be torn away from him." (180)

There is no hint that Powys saw anything incongruous in the juxtaposition of these sentences, yet here he writes about the new in the language of the old, and, as with the ambivalence of our response to Richard, so there is here an uncertainty of tone which I think is not deliberate but is a product of Powys' artistic immaturity.

Elise inspires in Richard an utterly new vision, a vision which is capable even of transfiguring the city:

"He exulted in the rawness of the iron frameworks, in the great torn-out gaps, like bleeding flesh that were being laid bare in the sides of the old Dutch houses, in the subterranean thunder and the whirling puffs of air and dust that came up through the subway's gratings. He exulted in the huge grotesqueness of the gigantic advertisements, in the yells of the truck drivers, in the flapping clothes lines, in the piled-up garbage, in the hideous tenements and vociferous children" (185)

Introduced to the fashionable Manhattan friends of his wife (a shock both to him and to us, and full proof that the relationship between him and Nelly had almost disappeared from the book) Richard's artistic system receives a few new jolts. With Karmakoff Richard experiences a peculiar rapport, and he slowly discovers its composition:

"It occurred to him that Karmakoff was his direct psychological antipodes - his fatal opposite - with vices, virtues, nobilities, ignobilities, made up of some chemical compound that was the extreme antithesis of all that he was himself." (194)

The threat to Richard is posed on all levels, personal, artistic, political, religious. To Richard's amorphous vacillations are opposed

Karmakoff's cause and effect, the inexorable march of the Marxist interpretation of history, and the annihilation of free will. Richard's only defence is the vision of art that Elise has given him; his own seems so insignificant in the face of these huge forces. Our understanding of Richard's (and Powys') old values is beginning to slide. The new city, the new world, the new vision, is having its effect.

There is something engagingly naive about the debates which follow. They are so transparently 'staged' that the narrative goes into a number of circular movements of increasing momentum until they have been worked out. The details of the action are comparatively unimportant. At most, like Nelly's unwilling journey across New York, they reflect the inward dilemmas of the characters themselves. What is important is the cacophony of voices, the debate given free play and little sense of resolution between conflicting attitudes, of which Richard's is just one. Here Powys comes closer to certain aspects of the modern novel, perhaps ideally exemplified in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, a book in which the main emphasis is on people talking. Powys never fully relinquishes traditional methods and here he seems to hesitate uneasily between the artistic approaches of Hardy and Lawrence to the writing of fiction. Looking at his treatment of the character of Richard in these pages, we can see why, for, at risk of doing a disservice to both Hardy and Lawrence, Richard's artistic theory lies somewhere between theirs. The crucial debate is that between Richard and Elise.

This argument provides a fascinating contrast to the one right at the beginning of the novel between Richard and Canyon. Then, Richard was out to defend the new and experimental; now he defends poetry of a specifically English rural tradition. What is most interesting is that the logic of the narrative seems to show Powys siding with Elise. Her criticism strikes right at the heart of early twentieth-century English

'nature' poetry, such as Powys himself had written in large quantities:

"All this indiscriminate piling up of flowers and trees and grasses, all this business about lanes and fields, seems to me just heavy and dull. It seems to get in the way of something." (219)

Richard's defence is in favour of a kind of sub-Keatsian melancholy, several times diluted to make it more comfortable, and this allows Elise to deliver the final crushing dismissal.

"Your poetry is a kind of self-indulgence It is too self-satisfied, too unruffled. It's as if you had never really wrestled with life!" (221)

Richard is silenced, and, I am sure, it is Powys' intention to make us feel the justice of this claim. Where, though, does this leave us when we assess Powys' theories of art? As we lose our bearings in the medley of voices, Powys seems to hesitate over withdrawing his authorial sanction from Richard's aesthetic and religious beliefs. Could this, then, be the true turning point in the novel, when, like Wolf, Richard is brought to see his 'life-illusions' crumble before him? Well, yes and no. The difference between Wolf's position and Richard's is that Richard's 'objective correlatives', Elise and Nelly, slip out of their 'roles' as projections of Richard's consciousness, and assume their own individuality. The gain in metonymic verisimilitude is a loss in metaphoric force of argument, which might be a good thing if Powys did not keep pulling us back inside Richard's consciousness again, asking us to accept as true perception what we have been led to believe is mere self-delusion. The novel's climax will illustrate what I mean.

So far Richard's philosophical musings, except the single venomous moment when inspired by Elise's presence, have all be in Powys' 'old' style. Now, after the cacophony of debates is over, and challenged by the mysteriously flitting presence of Roger Lamb across the book (the surname I assume to be significant in the light of the coda) a new vision seems to

be emerging:

"The Old World with its time-bleached pieties had accepted those gods' austere decisions and had bowed low before them in patient fatalistic ritual. But this reckless New World seemed to claim, in daring impious flippancy, the right to deny the whole traditional order to evoke some completely new attitude to life; some attitude in which camaraderie took the place of love, honesty to one's self the place of loyalty to others, cynical courage replaced submissive piety, as a reckless indifference to death did the old savage resignation

At any rate he was able in that hour, as he had never been able before, to gather up into some sort of perspective his former life in Paris, his marriage to Nelly, and his love affair with the dancer. *I will make this night*, he thought, as he passed the illuminated front of the Greenwich Village Theater, *a new start for my poem. I will get some of that young fellow's fancies into it. And I will tell Elise that she was right and I was wrong.*" (234)

The new perspective seems to take hold of the book at this point, and direct us towards the resolution that Powys has in mind. It involves stripping from Richard his emotional dependence on both women in his life. Inspired by Elise, Richard plans a weekend away with her in Atlantic City, a fact which Nelly discovers and which is for her the last straw. She flees, with the dutiful Canyot in attendance, back to Sussex. Though she has been cruelly abused by Richard there is a logic in her apparent departure from the book, for she represents to Richard that way of life which seems to have been rejected, and which, it must be said, Powys seems to have ceased to endorse. But for Richard to reach his goal, that sense of poise and balance which denotes artistic and ethical equilibrium, Elise too must be jettisoned, for it is her aesthetic, not her melodramatic individual personality, from which Richard draws this new vision of art. The final collapse of their individual relationship is the product of this flight to Atlantic City, and here again Powys begins to display a greater sureness of touch in his handling of atmospheric detail and physical description. Particularly skilful is the brief episode in which Richard writes E and A on the sand and then obliterates them. On the one hand this

erasure of Elise Angel's initials signifies the collapse of their relationship. On a subtler level the letters are representative of England and America, and hence of two modes of existence that have up to now deprived Richard of true single vision. Rubbing them out, we are led to feel that this really is a turning point, a wiping clean of the confused sheet on which Richard's artistic credo has been written. There follows a setting in order of personal relationships. Elise meets Karmakoff, and their pairing off is particularly suitable, despite their fanciful (and textually inaccurate) conversation. This leaves Richard with Catherine, an unlikely triumph for Powys' plot-making since she is the first woman in the book whose character Richard accepts for what it is, rather than trying to weave it into a scheme of his own devising. Also, she is emotionally and sexually as nearly 'neutral' as Powys can get. Their relationship, placid and passionless, preserves the moment of balance that Richard has achieved, and prepares him for the climactic revelation of the Christmas Eve dance.

This four-page description is the culmination of the artistic debates of the novel; it attempts a resolution of the political issues raised by Karmakoff, and the aesthetic disagreements represented in the opinions of Canyot, Elise, Nelly and Richard; and most explicitly, it reveals Richard's new vision. This being the case, it is worth analysing in some detail the goal to which Powys' artistic quest has brought him. The first thing to note is that it is neither entirely revolutionary, nor entirely traditional. Secondly it is essentially ritualist, a crucial part of the visionary aesthetic. In this sense it is religious, without being of a religion. Thirdly, it is total and all-embracing in its impact. It does not affect a portion of Richard's experience; it transfigures the whole of it. Fourthly, it transcends totally the personal which up to this point has been Richard's touchstone. The subjective descriptions that marked the

other instance in the book when Richard saw Elise dance have largely been eradicated in the face of this superior experience:

"There was indeed something about this whole Christmas Eve performance that lifted him . . . into a region where personal and possessive instincts had no place. Richard felt ashamed of himself, of his own inadequate and chaotic work, in the presence of this achievement." (270-71)

The catchwords of the new art are simplicity, austerity and ritual:

"Richard could not help becoming conscious that here, in the middle of this orgy of raw newness, there had been evoked something more suggestive of the passion of the human spirit ransacking the remote past and steering into the unborn future than anything in London or Paris. He recalled Karmakoff's casual remark about certain affinities between Russia and America; and he whispered to Catherine that Roger Lamb's idea of a revival of real *mythology*, of something that was both adventurous and religious, was actually present in what they looked at now." (270)

Perhaps wisely, Powys avoids a description of the dancing itself; the emphasis is on the ritual aspects of the event rather than its details, on the **anonymity** of the whole proceedings rather than a concentration on Elise herself. The consequence is a final all-embracing vision:

"Richard, as was his wont when excited to such a pitch, mentally gathered up into one swift vision all the persons and events of his life's drama. He saw them, these events and these persons, all beautiful, all mysterious, all full of the magic of that Nameless One who, whether he were born child of Semele or child of Mary, had the power to turn the sordid trials of chance into the music of an exultant rhythm that 'redeemed all sorrows'." (272)

This, surely, is the perception Richard has been striving for. This justifies all the wanderings, the vacillations, the self-delusions that have plagued Richard up to this point. This is the point to which the logic of Powys' narrative has taken us.

But this is not the end of the book. The final chapter takes us back to Sussex, to Nelly and Canyot and the absurd and irrelevant Mrs Shotover. It is the strongest piece of evidence in the novel for the claim that Powys' conception of the writing of fiction was immature. Its very existence calls into question the thesis that I have just built around the

novel. All I can say is that all the internal evidence points to the Christmas Eve dance as being the point at which the novel ought to have reached its goal. What, then, can be the purpose of Chapter Twenty-Two? The answer, I feel, lies in Powys' uncertainty over what he believed the novel was to show, an uncertainty which led him to seek the support of conventional gestures rather than rely on the genuine originality of his emerging talent. The final chapter exhibits a desire for an orthodox closure to the patterns generated in the novel. It returns to its opening scene. The time period (almost one whole year) implies the completion of a cycle. Most obviously, however, the final chapter shows that as yet Powys does not know how to handle his conception of the hero-figure. I have regularly shown that Powys' attitude to Richard is, to say the least, ambiguous. This last chapter is evidently meant to be the illustration of the only possible conclusion awaiting the romantic 'tragic' hero, death. The intention is to create a scene of poignant (indeed, tear-jerking) melodrama, in which Richard 'at last' dies happy, secure in love. It is an embarrassing failure, for two reasons. One is Powys' insensitivity of tone, which turns pathos to bathos at crucial moments. Each incident, no matter what its relative significance might be, is treated with equal intensity, just as earlier a style which successfully captured John Moreton's dying moments sounded rather absurd when devoted to two lengthy paragraphs dealing with Richard's "incorrigible tea-lust". An intense narrative style is in fact a characteristic of Powys' mature work also; indeed this is a logical outcome of an attitude which evaluates alike things both deeply personal and broadly cosmic (the opening pages of *A Glastonbury Romance* provide a good illustration). The result is by turns compelling and absurd, depending on Powys' subject.

The other, more serious reason is that this has the effect of making the whole New York section of the book irrelevant, which is, to say the

least, a drawback if one wants to discover in the book some sense of order and progress.

The chapter begins by explicitly returning to the opening pages:

"As Richard came out from the cathedral and looked at the yellow and purple crocuses in the ancient gardens, that same indescribable sense of peace descended upon him which he had felt when, nearly a year ago, he had first set his eyes upon Selshurst." (274)

As Powys narrates Richard's thoughts, we wait for some evidence of the change so conspicuously wrought in New York. It never arrives. Richard is the same arrogant self-deluding fool as he was before, his interview with Nelly the same pretence to impose on her the image of her he has always had. He is obliged to do what any self-respecting 'tragic' hero would do: to run out into the damp February countryside with no hat, no coat, no stick, no food or drink inside him all day, and a (to us) newly-discovered heart condition. The inevitable collapse follows, but Powys is unwilling simply to let him die. Instead, there is a chance meeting with Canyot, who is despatched on a final appeal to Nelly. Left alone again, he hears a stranded sheep in a dew-pond, and goes in search of it. What is this sheep here for? In one sense, of course, it simply serves to bring Richard closer to death. But other associations appear to be invoked, of the shepherd parable in the Gospels, for instance, and of the memory of Roger Lamb, whose death was in its way a sacrificial atonement for Richard's sins of self-delusion. But if the sheep 'means' anything, it is so ambiguously multiform in its ramifications that the whole image blurs dangerously out of focus, signifying simultaneously "his great unfinished poem", God and Karmakoff's Communism!

Richard collapses, only to be revived for a final time, a two-line conversation with Canyot. Asking "Does she forgive me?", he hears Canyot reply, "She loves you", and dies, leaving Canyot with a "look of unutterable happiness that spread over Richard's face." (287) Is this the

resolution toward which the book has tended? I do not think so. We are left contemplating the supremely irrelevant image of Canyot thinking of his work.

So much, then, for **After My Fashion**. If in the end its structural and conceptual flaws predominate, this should not blind us to the fact that it is a notable step on the road to maturity for Powys the novelist. It also contains some of the most articulate discussions in Powys' work on the nature of art, and its role in modern society, vividly captured in the American setting of the book. It shows a visionary novelist coming to terms with the expression of that vision. Most important of all, it shows explicitly, in its transitory state halfway between the traditional and the modern novel, the issues which the visionary novel raises, and which I can now go on to explore in their maturity.

Chapter Four

Powys: The Wessex Novels

*"Thus she abides; her Towers forever rising, forever vanishing. Never or Always."*¹

Between 1929 and 1937 Powys produced voluminous amounts of non-fiction, from short tracts on contemporary morality and literary criticism² to major (if repetitive) works of personal philosophy - *In Defence of Sensuality* (1930), *A Philosophy of Solitude* (1933) and *The Art of Happiness* (1935). In these three volumes, and in the essential *Autobiography* (1934), Powys explored the main tenets of his mature beliefs, in an attempt to explain how to relate his philosophical position to the conduct of everyday life. However, these years also saw the production of four huge novels, which are in essence fictional treatments of the same issues, and which are the subjects of this chapter. For me, Powys' Wessex quartet represents the pinnacle of his achievement as a visionary novelist.³

They do not form a quartet in the sense of an interrelated series of novels, like Paul Scott's 'Raj Quartet' or Lawrence Durrell's 'Alexandria Quartet'. There is no evidence that Powys consciously regarded their production as anything other than four separate works. Yet there is a kind of 'de facto' unity about them which almost all critics, in choosing to write about them as a group, recognise.

¹A *Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1120.

²*Debate! Is Modern Marriage a Failure?* (1930) and Dorothy M. Richardson (1931).

³Others - notably G. Wilson Knight (in favour of *Owen Glendower*) and Morine Krissdottir (in favour of *Porius*) - would dispute this claim. But, as I hope to show, Powys' fiction, which was always self-indulgent, disintegrates markedly from *Morwyn* onwards into the realm of private fantasy.

They are unified, in the first place, by their repeated probing at aspects of Powys' own personality, especially the relationship between his passive sensuality and his more mystical (or saintly) sense of creativity.¹ Yet though, in a sense, all Powys' novels are similarly self-obsessed, these four are set apart by a desire to play out this personal drama within a specific sense of place - Wessex. Here, psychological states, supernatural phenomena, layer upon layer of living history, the specific contours of a geographical locality, all these blend in a vivid delineation of Powys' philosophy, transformed (with less than usual of Powys' special pleading) into a generally coherent fictional form.

I

"What he lived in was not any compact, continuous sense of personal identity, but rather a series of disembodied sensations."²

The starting point from which Powys traced out his portrait of man was his own personality. His novels are remarkable for the consistency with which recognisably similar type figures recur, and this makes it relatively easy to generalise when it comes to identifying the main characteristics of humanity that Powys attempts to portray. At one level, this repetitive insistence is typical of the visionary novelist: think of the numerous Rupert Birkins and Gerald Criches that fill the pages of

¹Morine Krissdottir, in explaining how Powys came to write, as it were, versions of the same novel, over and over again, regards the works as rites of passage (John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest, p. 64), and analyses them according to an elaborate scheme of archetypal and anthropological procedures. When she neglects this rhetorical apparatus in favour of a more down-to-earth study of the books in relation to Powys' own personality she is much more convincing.

²Wolf Solent, p. 224.

Lawrence's novels, or Golding's mystics and Pinchers. But Powys is unique. Consider the line that runs through Wolf Solent, John Crow, Magnus Muir to Dud No-man; or the one that unites Johnny Geard, Sylvanus Cobbold and Uryen Quirm; or Christie Malakite, Persephone Spear, Marret and Wizzie Ravelston. Remove the minor surface variations that are a product of the locality and society of each individual novel, and Powys' gallery of characters is undeniably homogeneous. It is not my purpose in noting this to lament Powys' inability to direct and refine his creative instincts, to put, as it were, sufficient 'distance' between himself and his creation. Such an objection would not have seemed important to Powys; the illusion of objectivity was never his intention. Rather I want to tie down the homogeneity of the Wessex quartet first and foremost in terms of a consistent attitude toward man, as a species, an attitude shaped by the intense preconceptions of one single individual, John Cowper Powys.

In a 'Note' which prefaces **Weymouth Sands**, Powys identifies aspects of both Magnus Muir and Sylvanus Cobbold with "certain characteristics and peculiarities taken from the nature of the author himself."¹ Cobbold takes from Powys a fetishistic animism and a Taoist exploitation of unconsummated sexual urges. But Muir is closer to the author himself, with his walking stick, dominating presence and deep sense of masochism.² Not just physical characteristics but ingrained thought processes and turns of phrase in the speech of these characters tie them to Powys as he appears in the non-fiction³. Unfortunately there are times when it seems that

¹The purpose of this 'Note by Author' was to defend **Weymouth Sands** from possible libellous attack, following an unfortunate court case in which a local farmer fancied that he saw himself in Philip Crow in **A Glastonbury Romance**. This defensiveness on Powys' part contributes to much of the unsatisfactory vagueness in the setting of **Weymouth Sands**, and, later, to the elaborate denial of the 'real' existence of the Glymes cottages in **Maiden Castle**.

²See H.P. Collins' 'The Sands Do Not Run Out', in **Essays on John Cowper Powys**, especially pp. 211-2.

³Note for example the thoughts and speech patterns of Magnus Muir (**Weymouth Sands**, p. 23) and John Crow (**A Glastonbury Romance**, pp. 33, 38).

Powys forgets that there is supposed to be a distinction between Muir and himself - on pp. 310-12 of *Weymouth Sands* Magnus is given a completely unprovoked interior monologue on Powys' habitual themes that disrupts totally the thread of the novel.

What can be said then, of these Powysian humans? First, that though they aspire towards wholeness and a unified personality, they are plainly aware of their own fragmented consciousness. However, this theory is not presented in fictional terms as a destabilising element in the actual writing, as it might be in the fiction of, say, Virginia Woolf or Samuel Beckett. Instead, because Powys' is essentially a nineteenth-century technique, he favours the analytic articulation (often over-articulation) of these confused and divided states in long interior monologues. When he views man from the outside, it is as an awkward jumble of limbs clumsily at odds.⁴ But, looking through into the inner man, he comes to the inevitable visionary's conclusion:

"How coldly, how maliciously, he *could* dive into the people he knew and see their inmost souls from behind, from behind! Poison and sting the furtive coil and the sex-clutch; yes, a spasmodically jerking, quivering ego-nerve, pursuing its own end - that was what was behind everyone."⁵

Evidence for the close connection of the sexual and excremental recurs in Powys' fiction.⁶

Collins, in the article referred to immediately above, has this astute comment on the 'Powys-figures', "They rarely if ever act as persons rather than minds, or respond to normal social pressures. Magnus Muir and Gaul in *Jobber Skald* (i.e. *Weymouth Sands*), rather elaborate projections of the author, can hardly be said to do anything. Their significance is as sounding boards It is not their surface behaviour which matters at all." (212).

⁴This is especially true of those male characters which are modelled physically on Powys himself. See the description of Wolf in *Wolf Solent* (p. 48).

⁵*Wolf Solent*, p. 633.

⁶In this his work can be linked not just with the visionary tradition (Golding - see Chapter 6, for example - and Lawrence) but those on its fringes who share something of the same view - Joyce, for instance, in *Ulysses*. A useful article in this context is G. Wilson Knight's 'Lawrence, Joyce and Powys' (*Essays in Criticism*, October 1961, pp. 403-17).

This division of man into constituent functions is taken to its conclusion in **Wolf Solent**:

"Indeed, of bodily self-consciousness he had nothing at all. What he lived in was not any compact, continuous sense of personal identity, but rather a *series of disembodied sensations*, some physical, some mental, in which his identity was absolutely merged and lost." (224)

This kind of separation into elements of being can be found elsewhere in Powys' Wessex fiction,¹ though nowhere does he probe away at it quite so intensely as in **Wolf Solent**, perhaps because that novel, being less 'panoramic', is more concerned with the complex individual progress of its central protagonist.

Though Wolf's "series of disembodied sensations" suggests no hierarchy or priority of fragments that make up his being, it is clear that there was an 'essence', or portion of individual personality ("monad", in **The Complex Vision**) that could not be dissolved, however vaporous Powys' characters might become. In Wolf, this is characterised as "the hard, opaque crystal circle of his inmost identity";² in **A Glastonbury Romance**, John Crow, likewise, is "a hard, round, glass ball, that is a mirror of everything."³ This essential self becomes, in microcosm, a world, mirroring, as John Crow's does, the external world. This image, strongly reminiscent of metaphysical poetry, elevates personal identity, and the force of personality, above all else in Powys' fictional universe.⁴ This central identity exercises control over the fragments of

¹See Mat Dekker on body and soul (p. 322) and the two splitting apart in his son (pp. 910-13), in **A Glastonbury Romance**, and Dud, probing at levels within himself in **Maiden Castle** (p. 244).

²**Wolf Solent**, p. 288.

³**A Glastonbury Romance**, p. 370. This imagery leads straight to **Pincher Martin**, with his "centre", a "darker dark", a "fact like a bar of steel."

⁴Just how 'metaphysical' Powys could get can be seen in this extract from **Wolf Solent**: "Here to the superficial eye, were two skulls, lying side by side; but in reality, here were two far-extending continents, each with its own sky, its own land and water, its own strange-blowing winds." (291). It is, moreover, a small step from seeing the world within a head, to making a world within a head, in **Pincher Martin**!

being at its disposal. It relates to them as a creature looking out of the mouth of a dark tunnel.¹ This is the "I am I" - a phrase not just belonging to the indomitable willers among Powys' characters (like Philip in *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 745) but also to the 'intuitives', as Collins calls them, like Wolf. This force operates characteristically as the power of the will, manipulating the individual's patterns of thought as well as action:

"He took hold of his heavy, phlegmatic soul in the iron pincers of his massive will and he pressed it down, like a bar of molten metal into those lower levels of his thick nature."²

Powys' vision of man, though it encompasses diverse fragments in this way, is essentially dualist. With regard to the non-fiction, I illustrated a basic dualism between matter and spirit (though it did not necessarily follow, in a Manichean sense, that matter was inherently evil), and in the early fiction this was often modified into, for example, the 'Will to Power' and the 'Will to Sacrifice'. The Wessex novels portray this duality both within the self, and between the self and what is other than self. This, fundamentally, is what *Wolf Solent*, according to Powys, is about:

"What might be called the purpose and essence and inmost being of this book is the necessity of opposites. Life and Death, Good and Evil, Matter and Spirit, Body and Soul, Reality and Appearance have to be joined together, have to be forced into one another, have to be proved dependant upon each other, while

¹See his description of Nance, hesitating over a choice of actions in *Maiden Castle* (p. 274). This image can be transferred wholesale to Golding's universe - in the 'Sophy creature' at the mouth of her dark tunnel in *Darkness Visible*.

²This describes Geard in *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 447. The resemblances, once again, to the portrait of Pincher Martin in Golding's novel are remarkable. On this point, Powys' later fiction might also be cited. In *Two and Two*, the following contemplation of Wat Kums strikes yet another common chord: "'I am rather inclined to think that every single thing I enjoy is just as if it were something that I was swallowing! Yes! I feel as if my real self, my real I, were gathered about my mouth and were satisfying itself by using my hands, my fingers, my knees, my elbows, my arms to feed my mouth.

'I expect the truth of it all is', Mr Kums' thoughts ran on, 'that the I in all of us has got its centre, or what you might call its engine, in our head, while our body with all its parts, obeys our head.'" (35)

all solid entities have to dissolve, if they are to outlast their momentary appearance, into atmosphere."¹

I will show later what this means for Powys' 'world view'; for the moment, concentrating on his dissection of humanity, he places his central characters, to quote Greenwald, "between two poles of imaginative being, the ponderousness of Caliban and the volatility of Ariel."² It is in the cleft of this dual state of existence that Wolf Solent finds himself:

"One of his own most permanent impressions had always been of the nature of an extreme dualism, a dualism descending to the profoundest gulfs of being, a dualism in which every living thing was compelled to take part." (299)

As will be seen, it is a vital part of the visionary process to try to unify this dual perspective, not in a way that cancels out oppositions, but in a way that balances them and holds them in equilibrium, in tension but not in fusion. But these moments of vision are rare. For the most part, life's tension is a more painful affair, a pulling apart rather than a pushing together, as in Wolf's dream of the conflict within himself of the urge toward a modern facelessness in urban humanity and an acquiescent rural survival:

"He remembered what his dream had been. He was himself a brittle stick, a piece of dead brushwood. At one end of him was the Waterloo tramp. At the other end of him was that complacent old man with the white cat. He had awakened in terror because he felt himself beginning to crack, as those two antagonists tugged." (569)

The consequence is a perpetual internal division, rendered more vivid by the fact that all Powys' characters feel so intensely, and articulate so volubly. As a final example of man at war within himself, consider Sam Dekker, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, praying in St Patrick's chapel in

¹'Preface' to *Wolf Solent*, p. 9.

²*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 78. Earlier in the same essay, Greenwald makes another pertinent remark, in relation to the characters of *Weymouth Sands* (though it could apply to any of these four novels): "He liked to visualise the self as alternatively possessing the solidity of a stone and the diffuseness of mist, sometimes reduced by circumstances to a resistant hard core of personality and sometimes able to project itself imaginatively into the vastness of space." (77)

Glastonbury, in agony as his soul conflicted with his mind and body, directing him down painful avenues of action.¹ Duality threatens often to cleave Powys' characters in two.

However, there is duality without as well as within. Inner conflicts find their objective correlative in a character's relationships, for example. Most obviously this occurs in *Wolf Solent*, in which Wolf is torn between the simple earth-rooted Gerda and the darker spiritual sylph-like Christie. They exemplify the dual sides of his personality, and he needs them both. Yet, except for rare moments, he is separated from both of them, alienated and alone.² Isolation, and the need to cope with its psychological burdens, is a persistent theme in Powys' novels. Though *Maiden Castle* is, by Powys' admission, about the sexes learning to live together, it should not be forgotten that the only significant relationship remaining at the end of the novel links the lesbian Thuella and the sylph Wizzie. Dud is alone, and Uryen dead. And though 'normal' love does exist in these novels - notably, I suppose, between Sam and Nell in *A Glastonbury Romance*, though also possibly between the Jobber and Perdita in *Weymouth Sands* - human community is not exactly prominent.

Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly a tendency towards misanthropy on Powys' part. Wolf Solent's attitude - ambivalent, to say the least - is characteristic:

¹*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 551. This scene finds an echo in *Darkness Visible*, in which Matty, forced onward in his pilgrimage, prays in the church in Greenfield, crouched against the stone which receives his tears.
²Powys devoted much of his non-fiction to a consideration of how to live alone, and how to cope with solitude, a consequence, I feel, of his lonely and nomadic life in America. Though he extolled its pleasures, it seems to have been at heart a painful existence, and it is the darker mood that surfaces most often in the fiction, as in this passage from *Maiden Castle*: "Wizzie looked at her in silence; and then like a hand striking her in the face out of the Invisible, the abominable loneliness of every single person in the world, the loneliness of our pain, of our despair, of our insanity, sent a shiver through her that made her feel sick and weak." (470).

"Some of his sentences, when he revised them in cold blood, struck him as possessing quite a Swift-like malignity. He astonished himself by certain misanthropic outbursts. His habitual optimism seemed to fall away at such times, and a ferocious contempt for both men and women lay revealed, like a sullen, evil-looking, drained out pond!" (469)

Elsewhere, Powys gives the impression that this loathing is directed both outward (in the way others are seen) and inward, and it seems, in line with what I have shown of Powys' thought in the non-fiction, to be a loathing of physicality itself.¹

Moreover, since Powys' escape route from this crisis involved the cultivation of passivity and a vegetative existence, a sense of duality is often conveyed by the clash of characters exemplifying domination and passivity - Philip and John Crow speculating over the contents of William Crow's will, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, for example.

It is rare, however, for this objectification of the fundamental duality in the pairing of characters to be developed in the action of Powys' narrative. As I will show later when discussing the literary technique of the Wessex novels, it is more usual for Powys to write about the feelings, emotions and reactions of his characters than to describe events in which these sensations emerge, as it were, naturally. Thus the clash of opposing views and philosophies tends to occur only in actual verbal debate between characters, for the purpose of which Powys calls a halt to whatever is actually happening, in terms of furthering the plot. In these four novels, perhaps the most extreme instances occur in *A Glastonbury Romance* - in the formal argument of John Crow and Sam Dekker (pp. 206-8), for example.

In concluding this survey of Powys' attitude towards humanity, as seen in the Wessex fiction, I should make some note of Powys' hopes and aspirations for humanity. This highest goal appears to be to attain a

¹Of many possible examples, Wolf's struggle with himself and others (*Wolf Solent*, pp. 288-90) is perhaps the best description of utter revulsion at the physical processes of life.

wholeness, however momentary, with other people, the environment and with oneself. These moments of vision, and how they are attained, are the subject of the final section of this chapter, and I do not wish to duplicate such material here, other than to note that, as Powys observed in the 'Preface' to **Wolf Solent**, unity is achieved by creative tension, by a balanced clash of these aforementioned dualities. Yet beyond these flashes of insight, Powys advises a passive acquiescence to the events of life, a willed surrender which yet manages to appear a positive action, since the passive essential self can then feed off the sensations which bombard it. When Powys' central characters express his own self-doubt - crucially, Dud No-man in **Maiden Castle** - this is seen to be their most fitting end, and it is interesting that though at the end of that novel Dud's world appears to be collapsing (his work on Mary Channing rejected, Wizzie in America, his father dead, himself poor and deserted in a bare flat in Dorchester) there is sounded a note of tranquility bordering on optimism. For his minor characters - especially his 'rustics', like Number One and Number Two in **A Glastonbury Romance** - this is the full extent of their aspiration. Especially precious, in such cases, is the cherishing of memory, as a route back into that instinctive unselfconscious 'Golden Age' of childhood. Even the self-aware 'Powys-heroes', like John Crow, draw on this source, as in his dim recollection of a childhood fishing trip with Tom Barter.¹ Memory keeps alive these moments of insight, and shapes them as a defence against the onslaught of pain that is, for all Powys' characters, the daily experience of life.

¹See **A Glastonbury Romance**, p. 40.

II

"Each of these classes, the deeper he went into them, divided themselves into much subtler categories."¹

I have asserted elsewhere that Powys, in common with most visionaries, is concerned with individual progress, individual insight and illumination, and that this has serious (and, it must be said, often detrimental) consequences for his broader social perspective, as it is realised in the fiction. Now, the Wessex quartet (with the possible exception of the rather narrower focus of *Wolf Solent*) are 'panoramic' novels, and *A Glastonbury Romance* in particular sets out to explore the impact of the Grail legend at all levels of society in Glastonbury.² Thus, that novel especially seeks to reveal the necessary connection between man and society.

Several points about Powys' social attitudes made in the context of his non-fiction, and supported in the early novels, are also found to be true of the mature fiction. Thus, distinctions of social class, and the complex hierarchies of social behaviour, loom large in the novels because Powys tends to see society as markedly stratified. Class frictions, when people of adjoining groups mix, are a source of pain and embarrassment of which Powys remained intensely aware:

"At the name Dekker there occurred that curious moral stiffening, that gathering together of relaxed social awareness, which always happens in England when an upper middle-class person enters the company of a group of lower middle-class persons."³

¹Maiden Castle, p. 200.

²See Powys' 1953 'Preface' to the novel.

³*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 160. In *Maiden Castle*, Dud (here, as the context makes clear, Powys' mouthpiece) notes even more complex patterns: "He had discovered already that to divide the citizens of Durnovaria into upper class, middle class, lower middle class, and proletariat, was a crude and inadequate way of dealing with the town's complicated organism. Each of these classes, the deeper he went into them, divided themselves into much subtler categories. How delicately, for instance, the town's professional

The reason, in part, for this over-sensitivity towards class barriers, seems likely, as Angus Wilson sensitively observes, to stem from the fact that Powys, though he lived for most of his life in fairly intense poverty (especially in America), was a 'gentleman', the son of a clergyman and a man who earned his living by writing. These novels resonate with the clashing vibrations of these opposed modes of living.⁴

Another reason for the fact that tensions of class are important in the fiction is that Powys, feeling as it were this sense of displacement, attempts in the novels to come to terms with social change. Often, again as was true for Powys in real life, returning from America in middle age to the Dorset of his childhood, the issue is approached in his novels by having the central character return to his roots. I shall come back, later, to the 'pattern of homecoming' in the Wessex novels, when dealing with Powys' sense of the importance of place, but for now I wish to concentrate on the social significance of that action. In Hardy's fiction, an air of fatalism is in part due to the disintegration of rural community that was a product of social change; for Powys too rural existence had a ritualism and changelessness that was evidence not only of its 'earth-rootedness' but also of the fact that its lineage could be traced back to

people, its lawyers, doctors, clergymen, bankers, and so forth, separated themselves from the neighbouring county families, to whom in a few cases they were allied by blood!" (200)

⁴See Angus Wilson's 'Introduction' (1973) to the Picador edition of *Weymouth Sands*, especially pp. 13-14. Though, as Wilson rightly notes, Magnus Muir, a teacher of Latin, and Richard Gaul, a philosopher, share many of the characteristics of Powys in this respect, it is again Dud No-man, in *Maiden Castle*, in the passage referred to in the preceding footnote, who articulates most clearly Powys' sense of social unease: "The respectful manner in which the humbler of these Durotriges, children at school, labourers going to work, men 'on the dole', old men with pensions, touched their caps at him as he passed them down there on the river-path, many of them dressed far more neatly than he was himself . . . often made Dud feel nervous and ashamed. What had a nameless bastard like him, with a mere trick of book-writing, done for these patient people, to receive such honour? It must have been lodged in their blood, like a secret unescapable chemistry, this respect for a 'gentleman', even for such an extremely dubious 'gentleman' as himself!" (200)

Powys' 'Age of Gold', when man lived in an undivided community with others and the world around him. Thus, nature becomes the guarantor of social and environmental harmony. The function of Powys' rustics is both to demonstrate this, and to show his intellectuals, on their return, how much they have lost. It is for this reason that Abel Twig and Bartholomew Jones appear in *A Glastonbury Romance* - and I would add, in passing, that this is why it is to Abel that Sam administers the enema after his vision of the grail. It is unfortunate, perhaps, that the overly rustic dialogue has, today, such strong connotations of cod rusticity of the *Cold Comfort Farm* variety. This should not be allowed to mask the important role that these characters have in Powys' social scheme.¹

Powys, however, was very aware (a product, no doubt, of his urban American experiences) that social change was inevitable, and hence his books concern themselves with how to live with this new rootlessness. In individual terms this meant the cultivation of vision; in social terms it came to mean in naive attachment to a distinctly personal version of communism, in a fictional fight against the forces of capital. This economic and social debate is, it seems to me, the greatest point of weakness in Powys' novels. Because, as I have shown in the non-fiction, Powys' essential philosophy was dualist, involving the endless clash of love and malice, all aspects of his thinking are, to a greater or lesser extent, coloured by this view. Thus communism is associated with non-possessive love, capitalism with aggressive malice. In the fiction, though this involves crude stereotyping, Powys' capitalists fare reasonably well, illustrating, I think, Powys' willingness to treat viewpoints inimical to his own with a certain charity and generosity. Philip Crow in *A Glastonbury Romance* and Dog Cattistock in *Weymouth Sands*

¹An excellent example (*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 353-6) shows the two men discussing "what the future will bring to our wold town."

exemplify perfectly Powys' approach. Philip is aggressively self-centred, with a passion for domination (such a tendency can be seen in the passage on pp. 50-51, in which his thought patterns are transcribed); he is particularly associated with 'modern' industry and with electricity.¹ Yet Powys is compassionate in his analysis of Philip's behaviour in the final flood. Likewise, though Dog Cattistock's quarrying is, in Powys' terms, an unjustifiable abuse of the landscape (Jobber's relationship with Portland stone being much more harmonious) it is nevertheless Cattistock whose iron-willed bravery is exalted in the long storm sequence at the centre of the book. Within the shorter perspective of a novel's plot and time-scale Powys wishes to show capitalism defeated: the flood washes away not only Philip Crow's aeroplane, but also the new concrete bridge which has symbolised the expansionist tendencies of his industrial mind. Yet in the long term, though Sam Dekker has and Johnny Geard may have seen the grail, Powys is in no doubt that the future is in Philip's hands.

Powys' communists and philosophical anarchists fare considerably less well. In understanding this, it is perhaps most significant to note that communism and anarchism were closely allied in Powys' mind, despite the fact that philosophically they are almost polar opposites. What Powys appeared to mean by 'the idea of communism' was a world in which each man discharged his minimal social responsibility and obligation (though, significantly, this he saw in terms of duty to the family, not to the state), but in which he would then be free to indulge in his own desires, provided that in doing so he did not exploit anyone (or anything) else.²

¹Further on in the novel (pp. 230-1) a similar passage stresses the intense antagonism between Philip's values and those Powys wished to cultivate: "He would conquer it, this effeminate flower garden of pretty-pretty superstitions and mediaeval abracadabra! He would plant factory upon factory in it, dynamo upon dynamo! He would have mines beneath it, railways across it, airlines above it!"

²It is interesting to note, in passing, that both Russia and America were seen by Powys as nations in which the freedom he desired could be found. America Powys clearly knew well from his own experience; Russia, and its

However, in translating this into fictional terms, Powys fell foul of two unfortunate courses of action. One was to give his philosophical anarchists too much digressive introspection, which amounted to so much rope with which to hang themselves. This happens to Paul Trent in *A Glastonbury Romance*, and his fond recollections of his "fifth form essay on Freedom"; his ideas and actions remain at that level.³ Veering to the other extreme, Powys burdens his working class agitators with Cockney accents, aged parents, and no real grasp of philosophy. Red Robinson in *A Glastonbury Romance* is the most unfortunate of these⁴ but he is by no means alone. Moreover, though Powys does fully articulate his communist views through the mouthpiece of Dave Spear,⁵ he fudges the issue as far as the structure of the novel is concerned, since after all the talk about striking and communism, the crucial piece of the action is skipped over.⁶

Perhaps the only other thing that needs to be noted about Powys' social thought, as it is translated into his novels, is his understanding of the subtleties of crowd psychology. His interest in writing on a broad canvas was perfectly adjusted to the treatment of 'panoramic' scenes, like the pageant and the grand opening ceremony for Geard's Saxon arch, in *A Glastonbury Romance*. He knew that

"every audience 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."⁷

new social system, Powys idealised - though of course he was not alone here (in the early 1930s it was not only the Webbs who regarded it as 'a new civilisation'). In the Wessex novels both nations provide his characters with ways of escape, for exactly the same reasons - cf. Persephone's spontaneous (not to say arbitrary) decision to emigrate to Russia (*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 958) with Wizzie's and Thuella's departure for America (*Maiden Castle*, pp. 478-80).

³See *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 711-20.

⁴See, for example, pp.478-80 of *A Glastonbury Romance*.

⁵See *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 267-8.

⁶*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp.650, ff.

⁷*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 340-1. In this, and other similar scenes in Powys' fiction, there is a strong similarity with Golding's treatment of crowd scenes, particularly those in *Lord of the Flies*.

At such moments, the veneer of civilisation is removed and emotions rooted in malice take a collective hold. At such moments, social divisions based on class push the differing strata ever further apart, and then, more than ever, Powys' interest switches to the individual, and his progress in the face of society's hostile intents.¹

III

*"What I want to do is to isolate the particular portion of the earth's surface called 'Dorset'; as if it were possible to decipher there a palimpsest of successive strata ... of human impression."*²

I mentioned earlier the importance of home and homecoming to Powys. The 1960 'Preface' describes *Wolf Solent* as "a book of Nostalgia, written in a foreign country with the pen of a traveller and the ink-blood of his home." (11) Clearly his long stay in America had a powerful effect on the way he viewed his native country, and especially certain localities which retained a peculiar resonance, or 'mana', in his mind. In discussing Powys' response to, and use of, the natural world in his Wessex novels, I wish to concentrate on two particular aspects of his work. One is his sense of the locally numinous - the importance that specific places have in these novels. The other, in the context of more generalised, passing references in the fiction, is the weight he placed on the interactive qualities of landscape - that is, the way he uses the environment in these novels to communicate, to his protagonists and his readers, essential

¹A *Glastonbury Romance* again provides the best example: "In all human communities - indeed in all human groups - there are strange atavistic forces that are held in chains deep down under the surface ready to break forth in blind scoriac fury under a given touch. In these violent upheavals of class against class there is something far deeper than principle or opinion at stake. Skin against skin blood against blood nerves against nerves rise up from incalculable depths." (569).

²*Wolf Solent*, p. 45.

aspects of his 'world-view'.

Although Glastonbury is probably the most powerfully depicted of Powys' resonant localities, there is in all four of these novels a broader perspective, defined, naturally enough, as 'Wessex'. Similar in scale to Hardy's, though not extending quite as far westwards, it was a landscape penetrated not only by successive layers of human history¹ but also by elements of supernatural force.

Certain places within this landscape were endowed with a mythic resonance purely because of the personal connotations Powys brought to them. This is true of Sherborne and Yeovil in *Wolf Solent*; and of Weymouth in *Wolf Solent* and *Weymouth Sands* - a town which "possessed" Powys in his youth, according to the *Autobiography*. It was to the mental re-exploration in adulthood of these landscapes of his earlier life that Powys turned in these novels.² Part of this manoeuvre was undoubtedly to reveal a world which "seemed to gather the centuries together with a familiar continuity of unbroken tradition."³ It is a world in many ways too powerful for Powys' indecisive protagonists to cope with - Dorset overthrows Wolf's "life-illusion" where his London life had left him untouched.⁴ But the

¹Powys, like Golding, saw this area of England as a palimpsest, impregnated with history: "What I want to do is to isolate the particular portion of the earth's surface called 'Dorset'; as if it were possible to decipher there a palimpsest of successive strata, one inscribed below another, of human impression. Such impressions are for every being made and for every being obliterated in the ebb and flow of events." (*Wolf Solent*, p. 45).

²Fernandez's article, 'The Pattern of Homecoming' (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 219-31) is particularly helpful here, in the distinction she makes between physical homecomings (albeit for reasons of 'spiritual' renewal) like those of Wolf and Dud No-man, and "transcendental journeys" like those of Dud's father, Uryen Quirm, journeys which mirror, in their mythic rootedness, the fascinations which Wales and pre-Celtic history and mythology increasingly held for Powys.

³*Maiden Castle*, p. 15.

⁴Diane Fernandez is again perceptive here. The end result of the destruction of this life-illusion is not to destroy Wolf himself; instead, "he returns at the end of the novel to his own house, admitting his wife's adultery and his own personal and social failures. This is a homecoming fit to be compared, in its sense of the pathos and courage of an individual's acceptance of life as it is, with the homecoming of Leopold Bloom." (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 223).

continuities also bring solace - **Weymouth Sands** is peopled largely by failures, who suffer loss and deprivation, and the sea off Weymouth, in that novel, with its hypnotic rhythms of ebb and flow, images perfectly a patient and healing stoicism.¹

These landscapes which Powys revisited in the Wessex novels were the focus for an attempted recovery of his own past. Others are charged with a deeper, more mythic past. Maiden Castle, for instance, functions on both levels. For Dud (in this respect a 'Powys-hero') Dorchester and its environs are laden with evidence of a personal and family past, and he returns, in part, to make a kind of atonement. For his father, Uryen Quirm, Maiden Castle is the gateway to a more distant civilisation, a civilisation that Powys eventually traced back personally and in his fiction to North Wales.

It is Glastonbury, however, that speaks most strongly of Powys' faith in the spiritual power of particular localities in these novels. A **Glastonbury Romance** is rooted both in the soil of Somerset and in its cosmic setting; Glastonbury functions in this novel, in Eliot's words, as "the intersection of the timeless with time." Powys himself, in the 'Preface' of 1953, gave the most eloquent defence of the importance of the area. He claimed that the function of the book was to describe

"nothing more and nothing less than the effect of a particular legend, a special myth, a unique tradition, from the remotest past in human history, upon a particular spot on the surface of this planet together with its crowd of inhabitants of every age and of every type of character." (xi)

The Grail legend ("so vibrantly akin to eating and drinking and love-making and even to voiding our excreta") was powerfully attractive because it was evidence for Powys of a place and a moment where the eternal invaded the everyday world of space and time. It also affected the plot

¹Cavaliero, in **John Cowper Powys: Novelist**, pp. 79-80, is especially understanding here.

and imagery of the book, reworking references to incidents from the Grail legends, not with the painstaking craftsmanship of Joyce using *The Odyssey*, it is true, but, as Hopkins remarks, with "furtive dips into that world of weird ritual and mythology made so much of in T.S. Eliot's 'Wasteland.'"¹

In the fiction Glastonbury is, as most critics have observed, the central character. It shapes and moulds the behaviour of the other, merely human figures. As I will show it preserves perfectly the conditions in which Powys' characters experience visionary moments of insight, like Sam Dekker before his father's fish-tank, receiving

"A sensation like that of the presence of a *double world*, every motion and gesture in the first being a symbol of something that was taking place in the second."²

Of course, Glastonbury as a place does not function in this way for all the novel's characters, but almost all of them are aware of a kind of psychic vibration which reveals a potential coming together of material and spiritual worlds. The rustics and the urban lower classes (Number One and Number Two, Nancy Stickles) experience this, as it were, naturally, never having been away from the place. Even the aggressive materialists, like Philip, recognise the need to combat more than the bare earth if caves, mines and generators are to triumph.³ But it is those who are

¹Hopkins, *The Powys Brothers*, p. 157.

²*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 913. Cavellero, in *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, p. 75, comments sensitively: "The two worlds are interdependent; and it is the ignoring of the other world which leads to authoritarianism and self-assertion." In *Weymouth Sands*, Powys evokes a similar dual perspective in the view from Portland, in a way that keeps his metaphysical speculations more attuned with physical reality than similar passages in *A Glastonbury Romance*: "They came to that smooth level end of the Island called the Bill, where the land itself offers the wayfarer a circumference of double horizons, one infinite and one finite, both conveying an impression of boundlessness, but the boundlessness of the one being physical and the boundlessness of the other metaphysical." (348)

³A good illustration of this point - that Glastonbury has some impact on all people - occurs on pp. 125-6: "Everyone who came to this spot seemed to draw something from it, attracted by a magnetism too powerful for anyone to resist, but as different people approached it they changed its chemistry, though not its essence, by their own identity; so that upon

attuned to this force who can most powerfully exploit it - centrally, in this novel, Johnny Geard.⁴ With the aid of these powers he heals sicknesses and raises the dead, because he is attuned to the spirit of place, and to the supernatural forces which may be released at that place:

"What Mr Geard kept his mind steadily upon, all this while, was that crack, that cranny, that slit in Time through which the Timeless - known in those parts for five thousand years as a cauldron, a horn, a krater, a mwys, a well, a kernos, a platter, a cup, and even a nameless stone - had broken the laws of Nature!" (708)

Though Glastonbury, in common with other localities mentioned thus far in this section, had undoubtedly a deep meaning in the fiction, Powys' treatment of other landscapes in general reveals a similar attentiveness to nature and to the interactive relationship between man and landscape which, Powys claimed, was a vital part of human stability, and even sanity, in the twentieth century. By this, Powys meant something more than simply the association of certain moods and tones in nature with the feelings and emotional needs of his characters - something more than the use of the pathetic fallacy in his work, in fact. Wilson Knight cites this aspect of Powys' art as the major theme of the Wessex novels - "the human psyche in interaffective relationship with the natural surroundings."⁵ It is certainly true that there is a qualitative difference between the way

none of them it had the same psychic effect. The influence was personal and yet impersonal, it was a material centre of force and yet an immaterial fountain of life." The whole of this passage - though it is strictly speaking one of Powys' 'asides', in which he addresses the reader direct in paragraphs unattached to the main narrative - is basic to Powys' philosophy of the relationship between place (of which Glastonbury is one local example) and eternal forces.

⁴The text is full of examples. A typical instance is the healing of Tittie Petherton: "The truth is that this chalybeate fountain on this particular hillside had been the scene of such a continuous series of mystic rites, going back to the neolithic men of the Lake Village, if not to the still more mysterious race that preceded them, that there had come to hang about it a thick aura of magical vibrations It is not strange that Mr Geard, whose animal magnetism was double or treble that of an ordinary person, should find himself able to tap a reservoir of miraculous power." (707-8)

⁵G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest*, p. 30.

Powys handled the natural world in his early fiction - even in the most portentous passages of *Ducdame* - and the way he approaches depictions of the environment in these novels. The spiritual properties of natural phenomena assume a deeper significance.¹

In part, what one sees in Powys' work here is a basic elementalism which is a fundamental texture of nineteenth-century Romanticism. This dark-hued pastoralism (in which, for example, strategic places in *Wolf Solent* are called pointedly Blacksod and the Vale of Blackmore), so similar to, say, Hardy's handling of Egdon in his Wessex novels, often does seem to be there merely for 'atmospheric' effect.² But Powys can treat this issue much more subtly, in the emotional responses of John Crow, early in *A Glastonbury Romance*, for example, as he walks across Brandon Heath, or, on a broader level, the sentient flickerings of a newly-aroused nature on the eve of the great flood, in that same novel.

As with the overtly supernatural in its relationship with man, Powys sees forces of awareness both in nature itself, and in the combined response of perceived nature and perceiving humanity. The former - the sentient quality of nature - is evident in Powys' meditation on "the smell of primroses" and "the scent of moss",³ and it comes to an immense climax

¹The *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Up and Out* (11/10/57 - pp. 601-2), again written (I suspect) by Wilson Knight, traces this strain in Powys' thought back, via Shelley, Wordsworth and Blake, to a long occult tradition based upon the 'immanence' of nature. Cf. this to my discussion of the visionary tradition in Chapter 1.

²The chapter of *Wolf Solent* called 'Lenty Pond', and in particular Wolf's frantic response, on visiting the pond by night (pp. 560-2) show Powys giving way to his worst passions for over-writing: "Yes, what his flesh and his bones shrank from was not eternity. It was immersion in that localised, particular, cubic expanse of starlit oxygen-hydrogen!"

Critics who are antagonistic to Powys regularly seize on this side of his writing, claiming that settings are more important than characters, of whom the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Weymouth Sands* (20/6/35, p. 396) wrote "Mr Powys sees them as merely playing a puppet show on the broad lap of living Nature."

³*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 512-3. If there were just fleeting glimpses of this type of description I would be tempted to put this down to stylistic affectation on Powys' part. But he enters into it so enthusiastically ("There is a religious reticence in the nature of moss. It vaunts itself

in the "great creative nature" passages evoking the Towers of Cybele at the end of *A Glastonbury Romance*. However, it is not merely what is 'natural' in the landscape that can communicate in this way: the man-made high fan-tracery roof of Ramsgard Abbey, to Wolf Solent, "seemed to fling forth, like some great ancient fountain in a walled garden, eternal arches of enchanted water that sustained, comforted and healed."⁴ The same effect can be seen, on a slightly lighter note, in the influence that the statue of Queen Victoria and St John's spire have on Jobber in *Weymouth Sands*.

With this example I move from innate qualities of nature to perceived qualities, half-sensed and half-shaped by Powys' characters. Powys claimed that perceptions differed not just in detail from individual to individual, but in essence from male to female:

"The thoughts of one of this particular pair of human intruders who was a man continued to reduce these stones and pebbles and sea-waves to the insubstantiality of bodiless ideas; while the thoughts of the one who was a woman accepted each 'minute particular' as a sort of absolute, *the way things were*, in this world".⁵

Now, though this cannot be applied as a hard and fast rule (Christie, in *Wolf Solent*, is definitely on the masculine side) it is generally a reflection of Powys' thought. Consider Wolf and Gerda dabbling in the Lunt in *Wolf Solent*, (pp.107-9). Gerda (associated throughout the novel with an earth-rooted, animal sensibility - imaged as her blackbird-whistle) is here deeply, **physically** related to the stream. Powys describes vividly the clash of her "living whiteness amid the greenery", and her "immemorial

not; it proclaims not its beauty" and so on) that one comes to tolerate and accept passages like these as an essential part of Powys' meaning.

⁴*Wolf Solent*, p. 128. This is powerfully reminiscent of Golding's handling of a similar image - Jocelin's spire.

⁵*Weymouth Sands*, p.163.

girlish desire to expose warm, naked limbs to the cold embraces of the elements." In her play, and in the way she throws mud at the water rat,¹ she participates with this particular stretch of water at this particular time to achieve an experience rich in immediate sensation. Wolf, meanwhile, is seen to be sunk deep in abstraction:

"Wolf tried to visualize the whole course of the Lunt, so as to win for it some kind of coherent personality. By thinking of *all its waters together*, from start to finish, this unity could be achieved."

It is Wolf's tendency towards abstracting the particular into his 'mythology' that Powys sets out to undermine in this novel, seeing it as a besetting male weakness.² In *Weymouth Sands*, however, the identification of a male character with the environment is looked on more favourably: Jobber and Portland stone are identified so closely together that they merge at significant moments.³ He is, to quote Wilson Knight, one of those "rock-like persons for whom mysteries are irrelevant; cut, as it were, from nature's solidities, their very being invites us to make that nature our centre."⁴ Yet in both cases, the Jobber's and Wolf's, it is the natural environment, with which Powys places them in close contact, that shapes and gives meaning to their sensations.

¹This is another point of contact between Powys and Golding, though little of the active enmity of the 'Sophy and the dabchicks' episode of *Darkness Visible* can be seen in Gerda's behaviour.

²This is not to say that Powys would advocate the breaking of all Wolf's close bonds with the environment. He merely wishes to substitute for Wolf's erotic parasitism what Brebner calls "inward characteristics dramatically sensitised" (*The Demon Within*, p. 62). Brebner goes on to link this new approach with Hopkins' ideas of 'inscape'.

³Note, for example, Jobber's hoarse imprecation against his mortal enemy, Dog Cattistock: "Don't 'ee see, Mr Rodney, he's grown to be more than an enemy of flesh and blood? Don't 'ee see he's grown to be an enemy of the Stone?" (194)

⁴*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 199. Wilson Knight is acute here, but a critic who can also claim that Jobber is elementally conceived in his "simple strength and manliness, . . . just such a man as D.H. Lawrence was always striving to create" (*The Saturnian Quest*, pp. 43-4), is not, I would suggest, one whose judgment can be wholly relied upon.

IV

"What's Poetry if it isn't something that has to fight for the unseen against the seen, for the dead against the living, for the mysterious against the obvious?"¹

In **Weymouth Sands**, Powys wrote of Magnus Muir (in this, perhaps, a mouthpiece for the author): "Like many another lonely and egotistical man, he was much more original in his personal philosophy than in his aesthetic taste." Powys was on occasion bluntly honest, in his novels, about his own limitations (as well as his strengths) as a writer. Critics for whom Powys' personal philosophy outweighs his aesthetic taste (like G. Wilson Knight and Morine Krissdottir) seem willing to forgive the regular lapses of tone, the stylistic eccentricities that make Powys' work, in Angus Wilson's memorable phrase, "a kind of formidably huge, very exotic, strange yet same tasting, indigestible pudding."² Others, who come to the novels willing to be impressed by their energy and enthusiasm but unwilling to swallow too much of Powys' pontificating, conclude in self-doubt, or sidestep the urge to be judgmental.³ I have already analysed (in Chapter 2) Powys' views on art, aesthetics and the writing of fiction. The Wessex novels bear out the main emphases of that analysis - that Powys wrote voluminously and formlessly, by inspiration, faithful to no structural code but that of 'Nature', in the self-consciously naive idiom of the romance, and in terms of 'poetic' and arbitrarily selected images to carry the main burden of meaning. What a study of Powys' non-fiction might not prepare one for is his remorseless self-centredness

¹A **Glastonbury Romance**, p. 529.

²A **Review of English Literature** (January 1963, p. 11). I should point out that Angus Wilson does not agree with this definition!

³Hooker, in **John Cowper Powys and David Jones**, looks back over his short book and distrusts, without saying why, the fact that most of his passing critical comments on Powys' work have been adverse; Cavaliero, in **John Cowper Powys: Novelist** (p. 181) claims that Powys' novels are not designed for criticism.

(and the enthusiasm with which he keeps invading his fictional world in order to harangue the reader). However, it is not my purpose here to produce a damning catalogue of Powys' shortcomings as a novelist. I think, ultimately, if one is to derive any value from reading Powys, the stylistic collapses must be put up with, as part of an effort on Powys' part to communicate (the same could be said of Hardy). Rather, I want to examine the Wessex novels to see how they match up with Powys' intentions both internally (in what he allows his characters to think and say) and, as it were, externally (in what the novels have to say for themselves).

Powys favoured a conception of the writer as medium, a channel through which inspiration could flow. This is attractive as long as the inspiration is flowing, but if it were the sole truth it would give Powys nothing to fall back on when it dried up. He recognised this in **Maiden Castle**:

"Sometimes he actually wrote so fast - especially when his more analytical faculties were in abeyance - that it was as if he became a medium, writing, he scarce knew what, under some unknown 'control' His hand was moving now at top speed over the white paper, directing the pen point that did the work, that indeed sometimes went on doing the work when its director's attention had drifted away." (111-2)

The Wessex novels, like their predecessors, show clear evidence of the presence and absence of that attention. 'Authentic' art will not be poised, elegant and finished, but, though rough and occasionally naive, able to speak with an unstudied directness:

"There began to spring up - out of the void as it almost seemed - a very exciting and most original school of Glastonbury design, genuinely indigenous and wherein the roughnesses and crudities of drawing, colouring and perspective possessed the imaginative freshness and childlike appeal of an authentically primitive art."¹

This is what Powys aspires to, and in the struggle to achieve it, one is

aware that language, brute words, often act as a barrier to that communication.² To overcome it, Powys conjures. The magician and the conjurer - Sylvanus Cobbold in **Weymouth Sands**, Uryen in **Maiden Castle** - assume an importance in Powys' work because they cut through this barrier, or transform it, as Dud recognises in his father's explanation of supernatural forces at Maiden Castle.

However, there is one major drawback which has both philosophical and structural consequences for this view of the artist as medium. This is that Powys rarely demonstrates in the fiction what actually is the product of this inspiration; he can only tell the reader that it has occurred. This is true, for instance, of the "school of Glastonbury" example just cited. Powys is not concerned with ~~how~~ this art is "very exciting and most original" in detail. Likewise, there is an oppressive vagueness about Dud's bursts of written inspiration³ that Powys obliges the reader to take on trust. It is difficult not to feel that Powys doesn't actually care about the substance of Dud's work - as when Mr Cumber "was evidently fishing for a sensational article or something or other" (220). Detail at this point would help the reader to take Dud's writing seriously, but Powys is either unwilling, or unable, to supply it.

The reason for this, I feel, is that Powys' all-seeing authorial eye operates selectively. There are times when he self-consciously withdraws from any explanation. The disclaimers attached to the death scenes of Tom Barter and Johnny Geard in **A Glastonbury Romance** are clear evidence of this. However, when he describes events in the novels that relate to his

1 **A Glastonbury Romance**, p. 923.

2 Here again, however, there is an uneasy duplicity in Powys' style, for he often seems to take refuge in words, like Magnus Muir. "It was characteristic of him to take a furtive pride in not allowing the drudgery of teaching to spoil his private pleasure in the subtler and more primitive language, that language which had come to form a sort of invisible barrier for him between his interior world and the world of outer reality." (**Weymouth Sands**, p. 33).

3 See **Maiden Castle**, p. 201, for example.

own personal experience, he is more than willing to bury the action in wave after wave of over-explanation.¹

Inspiration, then, is something of a two-faced weapon. Under its disguise, Powys claims the right to know everything, and to tell everything about his characters, except of those things that for 'doctrinal' reasons, as it were, he ostentatiously claims not to know ("whether it passed, with its personal identity intact, into that invisible envelope of rarefied matter which surrounds our astronomic sphere or whether it perished irrecoverably, the present chronicler knows not"²). Some critics, notably Greenwald, have attempted to justify Powys' fictional method from his philosophy, identifying Powys the novelist with the aether.³ While it is undoubtedly true that Powys explicitly made this identification (as I observed in Chapter Two) this cannot explain totally the essentially nineteenth-century fictional technique, or the formless voluminousness of Powys' work, and it seems clear to me that when Powys' inspirational urge tailed off (as it lamentably often did, even in these Wessex novels) he turned to his second great fictional ground rule, "the More, the Better".

This, too, is Janus-featured. It gives to Powys' Wessex novels, especially *A Glastonbury Romance*, their comprehensiveness, the sense that

¹This is so much an integral feature of Powys' style that examples could be found on virtually every page of the novels. To cite just a few examples from *A Glastonbury Romance*, consider Powys' digression on Penny's cauldron (p. 210), his commentary on Mary's view of the moon (pp. 278-80) and his painstaking over-explanation of the reactions of Lady Rachel Zoyland to Geard (pp. 437-9). His worst offence, of this nature, is the way he crudely puts his own opinions on a subject into the mouths and minds of his characters, without attempting to, as it were, filter it through 'their' thought-patterns, as when he describes Geard's "contact with Christ, which resembled, though it was not identical with, the physical embrace of an erotic obsession" (442).

²*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1051.

³"In his fictions he aimed to transcend the bounds of his own personality, not by attaining the godlike impersonality of the Joycean artist paring his fingernails, but by assuming the ubiquitous personality of the universal aether" (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 79-80).

they are describing a whole world, very much in the manner of the great Russian novels of the nineteenth century. Angus Wilson, in **A Review of English Literature** refers to Powys' "peculiar" fundamental scepticism: "its function is not the negative desire to reject but the positive unwillingness to exclude". Further on in the piece, he writes, apropos of **Wolf Solent**, "When we remember that Mr Powys was already 57 when this novel was published, we must celebrate (or deplore) so extraordinary a resistance to the hard, petrified edges of belief, that yet never suggests shallowness or vague eclecticism."¹ Though this seems to me to be too sweeping² it does at least recognise one of the essential qualities of the Powys novel, its vastness.

Structurally, this has consequences that are ambivalently received by critics. It renders his novels rather chaotic. Now, those critics whose interest is in how Powys selects and shapes his material lament this³. However, those who find chaos attractive, whose response to one of Powys' novels is to wade out, as it were, into mid-stream and allow the work to flood over them, are attracted to the arbitrary and the tangential in the fiction.⁴ Whilst I would recognise the foolishness of looking to these Wessex novels for coherence, or evidence of meaning or intention being

¹**A Review of English Literature**, January 1963, pp. 13-14.

²There are, after all, so many moments of dogmatic insistence in these novels, where, in paragraphs of authorial asides, Powys tells us what "in fact" is the case, especially about emotional or spiritual states. Moreover, he is curiously unwilling to describe certain recurring events in these novels - such as the number of marriages which take place 'off-stage', notably in **A Glastonbury Romance**. These are avoided I feel, for the precise reason that Angus Wilson claims Powys is not guilty of, that is, the negative desire to reject, in this case to reject traditional Christian experience and patterns of behaviour.

³Early reviewers baulked at this confusion: see the **Times Literary Supplement** reviews for **Wolf Solent** ("the story is digressive and full of irrelevancies" - 8/8/29) and **A Glastonbury Romance** ("swamping incident in commentary" - 6/7/33).

⁴Hyman, whose remarks on the 'suicidal' tendencies of Powys' fiction I have already noted, has this to say of **A Glastonbury Romance**: "The fundamental horizontality of the **Romance** - its length, its multi-centredness, the concreteness of thoughts and feelings within it - is a constant threat to any development of plot or action." (**Essays on John Cowper Powys**, p. 134).

communicated through structure (as opposed to the meaningful absence of structure) there are, I feel, slightly unhappy consequences as regards our understanding of vision, which are the product of this disintegrating storytelling.¹ On a broad scale, there are unresolved complexities due to time shifts, for example. I have never read of an adequate explanation, nor can I offer one, for the sudden chronological jumps in *Weymouth Sands*. Powys appears to be confusing the basic thrust of the story for no reason.²

On a more detailed level, Powys' passion for digression and inclusiveness often wrecks his climaxes or what I take to be moments of significant meaning, seen in terms of the novel's overall intention. By this I do not mean the deliberate 'puncturing' of intense moments by a pointedly destructive incident.³ Rather, I mean a collapse which, in part at least, stems from a sudden bathetic switch of tone. At the murder of Tom Barter, Tossie is described as "that plump bundle of wild hysteria"⁴; the miraculous and beautiful episode in which Jerry Cobbold plays music for Perdita drifts back into Powys' more conventionally prosaic style as the scene turns to "a certain Doctor Lucius Girodel, a notorious quack,

¹I must emphasise again that structurelessness is relative. There is nothing in these four novels to match the narrative collapse of Powys' late fiction. For instance, in *Up and Out* Powys puts into the mouth of his fictional alter ego, Wat Kums, the following confession: "I keep telling myself the wildest stories. I start one; then I break that off and start another." (44).

²For instance, Marret is deeply upset at breaking to Magnus Muir in August the news that she left Sylvanus Cobbold six months earlier (p. 461); Jobber likewise is still visibly emotionally affected by Perdita's departure (pp. 484-5). Both these reactions suggest that Powys felt that the action of the novel was continuous. As the whole of the novel up to that stage had taken place over a period of three or four weeks in January-February, the sudden jump to the end of August seems deliberate - but why?

³A good example would be Geard's overhearing someone urinating after he has come under the spiritual influence of Merlin at Mark's Court. This is a typical visionary technique - cf. Golding's treatment of the weighty events described in the opening pages of *Darkness Visible*, deflated by the sound of vomiting (see Chapter 6).

⁴*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1053.

empiric, and abortion procurer, whose house was a famous resort of unconventional philosophers and their fair friends."¹

What these lapses do (and there are many, many more) is to reveal Powys' tonal insensitiveness as well as his flawed grasp of structure. For it is surely unlikely that Powys' interlude about the aesthetic appearance of scrambled eggs on toast can have much relevance to a love affair between Percy Spear and Will Zoyland, which is itself an incident whose significance is somewhat obscure in *A Glastonbury Romance* as a whole.

Finally, 'the More, the Better' has one more distressing consequence - Powys' tendency to forget details of the plot and to change them later on. It is of course difficult to tell how much of Powys' fiction was planned in any detail - Powys implied, as I noted in Chapter Two, that this amounted to little more than proposing an initial situation and assembling a 'cast of characters' - but as his fiction progresses his tendency to ramble and leave loose ends becomes more rushed. There are moments in *Weymouth Sands* when it seems very likely that Powys inserts ideas into the action as they come to him, without preparation, even when it means introducing a major psychological, emotional or historical fact about an already-established character.² By the time he wrote *Maiden Castle*, the stability of external events was of even less importance - hence he is not concerned to correct inconsistencies such as "that unopened Bristol letter" with a Yeovil postmark (276) or the fluctuating age of Wizzie Ravelston.³

Although this kind of unreliability is not consistent with the craftsmanship one might expect from a novel, Powys clearly disdained the

¹*Weymouth Sands*, p. 220.

²These might include the Jobber's "tremendous torso of love" (353) or the addiction of "the woman from Easton" for Sylvanus Cobbold (390-1).

³It is unlikely, I feel, that there is anything 'meaningful' about this sort of textual manipulation, as there is about Golding's handling of Matty's name in *Darkness Visible*.

carefully ordered in fiction (typified for him in the work of Henry James, whose novels he nevertheless respected, as his letters show), preferring a faithfulness to 'Nature'. Something as comprehensively vague is of little face value, so to determine Powys' success here, it is necessary to know what he meant. The key text is not in his non-fiction, but in *A Glastonbury Romance* - and this in itself is a superb example of the Powysian fictional technique, in that an authorial intervention of this directness is allowed to interrupt with no preparation a passage of orthodox third-person narration:

"The composers of fiction aim at an aesthetic verisimilitude which seldom corresponds to the much more eccentric and chaotic dispositions of Nature. Only rarely are such writers so torn and rent by the Demon within them that they can add their own touch to the wave crests of *real activity* as these foam up, bringing wreckage and sea-tangle and living and dead ocean monsters and bloody spume and bottom silt into the rainbow spray.

They intersperse their 'comic' and their 'tragic' in a manner quite different - so hard is it to throw off the clinging conventions of human tradition! - from the ghastly monotonies and sublime surprises that nature delights in."
(666)

This is worth analysing in some detail. Firstly, Powys rejects "aesthetic verisimilitude". This appears to be essentially an issue of structure and selection, and, as I have shown, shaping (in a formal sense) was anathema to Powys. But clearly some selection has to take place sometime for the novel to be written at all.¹ Novelists since time immemorial have issued 'Back to Nature' as a rallying cry: Powys's 'Nature' is unique, probably, in that it is made up of many varieties of consciousness, competing chaotically to put their points of view, and it is to this, in the mature fiction, that Powys desires to be faithful. Hence, I would suggest, Powys' interest in the 'Romance' idiom, in which the author is

¹Powys' protests are like Lawrence's, where he objects to novelists who rest their thumb in the balance pan - and both, one assumes, remained oblivious to the fact that they offended against the impossible ideal at the very least as much as those they criticised.

traditionally more free to interrupt, to inject so-called 'supernatural' elements (though to Powys these would, of course, be part of "real actuality"). Powys' work clearly is rent by "the Demon within", which leads to the marked confrontation in his work between "bloody spume and bottom silt" and "the rainbow spray" of his moments of intense vision.

Nevertheless, patternmaking (plotting and shaping) does go on within the novels - mostly, as I will show, on the level of repeated images.¹ So, faithfulness to Nature comes to mean both a desire to allow all aspects of consciousness a freedom in chaos to express their points of view and a desire to intervene authorially and sermonise, operating simultaneously.² Few critics have been willing to grasp the nettle here, in making sense of this polarising tension. Cavaliero is an exception, recognising the internal strains of *Wolf Solent*, which is full of a visionary intensity evoked by Powys' emphasis on an unstudied registering of the present moment at odds with a nineteenth-century narrative technique which cannot handle the consequently overwritten and monotonous meditative passages.³ Certainly the machinery of Victorian fiction impedes Powys' devotion to transcribing 'Nature', whether at the level of description (Dickensian

¹Belinda Humfrey, however, points out that in *Wolf Solent* there is also an interior commentary on the art of writing itself - see *Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 35-6. This is actually true of all four of these novels - not least because in each case at least one of the major characters is a writer.

²This latter point is consistent with Powys' view of his novels as "lay-sermons", and his claim in the 'Preface' to *A Glastonbury Romance* that he is "a born book-worm turned novelist or *fabulist*" (my italics). The tension between preaching and holding back can be seen in the impossible goal he sets himself in *Maiden Castle*: "to justify my planetary idealism by convincing domestic detail" (quoted in Malcolm Elwin's 'Prefatory Note' to *Maiden Castle*, pp. 9-10).

³See *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, pp. 49, 57-8.

'character'-drawing, like that of Penny Pitches in *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 112) or of event (Hardyesque coincidences¹ and patterns of behaviour, of which Dud's purchase of Wizzie in *Maiden Castle*, pp. 78-80, is only the most obvious).

What this tends to mean, in terms of the way Powys does shape his material, is that there is a tension and unevenness between long stretches of the, as it were, 'random' spinning out of event suddenly interrupted by episodes of ornately complex plotting.² And this pursuit of what is 'natural' takes place in fiction which self-consciously draws attention to its own 'writtenness', though I am genuinely uncertain as to how aware Powys was of the consequences of his method here.³

Tensions such as these are in part resolved by Powys' basic technique for holding his narrative together and communicating meaning, that is, the use of controlling images. As I observed in my second chapter, such aesthetic theory as Powys brought to his writing tended to be based on an affection for 'poetry' shaped by attitudes to 'beauty' and 'rhythm' that Powys drew from Pater. Hence in these novels, one regularly finds the most striking passages in the fiction communicating in terms of a heavily-charged late-Romantic lyricism, which Powys evidently saw as being the

¹Cavaliero is again astute here - noting an intrinsic antagonism between the 'Fate' elements in *A Glastonbury Romance* (sun, moon and evening star, and a double-natured First Cause) and Powys' insistence on "the subjectivity of all religious, mystical and imaginative experience" (*John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, pp. 65-6).

²In *A Glastonbury Romance*, for example, note the unlikely contrivances Powys sets in motion to get Geard trapped in Wookey Hole in Chapter Twelve. The signposting of future events is also laboured, as in the flood references on pp. 884, 889.

³I am thinking of those passages in the novels which draw attention to the fact that this is a book rather than a created world (of "real actuality"?), however illusory. Thus, for instance, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, "he uttered several times a sound which it is impossible to represent in print otherwise than" (330); in *Weymouth Sands*, Sylvanus "received a *tu quoque* so profane as to be totally unprintable" (222).

most effective way, in terms he quotes approvingly in the 'Preface' to **Wolf Solent**, of dissolving solid entities into "atmosphere"¹.

Powys defended 'poetry', as he had done 'Nature', actually within the text of **A Glastonbury Romance**, not this time as a direct aside, but (it must be said, rather woodenly) through the mouth of Lady Rachel Zoyland. It is, nonetheless, essential to his argument:

"What's Poetry if it isn't something that has to fight for the unseen against the seen, for the dead against the living, for the mysterious against the obvious? Poetry always takes sides. It's the only Lost Cause we've got left! It fights for the for the for the Impossible!" (529)

Two things strike me as noteworthy. One is that, by this conspicuous conjunction of poetry and impossibility, Powys is consciously adding another weapon to his armoury of fictional techniques which stress incompleteness, inconsequence and an inability to achieve perfect closure, whether to an argument, a piece of fiction, or a philosophical system: Taliessin's oratorical but necessarily unfinished poem in **Porius** (quoted, in part, in Chapter Two) is the finest example of this in the later fiction. The other significant thing about Powys' defence of poetry is that it is deliberately backward-looking. Poetry fights for what is passing, or has already passed; it does so, in consequence, in a manner which is also passing or past.²

However, Powys' poets, in these novels, are not good advertisements for his view of poetry. Jason Otter in **Wolf Solent** is treated ambivalently

¹This aspect of Powys' aesthetic make-up does of course have a more general impact on Powys' overall style, as well as this specific influence on a continuity of imagery. It is difficult to communicate this effect by localised quotation, but a reading (especially out loud) of passages from **A Glastonbury Romance** (like the elegiac lyricism of the end of the 'Consummation' chapter, pp. 311-3, or the great 'organ voice' of the final pages, 1118-20) would reveal Powys' rhetorical style at its most supple and resonant.

²This ties in with Powys' love for traditional ballads and other such verse 'rooted' (in subject and form) in tradition, and his regular dismissal of 'modern' poetry unless it deliberately availed itself of the imagery and pattern of myth (see Chapter Two).

by both Wolf and Powys; the execrable and comic Edward Athling, yeoman-poet of *A Glastonbury Romance*, is treated with mocking irony, where his manner and affectations are concerned, throughout (pp. 326-8). Yet (and this is crucial) their poetry as it is reproduced in the novels - and notice that Powys produces, as it were, chapter and verse for this, as he never does for the writings of Wolf or Dud No-man - is distinctly like Powys' own, and the poems appear to carry authorial approval within the text (as in John Crow's enthusiastic response to Athling's 'Merlin' poem, *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 328-9). The only explanation for this ambivalence is, I feel, to be found in Powys' simultaneous high seriousness and self-mockery, his desire to be both magician and clown. Still, 'true' poetry, in Powys' sense, has a way of transfiguring life (as it does for Wolf, *Wolf Solent*, p. 227).

The 'poetic' method is actually overtly discussed in *Wolf Solent*, in the conversation between Wolf and Urquhart over the form of their book on the history of Dorset. Urquhart suggests that it should be "continuous, not episodic", and the text of the novel supports this by its description of his cigarette smoke, "forming curves and squares and patterns" (45). Art requires selection yet not organisation according to an 'external' skeletal structure of form. Instead, Urquhart insists,

"our book was going to develop along organic lines, not along logical lines to represent the pell-mell of life The *last* thing we must think of is arrangement. My book must grow like a living thing, till it frightens us by its reality."
(62)¹

Thus, Powys arrives at an understanding of the novel that lays its emphasis on imagery. For in the same way, as he notes in *Maiden Castle*,

¹It is worth noting here Belinda Humfrey's comments on the place of the mythic in Powys' formal organisation: "Powys incorporates myth and mythical allusion not for contrast, like Eliot and Joyce, but for a more hopeful stress on *continuity* in human nature" (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 22; my italics)

matter (or event, in terms of fictional plot) is of less significance than the "symbols of the soul" that our perception of that matter generates.¹ Sometimes, Powys' uncertainty of tone betrays him, and he produces an image which seems at variance with its contextual meaning.² Yet when his skills are more subtly deployed - as they are, for the most part, in his handling of fish imagery in *A Glastonbury Romance*³ - some of the more disparate threads in that huge novel do at least begin to be drawn together.

In the end, however, I feel that even in these novels, the forces in Powys' work that make for incoherence and confusion prevail over those that would project an order into the novels. Unless one brings to the novels a faith that the imagery **will** make sense - as Morine Krissdottir does, misguidedly I feel, on her magical quest - then the novels do seem

¹See *Maiden Castle*, pp. 366-7. This quasi-Platonic view of "real actuality" is also vital in that it brings us back to an understanding of Powys' fiction-making that is rooted in the romance. Note too that Thuella's image - of the soul as "a great white whale" - is, I assume in the light of *Moby Dick*, a further emphasis on the fact that Powys' poetic fiction seeks to reach out to the unattainable and the impossible, which Melville's whale symbolised.

²My favourite example concerns Dud's perception of Maiden Castle, and the significance of its shape. Alongside "the shell of the fish called Kraken" and "that vast planetary tortoise, upon whose curved back, sealed with the convoluted inscriptions of the Nameless Tao" - descriptions which do at least generate for this earthwork connotations of prehistoric mythic significance - Powys adds, "it took the shape of a huge 'dropping' of supermammoth dung" (*Maiden Castle*, p. 230).

³References to fish link most of the novel's major characters. Centrally, of course, there is Sam's grail experience - in the description of which Powys himself intervenes to appeal on behalf of the grail (pp. 939-40) - and Geard's too, in his final drowning visions. But notice too the repeated image of Mat Dekker's fish tank, representing that closed, fated world which is penetrated from the outside when Sam has his vision ("able to break in *from outside* and smash to atoms this torturing chain of cause and effect"). Earlier in the novel, as Sam is wooing Nell, Powys inserts tellingly the comment "He felt a leap in the pit of his stomach, as if a fish had risen there" (167), a marvellously subtle prefiguring of what is to come, and at the same time a description internally consistent with Sam's emotional mood. Others in the novel are associated with different aspects of fish imagery. John Crow, for instance, early in the novel, is described in such a way that there is an identifiable equation between the rousing of his cold-blooded lust and the rising fish he sees with Mary in the pond (pp. 39-42).

to renege on the contract that Powys appears to want between reader and text. Partly, no doubt, this is deliberate - and it returns us to the suicidal in Powys' fiction, as it probes away at saying what in the end cannot be said¹ - but ultimately I find the novels disappointing as fiction, precisely because of Powys' shortcomings as a craftsman and stylist.²

V

*"It is hard to be impersonal in a cosmos that runs to personality."*³

Though Powys' aesthetic taste is often not discriminating enough to manage his personal philosophy, the Wessex novels nevertheless provide a fascinating insight into that philosophy, as Powys invents a fictional world that at least aspires to correspondence with his 'world-view'. What was only hinted at in the early fiction - an intensely animist, dualist,

¹Powys genuinely recognised his difficulties here: "Directly one comes to putting feelings into words, one is compelled to accept hopeless contradictions in the very depths of one's being!" (*Wolf Solent*, p. 307)

²As a final example, consider *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 732-40, a passage which can be revealing compared with the opening pages of Golding's *Darkness Visible* (see Chapter 6). Powys, like Golding, appears to be exploring the **process** by which the inexorable and inevitable in any event functions alongside the apparently arbitrary (both novelists being concerned to come to terms with the fictional outworking of free will and predestination). To this end, Powys like Golding begins with a view of the process of events as a mathematical model - circles and equilateral triangles, about Cold Harbour Bridge - which draws Philip Crow, Sam Dekker and Rachel Zoyland to Young Tewsy's fish. Then, to emphasise the opposite power of random action, Powys tells us that Rachel should meet Mr Evans because it was what "the great goddess chance, still finding her line of least resistance in the smooth fate-grooves of Glastonbury, now decreed." Only when chance and fate have played their part is vision, or at least a glimpse of it, revealed, in Evans' rhetorical outpouring about "the copulation-cry of the Yes and No, for the amalgam of the Is and Is Not!" Yet in the process, Powys has seemingly forgotten all about the fish that prompted this, and the delicate balance of chance and fatality that seemed to be at its root. The event is buried under a mystical torrent of words, and the frail offspring of the inevitable and the accidental cannot survive.

³*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 870.

anti-rationalist view of the universe, based on the dominance of personality - is given full rein in these four Wessex novels. Moreover, because the novels still have a grip (however tenuous) on some kind of correspondence with 'reality' (as the later historical fictions and the science fiction fantasies do not), Powys has a relatively secure basis from which to communicate his moments of vision.

At the heart of that 'world-view' is personality. Powys thwarts the plans of those characters in his fiction who would assert that events are in the sway of impersonal forces: as he says of Dave Spear, "it is hard to be impersonal in a cosmos that runs to personality." Consciousness undergirds and permeates the world of matter - and this goes not just for animate objects, exemplified in the 'conversation' of lice and trees¹, but also for 'inanimate' ones (evoked in the sentient existence of the sarcophagi, *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 822-3). This philosophy is inserted wholesale into *Weymouth Sands*, under the guise of being an exposition of Richard Gaul's life-work.

Thus the boundaries between animate and inanimate, between the tangible and intangible, are merged in these novels into what Greenwald calls Powys' "passionate animism".² It is this fusion that underlies the almost sexual response to the vegetative world that Wolf feels:

"So absolutely did he live in the symbols of his mental life, that the two things which now threatened this ecstasy - Urquhart's book and a shy, slender Christie, stripped of her clothes - transformed themselves into the wet, uneven bark of this trunk against which he now pressed his hand."

As this mood reaches an intense climax, Powys blurs the whole world into a cold erotic embrace:

¹See *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 706, 89.

²*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, pp. 59-60. The end result of this process is a blurring of solidities into "atmosphere", as claimed by Powys in the 'Preface' to *Wolf Solent*, and evoked most hauntingly in that novel in the tense and emotive meeting of Wolf and Christie, pp. 90-91.

"With a desperate straining of all the energy of his spirit, he struggled to merge his identity in that subaqueous landscape. He had, at that moment, a strange feeling, as if he were seeking to embrace in the very act of love the maternal earth herself!" (429)

The 'atmospheric' quality of this animism permeates Powys' work more thoroughly with each successive book of the Wessex quartet, as the 'real' substantial world becomes more and more a projection as well as a reflection of his characters' consciousnesses.¹ This is true, even of those moments where Powys' description is consistent with 'realistic' behaviour - as when Lovie turns her piece of scrap paper into her companion "Gwendolly".²

Thus Powys projects in his novels a world-view that is fundamentally religious, in the sense that he is open to the existence of phenomena which cannot be scientifically or materialistically explained. He does not subscribe to a religious system, and so the novels treat aggressively representatives of any body of religious thought (though usually it is the local version of Christianity) that would, as Powys saw it, seek to close off or deny any aspect of spiritual experience, or render its mysteries explicable.³ This being the case, Powys' clergy or religious representatives are treated as perverse or emotionally twisted - the Rev. T.E. Valley, with his scarcely repressed homosexual and necrophiliac tendencies, is typical.

However, it is very difficult to describe with any exactness what Powys' religious beliefs actually amount to. This is because, as I

¹In *Weymouth Sands*, Perdita cannot detach her sense of the Jobber's identity from the landscape into which it merges: "It seemed to fuse itself - when she tried to call up any definite image of the man - with the lights and scents and murmurs and darkneses of her whole impression of her landing. The Jobber, when she tried to visualize his identity, seemed to melt away from the clasp of her imagination and to lose himself in the sound of breaking waves, the smell of tossed-up seadrift, the rocking reflections of ships' lanterns." (58)

²See *Maiden Castle*, p. 323.

³In *Wolf Solent* (pp.519-20) Powys voices a scepticism of the claim that any of the Christian denominations is able to offer Wolf any help in his moments of crisis.

mentioned earlier, there is an uneasy contradiction in his novels between a fatal pessimism that sees all human action being manipulated by a malign First Cause, and a levelling scepticism which sees all spiritual action as the product of (and sometimes only existing within) the individual mind. The First Cause in **A Glastonbury Romance** is amoral, like Hardy's Immanent Will in **The Dynasts**. It partakes of the duality that Powys sees at war in everything: thus, when John and Mary 'pray' (pp. 76-8) it so happens that the prayer enters the 'evil' as opposed to the 'good' aspect of this Being:

"It itself is divided against itself in those ultimate regions of primal causation. Its primordial goodness warring forever against its primordial evil holds life up only by vast excess of energy and by oceans of lavish waste. Even though the cry of a particular creature may reach the First Cause, there is always a danger of its being intercepted by the evil will of this vast Janus-faced Force."

Yet though it is ostensibly 'neutral' it suits the sense of 'malign fate' on which Powys' novels turn to make this First Cause almost always in enmity towards men.

This being so, Powys sets against it, as I discussed in Chapter Two, 'the Idea of Christ'. Christ, in the Wessex novels, is a force for goodness and charity, operating against the evil in the First Cause, and in articulating this Sam in **A Glastonbury Romance** uses precisely the same arguments as Mr Moreton used in **After My Fashion**:

"It's not that I'm considering Christ simply as an ordinary man I'm considering Him as a God who is *against* the cruelty of the great Creator-God." (465)

However, because Powys may have regarded even this as too dogmatic, his Christ is rarely a decisive force in the fiction in the way that Powys seemed to regard him in his philosophical works.¹

¹In the later fiction Powys seems to stress a spiritual relativism more and more. Even in the very late **Two and Two**, where 'Jesus' is given the closing paragraphs of the novel, Powys is careful to place the Devil prominently in the background, and in any case Jesus is given the limpest of last lines (p. 79).

This being the case, Powys' Wessex novels tend to become more and more tentative, after **A Glastonbury Romance**, when describing causality. In **A Glastonbury Romance**, Mat Dekker's fish-tank, watched by the all-powerful human agents, Sam and Mat, is repeatedly used to parallel the relationships between man and extra-terrestrial forces. This book asserts most strongly Powys' sense of predestined event, especially when he treats those characters in the grip of forces more powerful than themselves (such as Owen Evans, p. 251). By the time he wrote **Weymouth Sands** Powys had relaxed (in many senses - structural, motivational and in terms of the relationship between men and 'the gods') so much that the First Cause was now simply Everything, in a continuous flux (p. 412). This tendency - "it was the inherent nature, throughout eternity, for All there was to change" - perhaps explains why this novel is the most formless of the four. In **Maiden Castle** Powys began to develop in earnest a new uneasy balance of potentially contradictory forces that was to sustain him for the rest of his fictional life. This revolved around an earth-cult mysticism (pp. 166-7), much more tentative and vague in its outworking than the force Powys depicts in **A Glastonbury Romance**, working in wary alliance with an insistence on the power of mind to control and create 'external' supernatural forces (pp. 249-50). This reminds me strongly of Powys' claim, in the later non-fiction, that it is possible to pray effectively to 'gods' that one has invented for oneself, even while knowing that they do not 'really' exist. However, in this respect **Maiden Castle** has more in common with the later fiction, and is less representative of the Wessex novels as a whole.

To summarise, then, Powys' middle-period novels are religious, but

unsystematically so. They are, as Cavaliero says "about the nature of the religious sense."¹ Broadly speaking, they reflect a pagan mysticism which has Celtic or pre-Celtic overtones.² But it is more fruitful, I feel, to regard the tensions in these novels between an earth-rooted religious sense and an all-encompassing scepticism as evidence for the essential presence in Powys' mature work of a fundamental duality.

Dualism - an unceasing war between the forces of love and malice - had been rooted in Powys' thought since the writing of *The Complex Vision*, if not before. In the early fiction, with its superficial 'realism', dualism expressed itself largely in the pairings of characters of opposing tendencies, or of similarly-viewed places, but it was rare for it to penetrate through to the very essence of the world Powys was describing. The Wessex novels take this process several steps further, and Powys makes explicit reference, in the fiction, to this sense of conflict that so powerfully possessed him. However, the overriding impression that one gets from reading Powys' intensely melodramatic fiction is not in fact that love is continually overcoming malice, but that malice is the focus of Powys' fictional energies, and this despite the apparent restraint Powys placed himself under of not concentrating too knowingly on sadism and the horrors of vivisection, for fear of corrupting his readers.³ True, there are 'positive' loving and sexual relationships (Sam and Nell, notably; Wolf and Gerda some of the time) and instances of innocent companionship that has no trace of passion (Perdita and Larry in *Weymouth Sands* spring to mind). But, perhaps because Powys' conception of this positive side of the

¹John Cowper Powys: *Novelist*, p. 61. He is equally tentative about the conclusions that are to be reached: "Powys . . . seems to have favoured some kind of pantheism . . . Behind all the beliefs is a mystery."

²The earliest review of *Wolf Solent* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 8/8/29) portrays Wolf as a pagan mystic who, unlike the Christian, is never anxious to separate himself from his prison - and cf. G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest* (pp. 38-9) on the 'roots' of *A Glastonbury Romance*.

³See Angus Wilson's 'Introduction' to *Weymouth Sands*, p. 12.

love-malice dualism was so eccentric, not to say perverse - a cold, passive, sexless eroticism, a parasitic drawing on the 'spiritual virginity' of his sylph-like women - I for one rarely feel that the balance Powys made so much of in **The Complex Vision** is demonstrated convincingly in the fiction.

It is true, of course, that in the Wessex novels Powys often tells us of the existence of this fundamental dualism - in Wolf's already quoted confession (**Wolf Solent**, p. 299), in the divided nature of the First Cause (**A Glastonbury Romance**, p. 77). In **A Glastonbury Romance**, Geard is permitted an undiluted transcription of Powys' own views:

"Life's a war-to-the-death, Cordelia between the Spirits of Good and Evil Life springs from their conflict. Life *is* their conflict. If the Spirit of Good conquered entirely - as one day I hope it will - the whole teeming ocean of life would dry up." (349)¹

It is more subtly stated in **Weymouth Sands**, where Sylvanus Cobbold discourses on the fact that "Unhappiness comes from not realising that life is two-sided" (261), since this particular oration is at least firmly rooted in the action of the narrative at this point. But then **Weymouth Sands** is, as I have previously observed, the most genial and relaxed of the four novels, and though it is relatively more formless this also discourages Powys from forcing his obsessions on his characters quite so roughly. Hence, a contrast emerges more unobtrusively between authority and helplessness, between men of power and the downtrodden.² The same cannot be said of **Maiden Castle**, in which the characters seem too rigidly

¹In this novel Powys puts his views more uncompromisingly into the mouths of many of his characters. Cf. Geard's sentiments with those Sam expresses: "For me the whole thing is dualism. It's a perpetual war between good and evil." (207)

²See Cavaliero's sympathetic comments in **John Cowper Powys: Novelist**, pp. 87-90.

under the sway of their author's mind, and in which 'reality' begins more than ever to disintegrate.¹

What I would claim therefore is that though the balance of love and malice is the 'official' doctrine of the four novels, and though indeed there is plenty of evidence for the fact that that balance is sought (if not achieved) at certain moments in the fiction, the emphasis in the novels, **in the process of arriving at these points of balance**, is overwhelmingly on the side of malice. The reason for this is surely that Powys stressed the image of the Abyss in his work, on making his characters go **down and through** stretches of darkness and loneliness (at which points the tie between the erotic and the excremental is very marked) in order for them to emerge with a potentially balanced view (in Powys' terms!) of their fate.

Occasionally malice appears so pervasive that it permeates the whole world: Magnus Muir speaks for Powys in recounting "the underlying chaos and violence and shame that exist in life" (**Weymouth Sands**, p. 37). Powys recognises "the seamy side of existence"² (**Weymouth Sands**, p. 223), which is partly due to the state of nature but more commonly the product of "the misery that human beings cause one another" (**Wolf Solent**, p. 82).

This general perspective on the state of life is imaged in the novels largely in terms of disease, or decay, or eating. All are the conventional expressions of the visionary temper. Wolf conceives of his buried father as the "fellow i' the cellarage" (543).³ As an image for the corrupt forces within the self that are suppressed by the censoring ego, this is emphasised often; when such forces are let loose, they appear as decaying

¹Duality is thus clearly stressed, but at too great a cost - the **Times Literary Supplement** review (27/3/37) called the book "a celestial/demonic Punch and Judy show."

²This is one of the many images that link Powys to Golding, in this case to **Darkness Visible** (see Chapter 6), and to **The Paper Men** (see Chapter 7).

³Connections extend backwards into Lawrence's work and forwards to Golding - it is an image basic to both **Pincher Martin** and **The Spire**.

flesh or vegetation, or parasites feeding on such things. In one particularly grotesque instance Wolf conjures it as

"a plump, blunt-nosed maggot, peering out from a snug little crack in the woodwork of a blistering cross, on which hung, all in her long black skirt, the form of Selena Gault." (527)¹

Maggots suggest putrefaction, and also eating. Both connotations come across when Wolf considers his own physical and psychological corruption:

"These words of Jason's, and the look that accompanied them, caused Wolf a discomfort that resembled the squeezing of a person's tongue against a hidden gum-boil He began to suffer from that old miserable sensation that his body was a lump of contemptible putrescence, on the top of which his consciousness floated He felt as disintegrated as the remnants on the poet's plate. He *was* those remnants. Dorsetshire had eaten him up!" (504)

However, as in life the personal vice that Powys feared most was his sadism, so in these novels it is the sadistic impulse which speaks most powerfully for malice.² It runs as a vein through the character of Philip Crow, who is identified by his "motiveless malignity" (*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 144). But most forcefully it possesses Owen Evans in that same novel. Into him Powys pours all the perversely erotic pleasure that he himself found in contemplating sadistic behaviour:

"They were scenes of sadistic cruelty, these pictures that dwelt in the back chambers of Mr Evans' mind; and the extraordinary thing about them was that, in spite of their iniquity, which was indeed abominable, they still produced in him - whenever the least glimpse of them took form again - an inebriation of erotic excitement that made his pulses beat, his blood dance, his senses swoon, his knees knock together" (109)

His progress is the perfect example of Powys attempting to go, as it were, down and through malice to achieve some kind of tranquility. For what he strives to do is to channel this force within him back on himself (shades, clearly, of Powys' own masochism) - in order to find "Something

¹With maggots, and, in the next paragraph with images of eating, Powys places *Wolf Solent* firmly in *Pincher Martin* territory.

²G. Wilson Knight's article 'Sadism and the Seraphic' (*Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, especially pp. 227-9) studies the autobiographical aspects of this subject.

that will take away our torment" (159). He volunteers to play the part of Christ in the Pageant, but only if he can actually feel the pain. But the whole agonising process (described in Powys' most intense style, pp. 613-8) brings no release. This only comes later when Evans is purged (literally, as he vomits) by seeing the head of Tom Barter crushed by an iron bar, the very image that had given him the most torment. Perhaps the most significant thing to emerge from Evans' agonising journey to escape from malice is that, because the concept of grace has no part in Powys' universe, his sadists are obliged to take upon themselves the whole force of their mania. It is because this pattern of suffering recurs, in milder form, for all those in physical, emotional and psychological distress (which really means almost all of the characters Powys ever portrayed) that malice plays such a disproportionately larger part (in terms of Powys' overall philosophy) in these novels. It is salutary too to remember that Evans' release from this sadistic burden exhausts him totally, and he becomes prematurely decrepit. Life, in Powys' universe, is a struggle; when that struggle is over life is too.

However, in his non-fiction Powys urged that day-to-day life should seek to balance love and malice, not for one to triumph over the other. This synthesising process - seen in the 'Preface' to *Wolf Solent* as a holding in tension rather than a merging or fusing - was necessary if life's goals (usually seen as the individual's freedom to live a peaceful existence, simultaneously selfish and selfless) were to be achieved. Several critics, notably G. Wilson Knight, have called this achieved balance 'Wordsworthian',¹ both because it provided a reconciliation of mind and matter, and because the mediating role of Nature was crucial. In these four Wessex novels, Powys makes many references to the discovery, and value, of this balanced state, and in the progress of *Wolf Solent* (and

¹The *Saturnian Quest*, especially Chapter 1.

less successfully of Dud No-man) he demonstrates the achievement and the cost of finding that balance.

The process is seen either as a forcible yoking of oppositions, or as a getting 'beyond' them, or 'behind' them. Dud's carved bed-post head contains within itself good and evil (*Maiden Castle*, pp. 17-18) and it has an inherent value for that reason not just for Dud but for his father. It is a talisman, representing and embodying the opposing forces, reconciling inner and outer worlds. At such moments, the key to visionary insight is given that, as it were, unlocks meaning for Powys' characters:

"It sometimes happens that a contemplative person, whose head is full of contrary thought-currents, receives, in a quick, unexpected revelation, a view of the world as it exists when many separate, far-off moments of insight, that have caught our landscape under a large and reconciling light, melt and fuse themselves together." (*Weymouth Sands*, p. 467)

Such a calm and tranquil balance as this, given to Magnus Muir on Weymouth Sands itself, is rare; normally Powys' characters are required to undergo a much more intense struggle.

Uryen Quirm's battle to get 'beyond' is an immense strain:

"I've felt for some unknown reason that I was born to bear the terrible pressure of that hurt in the soul when it struggles to break through to break *out*, to break *in*, to take the Secret by storm!.... All extreme emotions reach a point where you can't distinguish between pain and pleasure. The suffering is intense; but something in you rushes towards the suffering, opens its arms to the suffering At its intensest it comes when love and hate are one. It is terrible then. It is a feeling so terrific that it often ends in madness; but if it doesn't end that way it ends in *breaking through*." (*Maiden Castle*, pp. 247-8)¹

The echoes of this struggle reverberate through these novels, as does the tranquil message that tells that the struggle is over. At the end of the first chapter of a *Glastonbury Romance*, after the emotional and psychic conflicts of the reading of the will, Powys evokes, in phrases

¹This is the point Owen Evans would have reached if his sadism hadn't been such a deeply-ingrained, fundamental part of his character. But clearly the yearning (in the 'Esplumeoir' passages, *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 178-9, for example) is the same.

resonantly Wordsworthian,

"the presence of the night taking the bitterness from defeat, taking the triumph from victory, and diffusing through the air an essence of something inexplicable, something beyond hope and beyond despair, full of pardon and peace." (66)

This is more than just the healing power of nature, just as the union of Sam and Nell is more than the two becoming one flesh (p. 311). Geard's wild Easter communion (pp. 409-10) gives a more vivid flavour of this merging, with its coarse animal intensity in this case merging with its spiritual meaning. The most valuable 'coming together' in this novel, though, is Sam's, when he sees the grail. I will examine this in detail later, when I come to look at the moments of vision themselves, but for the moment I merely want to stress that the experience took pleasure and pain and "swallowed them all into itself" (935). The experience generates "nothing less than a coming together of his body and soul" (954).¹ It is a new thing. Powys elsewhere in the novel brilliantly captures the impact of this on ordinary folk, an impact that gains all the more for being couched in the language of the old, divided experience: "'Tis like Saturday afternoon in private bar and yet 'tis like Good Friday in Church. It makes a person feel sort o' wobbly in his innards." (591)²

In *Weymouth Sands* Powys gives to Sylvanus Cobbold, admittedly one of that novel's less convincingly 'realistic' creations, an already fully

¹In consequence, Sam, like his namesake Sammy in Golding's *Free Fall*, has the experience of living in two worlds simultaneously and it is the 'real' world, the material one, which seems somehow unreal: "There came over Sam just then a desire to laugh aloud. That no one in this town could be brought even to listen to what he had seen seemed like a crazy dream. He felt as if he were living in two worlds at the same time, and one of them, by far the less real and by far the more absurd, was trying to convince him that the other was a fantasy" (965).

²Reasons of space do not permit me to analyse the fusionist elements of Sam's experience at great length. I would draw attention, however, to the way "two and two make five" for him (in a favourite phrase of Powys', p. 260) in the *Incarnation* - "the Thing Outside breaking into our closed circle" - but that Powys isn't doctrinaire about this: "it was unnecessary to trouble himself one way or the other about his father's Creed; since the essence of the thing lay in the conduct of life rather than in any intellectual doctrine." (263)

worked-out version of this balance in his 'Caput-Anus' philosophy. In many ways he exemplifies Powys' ideal existence - playing the zany, preaching his own personal beliefs to the passing crowds, befriending life's eccentrics and failures, indulging in obscure personal fetishes and exploiting the 'spiritual virginity' of sylphs - and the intolerance with which society treats him says much for the way Powys felt that the world saw him. The philosophy itself is, however, worth noting, both because it brings together the two modes of duality and because it makes explicit reference to the excremental:

"In talking to his God he never called himself 'I' or 'me' or 'your servant' or even Sylvanus; he always called himself 'Caput'. But even this was not enough; for, since the Absolute was Everything, it was necessary to place the lowest function of his body side by side with the highest. Thus to the word Caput, in speaking of himself to God, what must this fantastical being do but add the word 'Anus', which had the double advantage of indicating his spasmodic body-shame, and, incidentally, of rhyming with Sylvanus! He wrestled with the Spirit in a frantic effort to make it include the Gross, the Repulsive, the Disgusting." (381-2)¹

In the last analysis, though, Sylvanus remains an attitude rather than a personality. His philosophy is a given thing. In *Wolf Solent*, Powys sought to show how that philosophy could be earned. The novel is concerned, as most critics have seen, with the loss of Wolf's 'life-illusion', and its replacement by a newly-achieved wholeness that takes account of all oppositions and contradictions in a genuinely Wordsworthian synthesis.² Wolf begins, in the way that Powys counselled all men to live in his contemporary non-fiction, with a system of mental defences and

¹It occurs to me that though this novel does not conspicuously seek to demonstrate the necessity for this joining of oppositions, since there is little evidence of change occurring through the dramatic interaction of characters, Powys ends it with what I take to be a symbolic conjunction: Gaul's 'Philosophy of Representation' needs Jobber's stone to act as a paperweight, to stop it from blowing away (p. 567).

²See G. Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* (pp. 34-5), Krissdottir's *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (pp. 67-80), Cavaliero's *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (pp. 52-3) and Brebner's *The Demon Within* (pp. 77-8) for a broad range of approaches to this central issue in the novel.

tricks to serve as a protection against life's difficulties. Brebner calls this "a self-consuming satisfaction, a form of cerebral masturbation."¹ Though Wolf is capable even at this stage of exploiting passionate (even erotic) links with Nature (pp. 150-1, for example), his defences cannot endure against mounting pressure. He is forced to depend on Urquhart's money, representing a giving way to the depraved and excremental forces that his employer stands for. He is also passionately attracted (though with a cold passion, naturally) to Christie Malakite, one of Powys' darker-toned sylphs, to whom he fails to make love. Under these pressures, and isolated in the Dorset countryside, he undergoes a kind of 'dark night of the soul', even contemplating suicide, and he discovers what he in fact always knew, that in extreme conditions his 'life-illusion' is revealed as a lie. But here it is the ugly characters (Selena Gault, Urquhart, Monk, Jason, old Mr Malakite) who are instrumental in the mental rearrangement he experiences; the underlying point, as Cavaliero observes, is "the necessity of loving the squalid and the outcast, and of accepting the excremental factor in life, if wholeness is to be attained."² Hence, I think, the stressed juxtaposition of Christianity and mud (p. 516, etc.).³ And hence, finally, after the purgation of his either/or mentality (Gerda or Christie, Darnley or Jason, the man on the steps of Waterloo Station or the contented old man with his dog), Wolf is given (behind the pigsty!) his golden 'Saturnian' vision (pp. 630-2):⁴

"'It is a god!' he cried in his heart; and he felt as if titanic hands from the horizon of this 'field of Saturn', were

¹The Demon Within, p. 78.

²John Cowper Powys: Novelist, p. 53.

³The unification of the earthly and heavenly is thus a feature of this novel as it is of *The Spire*, which must go down as far as it goes up, and so on.

⁴At this climax, Wolf becomes Powys, recalling a Weymouth memory of "an extraordinary ecstasy from the sight of the dancing ripples of the wide bay turned into liquid gold by the straight sun-path" - cf. *Autobiography*, p. 429.

being lifted up to salute the mystery of life and the mystery of death!"

Wolf's reconciliation to life and to the universe around him is explicitly Wordsworthian (he quotes from the 'Intimations of Immortality') and the seal is set on his attained stability: "Between himself and what was 'behind' the Universe there should be now a new covenant!"

One consistent feature of this new covenant, as it is preached in Powys' fiction, is its anti-modern, anti-rationalist sentiment. I demonstrated in Chapter Two how Powys' thought seemed contradictory when he was considering the idea of progress. He had a faith in the automatic dawning of the Aquarian age and the inexorable upward spiral of human progress. At the same time he withdrew personally from the modern urban world to a rural lifestyle and a psychological attachment to a mythic past. Earlier in this chapter I commented on the consequently awkward nature of Powys' social vision, in these Wessex novels. On the broader perspective of his 'world-view', this awkwardness remains, though it is noticeable that after *A Glastonbury Romance* the issue becomes less problematical, since Powys begins his steady retreat into his own mental universe - a process taken farthest, in these novels, in *Maiden Castle*. Underneath a general disapproval of things modern, there are specific denunciations of industrialisation, modern art, science and Powys' 'bete noir', vivisection.

His work is laden with images depicting the violent ravages of modernity. In *A Glastonbury Romance*, the threat is posed by electricity and aircraft, in *Weymouth Sands* by quarrying and motor cars. *Wolf Solent* opens with Wolf's memories of his 'malice dance', "pouring forth a torrent of wild, indecent invectives upon every aspect of modern civilisation."

(14) He is haunted throughout the novel by a vision he saw on the steps of Waterloo Station, the face of a man in "inert despair", suffering "the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners." (15) This man is

undoubtedly one of the tide that washes across London Bridge in **The Waste Land**. He is a potent symbol in the novel of all that modern existence, cut-off from its roots in nature, has done to the common run of humanity.

However, Powys' passions burn not just at what modern life has done to man, but at what modern industry has done to the world. The prose of **Wolf Solent** trembles with revulsion:

"There arose before him, complicated and inhuman, like a moving tower of instruments and appliances, the monstrous Apparition of Modern Invention. He felt as though, with aeroplanes spying down upon every retreat like ubiquitous vultures, with the lanes invaded by iron-clad motors, like colossal beetles, with no sea, no lake, no river free from throbbing, thudding engines, the one thing most precious of all in the world was being steadily assassinated. In the dusty, sunlit space of that small tobacco-stained carriage he seemed to see, floating and helpless, an image of the whole round earth! And he saw it bleeding and victimised, like a smooth-bellied, vivisected frog. He saw it scooped and gouged and scraped and harrowed. He saw it hawked at out of the humming air. He saw it netted in a quivering entanglement of vibrations, heaving and shuddering under the weight of iron and stone." (15-16)

I have quoted from this passage at some length to show the sort of wrought-up intensity that Powys injected into his fiction on this subject.

At the heart of Powys' horror at the impact of industry is a revulsion at the power wielded by magnates to exploit; exploitation of people or of landscape, being the cardinal sin in Powys' book. Powys shows Philip Crow's character nourished by power: even his sexual drive is channelled into possession and exploitation. In fact Powys saw human sexuality as a whole cheapened by the new mechanised age. In an interesting aside in **A Glastonbury Romance** he notes,

"Sexual gratitude is an emotion much less frequent in modern days than in medieval times, owing to the fact that industrialism has cheapened the value of the sex-thrill by lowering the ritual-walls surrounding it." (829-30)

The character most firmly in the grip of the power-drug, explicitly seen to be fed at the expense of a 'natural' sexuality, is Cattistock in **Weymouth Sands**. He refrains from spending his wedding night with his new

wife because, in order to feel "that terrible will to mastery that had dominated him", he yearns for "*power in suspension*":

"it was no *overt* assertion of power he wanted, no worldly exercise of power, but the feeling that he was detached from other men by his secret possession of what others, if they had it, would flaunt and flourish, but that he would hold, to the bitter end in volcanic reserve It was the *secrecy* of power, of power unused, concealed, unknown even, to the very end, that alone satisfied his pride." (440-1)

Power corrupts, in Powys' world, by splitting off the natural human urge to manipulate the environment from the essential compassion that would tolerate the right of other people and objects to exist freely. And just as power corrupts, so the absolute power of the scientist to 'control' his experiment corrupts absolutely. Dr Brush, in *Weymouth Sands*, may be a caricature scientist, but he exemplifies all the horror that such a profession generated in Powys:

"When I hear my sweet hypocritical colleagueslike so many clever politicians, defending experimentation as a humane duty for the curing of disease, I feel that the human race is so contemptible prodigious in its capacity for a particular kind of disgusting cruelty, covered up with ideal excuses. If I were allowed - as no doubt we *shall* be in half-a-century - to vivisect *men*, I'd gladly let the dogs alone It's a vice. *I know what it is*. And I know what I am. I am a madman with a vice for which I'd vivisect Jesus Christ." (438-9)¹

Vivisection in these novels, as for Powys in real life, was the last step along the scientific road to insanity. *Weymouth Sands*, in particular, is punctuated with deeply-felt appeals against this ultimate horror - in the Hell's Museum chapter (especially pp. 117-20: "merely to imagine that those red-brick buildings contained animals in the process of being vivisected was something that gave the spot an atmosphere of such horror that he fidgeted in his seat and felt sick in his stomach....") and in numerous asides in which Powys comes forward to instruct the reader:

¹It is interesting that even here, Powys gives Brush some 'redeeming' characteristics. Like Captain Andersen in Golding's *Rites of Passage*, in an analogous though very different position of power, he turns out to be a devoted flower lover (p. 119).

"The girl had married an assistant of Dr Brush and it was her death that had first drawn Magnus' attention to the appalling facts of vivisection, that secret horror behind all modern civilisation." (372)

What is there, though, in Powys' universe that could be set against the wielding of such power? Quirm in **Maiden Castle** suggests the mythic force of poetry (pp. 447-8, 467-8), but he dies in the process. In the non-fiction, Powys urged the deliberate cultivation of three aspects of human nature - the comic, the religious and the sexual - as a defence against the ravages of modernity. Now it must be said that the comic plays as little part in these Wessex novels as it does in any of Powys' fiction. Powys was resolutely not a comic writer.¹ The celebrated pun in **Maiden Castle** - "Greater love hath no man than this" (32) - is prized simply because it is such a rare example of textual wit in the Powys canon. What little comedy there is in the novels centres, I think, around the same self-abasement that made Powys mock his own character and behaviour in the **Confessions** and the **Autobiography**, and which here makes him similarly scornful of the Powys heroes he creates. **Weymouth Sands** provides the best example: Magnus Muir and Richard Gaul, in their fussy unworldliness, are gently made fun of, in quirks of behaviour like Gaul's mannerism with his spectacles:

"Mr Gaul took off his spectacles, a gesture of his which always accompanied the reception of anything startling. But he only twisted them in his hands and replaced them carefully. Had the event been more personally arresting he would have cleaned them with his coat sleeve. Confronted by a shipwreck he might even have rubbed them against his trousers." (102)

¹I am aware of a certain 'accidental' comedy in reading Powys that comes from his more spectacular lapses of tone, but though this affords the reader of the novels some occasional hilarity, it seems to me somewhat mean-spirited to dwell on it.

Such unaccustomed gentle humour is refreshing, and it extends to cover Powys' treatment of Gaul's philosophy (pp. 470, 541-5).¹ Only occasionally, I feel, does Powys seem not to be aware that his flippancy is costing him dear: at the novel's climax, contemplating the fates of Perdita and himself, in what had been and continues afterwards to be, a poignant episode, Muir thinks philosophically, "She wins I lose. But I am the one who can swallow Bath buns"! (561).

However, though the comic impulse functions only rarely, the sexual and religious aspects of human behaviour permeate almost all of Powys' work, and these four novels are no exceptions. Though these separate instincts do function individually - the 'normal' sexuality of Sam and Nell, the relatively uncomplicated religiosity of Johnny Geard - Powys most often views them as interrelated means of reaching the Wordsworthian synthesis described above.²

At its most basic level, Powys rooted this conjunction in the kind of vegetative sexuality that I have already shown to be characteristic of Wolf's relationship with the environment. A **Glastonbury Romance** is a treatment of "the relation between sex, sensuality in all its confused aberrations, and religious ritual" (**Autobiography**, p. 336), as Powys' 'Preface' of 1953 stressed.

At a higher level, the religious and sexual impulses meet in the 'cerebral' lovemaking of the Powys-heroes with their sylph-like female companions. Of these sylphs, Wizzie Revelston is perhaps the most benign;

¹There is a resemblance, which admittedly should not be pushed too far, between the way Powys treats Gaul and Muir ("with that silly, fussy, intrusive top of his mind that still took an absurd interest in unessential details" - 545) and the way Golding treats Sim and Edwin in **Darkness Visible** (see Chapter 6).

²Cavaliere draws attention here to the differences between Powys and Lawrence. For Lawrence, in **Lady Chatterley's Lover** for example, sex was a healing of body and soul; for Powys it was a springboard to extended sensuous and spiritual awareness. (**John Cowper Powys: Novelist**, pp. 168-70).

generally, like Christie in *Wolf Solent*, they harbour a kind of occult power.¹ This sterile love-making is different from both normal sex and exploitative sexuality (exemplified in the behaviour of Philip and Persephone Spear, *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 240). As practised by John Crow and Dud No-man, it seems to generate an ecstatic sensitiveness towards both the natural and supernatural surroundings, though they do not systematically (that is, as a religio-philosophical manoeuvre) exploit it. In *Maiden Castle*, Dud, who is impotent and Thuella who is a lesbian take part in an extended "purely cerebral" love-making over a "scummy pond" - an activity described as "sacred holy near the 'el-bridge' between life and death." (211-2) Earlier, he characterises his desire as wanting "to make love to her for hours - delicious and yielding, but not too responsive!" (186) This could be a description of John and Mary Crow, as they are evoked in the earlier *A Glastonbury Romance*:

"John's way of love-making might, however, have easily palled on a more passionate nature than Mary's; for he was not only profoundly corrupt but extremely egoistic, touching her and holding her in the manner that most excited his own childishly fantastic imagination, and never asking himself whether this was what suited her, nor for one second forgetting himself in any rush of tempestuous tenderness" (88)

Whatever else might be said for it, this sort of lengthy love-making is not of the conventional sexual kind, and it never reaches an orthodox climax.²

At a higher level still, Powys proposes a religio-sexual

¹See G.Wilson Knight's essay in *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, especially pp. 230-4.

²Only Jobber Skald, of all the characters in these novels to whom Powys is sympathetic, appears to have a 'normal' sexual reaction to an erotic stimulus, albeit one that Powys describes in a circumlocutory fashion: "While she looked at him she smiled wantonly, provocatively; and, while she smiled, her fingers went to the clasp of her belt to undo it; and then to the hooks at the side of her skirt, to undo them also And he had only to go straight through that black tide to take her - there as she was - for she was waiting for him; but for some reason the stone in his pocket was growing heavier and heavier and bigger and bigger! He could hardly hold it with his fingers, it was growing so big" (*Weymouth Sands*, pp. 205-6)

sensationalism of a vaguely homosexual nature. In *Wolf Solent*, Wolf feels an obscure pleasure in observing the naked swimming of Lob Torp and Bob Weevil, and especially in observing the effect they have on Squire Urquhart and Jason - "the presence of those two lads seemed to have drawn out of both his equivocal companions every ounce of black bile or complicated evil." I regard this quasi-homosexual eroticism as a metaphorically 'higher' form of the cultivation of religious and sexual feeling precisely because it has this power of neutralising malice, in a way that the heterosexual love-making, however cerebral, does not. Thus, Powys says of Wolf, watching Urquhart, "he was struck by the purged and almost hieratic look which the man now wore he felt the man's amiable passivity seeping in upon him"; while Jason "had the look of an enraptured saint, liberated from earthly persecution and awakening to the pure ecstasies of Paradise." (298-9) A similar homosexuality binds John Crow and Tom Barter in *A Glastonbury Romance* at a deeper level than that at which John lives with Mary, even when they are married. But the most striking reference to the relationship between homosexuality and religious insight in that novel is Sam's grail experience. For it is only when he has received the anal assault of the spear thrust that he has the grail revealed to him - and the point is driven home, when almost immediately afterwards he administers an enema to Abel Twig. This is the ultimate synthesis of duality:

"The two extremes of his experience, the anus of an aged man and the wavering shaft of the Absolute, piercing his own earthly body, mingled and fused together in his consciousness."
(948)¹

At the pinnacle of Powys' understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the religious is the Taoist philosophy of Sylvanus Cobbold.

¹For a more probing exploration of this theme, putting Powys' work in the context of similar ideas in the writings of Lawrence and Joyce, see G. Wilson Knight's, 'Lawrence, Joyce and Powys' (*Essays in Criticism*, October 1961, pp. 403-17).

The theme - the use of unconsummated sexuality as a means of breaking through - is actually fairly common in these novels, but only Sylvanus Cobbold is equipped with a theoretical justification for it. This is more than vegetative eroticism or cerebral love-making:

"a certain indefinable quality that might perhaps be indicated as erotic virginity, a quality that had something in it of the classic abandonment of Bassarid and Maenad, and that it would not be inappropriate to name *unravished obsession* ." (Weymouth Sands, p. 272)

Later, as Powys describes Sylvanus practising on Marret, the Tibetan origins of his behaviour become clearer:

"Sylvanus Cobbold had been lying in his bed holding Marret between himself and the wall in his mystic-sensuous contemplations As Sylvanus held her, pressed close against him, his own thoughts literally 'wandered through eternity'. 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 erotic ecstasy to strengthen his colloquy with the mystery of the cosmos."
(380)¹

This was as far as Powys went in depicting parthenogenesis - conception without fertilisation, or, in Powys' case, regeneration without copulation - in the Wessex novels, but it is clear that it was a cornerstone of imaginative, spiritual and sexual illumination in his philosophy.²

The early novels have very little to say about Powys' view of the past and future, except for *After My Fashion*, with its depressing picture of 'modern' American life. The Wessex fiction, perhaps because it has a

¹For a fuller and fascinating description of the relationship between Powys' philosophy of erotic mysticism and the Taoist technique 'maithuna' - ritual union with a young girl not leading to orgasm - see Morine Krissdottir's *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, especially pp. 104-7.

²In his later fiction, this theme fascinated Powys even more strongly. In *Atlantis* there is a celebrated description of a sexual coupling ('tripling' is more accurate, I suppose!) of a statue, a dead man and a live man (p. 283). The closest resemblance in the Wessex fiction to what Brebner calls "this image of necrophiliastic fellatio, bridging the gap between life and death to affirm the continuity of the human spirit" (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 279) is the "tremendous torso of love" that the Jobber shows to Perdita in *Weymouth Sands* (p.353). Later, Powys based a whole novel, *The Brazen Head*, on the theme.

sense of rootedness that gives a perspective on history, explores this theme much more fully. It is in these novels, notably **Maiden Castle**, that Powys begins to replace an orthodox historical perspective with a sense of the mythic past. In my second chapter I showed how Powys came to associate an undivided Saturnian 'Age of Gold' with Welsh mythology. **Maiden Castle** acts as the pivot, as Wilson Knight observes, between Wessex and Wales.¹ It is on the earthwork itself that Uryen begins a mystical old Welsh chant, "strange elemental syllables in singular harmony with the subhuman sounds that went sighing past them." (257) In the fiction, the attraction of the mythic unity of a golden age is obvious: for Wolf Solent it is a confirmation of his newly-achieved balance and harmony, for example.

Moreover, as the past metamorphoses into myth, so in these novels the future is shaped under the same influence - in particular the influence of the 'Cauldron of Rebirth'.² Occasionally, Powys' signposting of this development is somewhat crude: of Sam Dekker, embracing a tree-trunk, Powys asks pointedly,

"Was Sam's gesture, at this moment, destined to prove the existence of an increasing rapprochement in these latter modern days between certain abnormal human beings such as were both Sam and John, and the subhuman organisms in nature? Was it in fact a token, a hint, a prophecy or a catastrophic change imminent in human psychology itself?" (**A Glastonbury Romance**, p. 128)

But Powys certainly felt himself to be on the brink of an immense change in world history, the coming of the Aquarian age, which the great flood at the end of **A Glastonbury Romance** perhaps too literally symbolises.

However, for all the reshaping of the past and aspirations about the future that take place in these novels, Powys stresses time and again the necessity to live in balance and at peace with the present, in passive

¹The Saturnian Quest, especially p. 49.

²This is also known as the Cauldron of the Mothers, or Ceridwen - see Chapter 2, and especially Powys' essay 'Pair Dadeni'.

existence. There are two 'levels' to this passivity, both of which are important if visionary glimpses are to be exploited in their fullness. For the common-run of man, Powys urged that life should be lived in a state of child-like undifferentiation, as far as that was possible. This is the way of life of the rustics, those in touch with their roots, for whom the intellect has never broken their consciousness into fragments. Those who are self-aware - the Powys-heroes, the saints and artists - have to strive for a kind of simplicity (as, for example, Wolf does in *Wolf Solent*, pp. 402-3). By living thus, it is possible to become adept at reaching a deeper level of undifferentiated being, the level at which visionary insight is obtained. The acquisition of this state - exemplified in Wizzie's sense of harmony when performing in *Maiden Castle* - is the key to vision, to which, in the final section of this chapter, I now turn.

VI

*"It kept breaking up into innumerable waves of darkness and light, that fell and rose, rose and fell, till they were an eternal oneness in their manifold, and an eternal manifold in their oneness."*¹

In the non-fiction, Powys explored the means by which moments of individual vision could be cultivated so that, albeit briefly and fleetingly, 'the eternal vision' could be glimpsed. The early novels depicted this behaviour only vaguely: Powys' art was not attuned to the sort of description and evocation necessary to crystallise out these significant moments, and I would suggest that only twice (the Christmas Eve dance in *After My Fashion*, and the mystical meeting in *Ducdame*) does Powys come close to the sort of event, and narration of it, that has the freight of visionary meaning that he intended. The Wessex novels, as

should by now be clear, are radically more advanced, in terms of the fictional world they reveal, even if Powys' technique remains lacking in subtlety. In these novels, the visionary process is explicit.

It begins in a contemplation that, implicitly or explicitly, seems to be a form of prayer. As the *Autobiography* showed, this need not be directed at any specific 'god', self-created or otherwise. Thought itself has a power of its own, and in *A Glastonbury Romance* in particular Powys explains clearly what its influence can amount to:

"Human thoughts, those mysterious projections from the creative nuclei of living organisms, have a way of radiating from the brain that gives them birth. Such emanations, composed of ethereal vibrations, take invisible shapes and forms as they float forth 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. Some are barely out of the body before they fade away. Others - and this is the cause of many ghostly phenomena - survive long after the organisms that projected them is buried in the earth." (500)

Given that a world like this is also criss-crossed by an invisible spider's web of superhuman sentiences (the invasive 'tendrils' of the First Cause - *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 73, etc. - as well as countless 'immortal companions'), it is clear that even an apparently deserted landscape in a Powys novel is scintillatingly alive with a myriad of invisible presences.

In this environment, thought is a creative activity with a hold on the miraculous. It is integral to the power of the grail, as Geard explains (to himself, but obviously for our benefit):

"For a thousand years the Grail has been attracting thought to itself, because of the magnetism of Christ's Blood 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!" (*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 457-8).

¹Weymouth Sands, p. 213.

The power of thought to command changes in the material world grows stronger with each successive novel. Wolf Solent commands happiness for Christie (*Wolf Solent*, pp. 620-1) but Powys treats Wolf's behaviour with a gently mockery here. In *A Glastonbury Romance*, Geard commands the cancer to come out of Tittie Petherton (p. 707) and he later raises a small boy from the dead by a similar method (pp. 891-3).

Though these are public miracles, performed with great spectacle, there is at the heart of them an intense stillness and silence, and vision more often begins in a solitary contemplation. Powys' novels protest vigorously against incessant noise,¹ and Wolf Solent's retreat into the not-quite-silence of the natural world is representative of the action of many of Powys' contemplatives:

"It was, as he recalled its full effect upon him, the expression of just those mysterious silences in Nature which all his life he had, so to speak, waited upon and worshipped. That strange whistling was the voice of those green pastures and those blackthorn-hedges, not as they were when human beings were conscious of them, but as they were in that indescribable hour just before dawn, when they awoke in the darkness to hear the faint, faint stirrings - upon the air - of the departing of the non-human powers of the night." (113)

At times this stillness acquires a ritual quality, as though part of the searching after visionary insight involved the deliberate subduing of everyday activity in an act of ritualistic propitiation. The simple hushed stillness of Perdita and Larry before the heron (*Weymouth Sands*, pp. 166-8) marks the beginning of this process; in *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* it is associated more strongly with a specific sense of place, a place possessing the aura of ancient ritual. Thus John Crow gazes at Stonehenge "with an ecstasy that was like a religious trance. It was an ecstasy that totally abolished Time." (*A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 103) In such a place he can make his peace with 'the gods' and offer up a

¹The murdering of silence, and hence of spiritual life, links Powys' here with Golding, as *The Pyramid* and *Darkness Visible* reveal, in their very different ways.

prayer for the future. Likewise Cordelia Geard experiences a moment of intense communion by the ancient oaks of Chalice Hill, associated as they are with the mythic Arthurian past. (*A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 215-7) It is significant, I think, that in that moment something is both born and baptised - visionary insight involves a kind of mythical rebirth -

"Then all was absolutely still; and in that stillness, a stillness like the terrible stillness of uttermost strain in travail, there came the first cry of birth, the fall of a single drop of rain."

In such moments, as though in a dream, the protagonist's visionary perspective is transformed.¹

Another way 'through' ordinary experience to arrive at moments of vision is via a surrender to music or a consciousness of rhythm. Wilson Knight finds *Weymouth Sands* to be "a happy book",² despite what it has to say about vivisection, and this contentedness is substantially due to the consonant interplay of colours and musical harmonies in the novel. Most strikingly and beautifully this occurs in the passage in which Perdita listens to Jerry Cobbold playing the piano. As in the passage with Larry and the heron mentioned earlier, Perdita begins by abandoning herself to the music, by which she is profoundly moved:

"Is it some modern musician imitating the old style? No, no! This is no imitation. This is life itself, life filling out the patterns and rules it has made, *as if they were sails*, to carry it beyond itself, over unknown seas."³

This, however, is just the beginning of Perdita's surrender; at this point she almost defeats the process by allowing her intellect to intervene:

¹In fact, dreams make equally powerful vehicles for evoking the transformation of quotidian reality into something heightened or charged with insight. The most extraordinary episode of this nature occurs on pp. 757-9 of *A Glastonbury Romance*. Once more there are remarkable parallels with similar transformations in Golding's work - in particular notice how Persephone's sprouting tree/cross evokes *The Spire* and how Mat Dekker's dream of the metamorphosis of Holy Grail into Nell illuminates episodes in both *The Spire* and *Darkness Visible*.

²*The Saturnian Quest*, pp. 47-8.

³This and succeeding quotations are from *Weymouth Sands*, pp. 211-3.

"Her critical, pessimistic intelligence began its usual trick now of trying to spoil her pleasure." Typically, at such moments, the self-consciousness of the individual attempts to distract attention from a simple passive registering of the phenomenon (musical or otherwise) that is the vehicle of visionary revelation. But Perdita again yields, and Powys eloquently evokes the consequences:

"Sound was pouring forth, out of the abyss, of something beyond all reason and all knowledge! She herself, the Perdita she lived with, became a sound among other sounds, a sound that was nothing but the rising and falling of darkness and light. Past and future were lost in each other. Nor did any present that could be called a present take their place. This conscious sound, that *had* been Perdita's soul, was a thing that had neither inward nor outward, neither subject nor object. It was an Absolute, self-existent, self-generated, self-complete. Only it kept breaking up into innumerable waves of darkness and light, that fell and rose, rose and fell, till they were an eternal oneness in their manifold, and an eternal manifold in their oneness"¹

Music is thus a powerful release mechanism, a means of drawing Powys' characters out of themselves and preparing them for such a visionary moment. But the other arts could perform the task equally successfully, and Powys attaches to the artist a particular importance, a kind of secular sanctity. In Chapter Two, I observed how Powys traced a kinship between saint, artist and madman (or holy fool); in these Wessex novels such characters play a decisive role. In part, of course, this is simply because, since Powys created characters out of his own experience, the central figure in each of these books is a writer. But even 'naive' artists can achieve, through the practising of their art, moments of fulfilment and peace, in reconciling themselves to their environment - as Wizzie Ravelston, reunited with her circus horse, illustrates (Weymouth

¹This marvellous passage deserves much study. It is, in the way Powys evokes this moment of insight in terms of harmonies, waves and rhythms, and then allows the harmonies to fragment again into the mundane unredeemed world, very similar to the sort of process Golding depicts for Sammy, on his release from solitary confinement in Free Fall, or for Matty, under the influence of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in Darkness Visible.

Sands, pp. 297-8). At such a moment she is merged with what Wolf Solent calls "the stream of life" and it is his realisation of this that helps him to interpret his own life in the same way as would "saints and artists" (448). But it seems that the 'Powys heroes', as these novels progress, become more inhibited by a kind of defensive scepticism; it is the saints and magicians who pursue vision more systematically. Of the latter, figures like Sylvanus Cobbold and Uryen Quirm come replete with philosophies, as I have noted already; they are, however, so bizarre and implausible that their insights seem too easily achieved, too 'given'.¹

A more satisfactory source for sanctity is *A Glastonbury Romance*, which contains the contrasting, but equally illuminating, figures of Johnny Geard and Sam Dekker.² Geard's status, as a religious figure, might at first make him seem an unusual source for visionary insight in Powys' fiction, but his non-conformity is extreme, and his perceptions (in the 'Mark's Court' chapter, or the wild Easter morning communion) correspondingly intense. It is Sam, though, who exemplifies the true Powysian saint. Early in the novel he is characterised in this way:

"The girl saw in his look at that moment that deep, obstinate, half-mad *creative* look, the look of the artist, of the saint; the look of Something which the ebb and the flow of her woman's moods would have no power to change." (300)

During the course of the novel he moves from chastity (seen in terms of a more or less orthodox Christianity) to find fulfilment temporarily in normal sexual passion. But he then progresses beyond this stage to a second initiation, which unites his spiritual aspirations with the greater

¹Wilson Knight, to his credit, recognises this, when observing, of Uryen, "he is best approached as a philosophical, or symbolical, creation, rather than as a man." (*The Saturnian Quest*, p. 52)

²For the significance of the contrasts, see their differing expositions of 'Christ' and his significance to each of them (pp. 909-10).

awareness of his own physicality that his affair with Nell Zoyland has generated.¹ This revelatory experience, a vision of the Grail, follows on from a physical invasion of his being that seems like an anal assault from a spear. The violent yoking together of these two events is essential to Powys' purpose, and they make of Sam a true saint. Emphasis on the excremental is further stressed when Sam puts sanctity into practice, administering an enema to Abel Twig:

"The two extremes of his experience, the anus of an aged man and the wavering shaft of the Absolute, piercing his own earthly body, mingled and fused together in his consciousness. Holy Sam felt, as he went on with the business, a strange second sight, an inkling, as to some incredible secret, whereby the whole massed weight of the world's tormented flesh was labouring towards some release." (948)

Though Sam's Grail experience is one of the pinnacles of emotional and mystical meaning in the novel, it is more usual for visionary insights to occur in a mysteriously inarticulate and haphazard fashion, events which seem like chance invasions of the everyday world by levels of existence which are coterminous with that world but usually hidden from mundane human perception. This sense, that there are layers of sentient existence going on alongside the so-called 'real' world, is present in each of these novels. In *Maiden Castle* Dud is more than once made aware of "the parallel existence of quite different layers of reality" (84).² In *Weymouth Sands*, the opportunity to 'see' through to these different layers depends on the movement of 'screens' that separate them, as in the case in one example, in which, for Perdita,

¹In Morine Krissdottir's quest to invest such developments with archetypal significance, Sam becomes the Questing Knight and Glastonbury the Waste Land. This has its comic consequences, since, in her interpretation, his vision of the Grail means, ultimately, that the land becomes fertile again. Powys doesn't do things by halves - as the final flood makes clear! (See *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, pp. 86-92.)

²Later, when Dud begins to write his historical romance, he is aware that this multi-layered sensation is particularly associated with a sense of place - first Dorchester, and later Maiden Castle itself. See pp. 111-3, for example.

"events occur in a special and curious manner that seem to separate that fragment of time from all other fragments."

Powys analyses what is happening in this instant in some detail:

"Another peculiarity of these moments is a sensation as if there were a spiritual screen, made of a material far more impenetrable than adamant, between our existing world of forms and impressions and *some other world*, and as if this screen had suddenly grown extremely thin, thin as a dark, semi-transparent glass, through which certain faintly adumbrated motions, of a pregnantly symbolic character, are dimly visible."¹

In the case of Sylvanus Cobbold, in the same novel, his interaction with this mystery is rather over-explained: his relationship with the sprite Trivia is indeed a trivialisation of such an experience (p. 393, for example). But Dr Mabon, towards the end of the novel, utters an oracular statement concerning "some secret continuity in experience" (496) which evokes, in a mood of elegiac serenity and peace, a similar reaction to this multi-layered visionary environment to that given by Sam Dekker in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

In many ways Sam's experience is analogous with Wolf Solent's, though Sam is allowed to 'progress' beyond his culminating visionary experience, where Wolf's comes right at the end of the novel. But for both of them, the 'mystery' of vision follows on from the loss of their 'mythology' or 'life-illusion'; it is as though it is only when they cease to shape experience into a pre-ordained perceptual mould that the inexplicable and unpredictable is revealed beneath daily life.²

At such points Powys mingles squalor and sublimity, and the mystery of vision is revealed as a borderland of the miraculous around everything that exists. This goes beyond the mere mingling of cosmic and particular,

¹*Weymouth Sands*, pp. 48-9. The similarity of imagery and thought between this passage and similar occurrences in Golding's *Darkness Visible* are striking. (See Chapter 6.)

²Hyman (*Essays on John Cowper Powys*, p. 130) is astute here. Of Wolf's final 'field of gold' vision he says: "It is in the light of this vision that he can accept the environment revealed by the loss of his mythology, a world less dramatic, but more complex, than the patterns he had imposed upon it."

such as occurs in the opening pages of *A Glastonbury Romance*; it is a revelation of what John Crow calls "the secret of the mystic value of the commonplace" (491). Perhaps the most profound illustration comes when Sam visits the most run-down part of Glastonbury, significantly called Paradise, an area of slum dwellings, decaying gardens and broken inhabitants. Here he finds

"a strange and singular reciprocity between his soul and every little fragment of masonry, of stony ground, of mossy ground, of woodwork, of trodden mud, of clumps of last year's dusty nettles, of withered dock leaves or of mildewed palings."

All of this is illuminated in a dusky glow, and Powys stresses the lasting value of the experience by stepping forward and addressing the reader directly:

"Sam had found out that when a person is liberated from possessiveness, from ambition, from the exigencies of desire, from domestic claims, from every sort of authority over others, he can enjoy sideways and incidentally as he follows any sort of labour or quest the most exquisite trances of absorption into the mysterious essence of any patch of earth-mould, or any fragment of gravel, or any slab of paving-stone, or any tangle of weeds, or any lump of turf that he may come upon as he goes along." (926-7)

Thus Powys arrives at the fictional equivalent of the 'apex-thought', as described in Chapter Two. It is possible to object that in these Wessex novels minor epiphanies are given too freely for the major revelations to assume the necessary piercing directness that Powys claims for such moments in his non-fiction. Not only do the scarcely human 'magician' figures feature too often here; relatively trivial characters, like Rodney Loder in *Weymouth Sands*, with his system of 'essences', slip freely from level to level of perception with a casual ease that makes nonsense of Powys' claim, in *The Complex Vision*, that the 'apex-thought' is glimpsed only fleetingly, on the very fringes of possibility and perception. But in *Wolf Solent* this type of experience retains its sense of wonder.

A glimpsed understanding of it comes to Wolf fairly early in the novel as a result of an important conversation with Christie about her perception of life:

"Philosophy to you, and to me, too, isn't science at all! It's life winnowed and heightened. It's the essence of life caught on the wing. It's life *framed*." (91)

But at this stage Wolf remains in the grip of his life-illusion, which, as has been pointed out already, limits his receptivity to deeper insights.

But as the novel develops, Wolf comes to grasp this, and thus the possibility of further enlightenment:

"No system at all! Only to dissolve into thin, fluctuating vapour; only to flow like a serpentine mist into the grave of his father, into the mocking heart of his mother, into the ash tree, into the wind, into the sands on Weymouth Beach, into the voice of the landlord of Farmer's Rest. No system at all!

Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus"¹

From this discovery the final revelation becomes possible, the inspiration of the 'field of gold'. In terms of a fictional explanation of the 'apex-thought', perhaps the most significant thing about this experience is how, for Wolf, it penetrates and illuminates all levels of being instantaneously: the gold of the field makes him recall sources of gold in the mythic past, and

"all these things, not in their concrete appearances, but in their platonic essences, made his mind reel. The thing became a symbol, a mystery, an initiation. It was like that figure of the Absolute seen in the Apocalypse. It became a *super-substance*, sunlight precipitated and petrified, the magnetic heart of the world rendered visible." (630)

This is, one might say, a type of the grail; in *A Glastonbury Romance* we have the Grail itself, the apex-thought in its ultimate manifestation. But there are two aspects of Wolf's progress that shed revealing light on both Sam and Bloody Johnny in that later novel. One is the inability Wolf

¹Wolf Solent, p. 374. The last line of the quotation quite clearly links Wolf's realisation here with Sam's in *A Glastonbury Romance* and 'the Idea of Christ' in *The Complex Vision*.

(and, for the moment, Powys) has when it comes to turning experience into words.¹ It is not until the very end of the novel that he realises that there are no words for what he wants to express; that words are part of the corrupt and debased material that cannot express the incorruptible. The other important feature of Wolf's revelation is that it does not lead to a 'closed' climax. That is to say that vision is like a fleeting moment of equilibrium. But life does not stop after such moments: it goes on, with a possible sense of anti-climax. Thus Wolf cannot stay forever bathed in his field of gold. He turns back, at the end of the novel, to Carfax and Gerda, to the mundane triviality of tea and cakes. Yet the moment has occurred, and given the realisation that "between himself and what was 'behind' the Universe there should be now a new covenant" (633), what has happened, committed to memory, will always illuminate the future.

This 'new covenant', as I have observed, finds its purest expression in the Grail, which, Powys claimed, "has succeeded in establishing itself both as a reality touched by the miraculous and as a miracle based on reality."² In *A Glastonbury Romance* Sam Dekker and, I assume, Johnny Geard are rewarded with a vision of the Grail; other characters, notably John and Mary Crow and Owen Evans, take hesitant steps towards it, but are denied a full revelation. In John's case this is undoubtedly due to his inherent scepticism; though he sees a vision of Arthur's sword plunging into the Brue he does not act on this (p. 361). At the end of the novel, before the final flood, he retreats to Norfolk, which signifies, I would claim, Powys' unwillingness to commit himself totally to the Grail message. Part of him at least, the part characterised as 'John Crow', always seeks to hold back.

¹See Wolf Solent, p.448, for example.

²'Preface' to *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. xi.

About Mary's experience, Powys is enigmatic. She is not, even by the standards of Powys' normal treatment of female figures, a fully worked-out character. It is in fact unusual for Powys to allow the women in his novels to acquire the depth of spiritual insight of the central, male characters; thus Mary's vision, as *Midsummer's day dawns*, is unique. But it is also inarticulate: Powys tells us: "What she experienced was like a quivering love-ecstasy that had no human object", and "a smile of indescribable peace flickered over her face!" (556) But "whatever it was that stirred her so, the effect of it soon passed." The episode ends in frustrating anticlimax. Powys tells the reader that "the invisible Watchers of human life in Glastonbury noted well this event. 'She has been allowed to see It,' they said to one another." But what 'It' is, Powys never reveals!

Evans' experience, the mock crucifixion that forms the climax to the first part of *A Glastonbury Romance*, is powerfully evoked. In many ways his fate at this point exemplifies Powys' advice to go down and through suffering to achieve a state beyond pleasure and pain. But even such agonies as Evans experiences here cannot purge him of the sadistic tendency lurking within him, and for all his frenzied agony, there is no release, no vision of the Grail comparable to Sam's.

That Sam's experience is to be completely extraordinary is clear from the lead up to it that Powys gives.¹ He begins by stressing Sam's lack of 'psychic' or 'mystical' qualities. In that sense, Sam is an 'ordinary' man out for an ordinary walk. Likewise the setting is utterly plain: a semi-derelict coal barge. But Sam, however plodding and obtuse, is nevertheless responsive when the Timeless comes 'crashing' (Powys' word) into Time: "then - without a second's warning - the earth and the water

¹The following quotations come from pp. 934-40 of *A Glastonbury Romance*. The whole passage makes vital reading in this context.

and the darkness *cracked* ." The experience, which began in pleasure, is then bound up with pain, in a conscious evocation of the fusion of the Absolute and the excremental:

'When this darkness was split, and the whole atmosphere split, and the earth and the air split, what he felt to be a gigantic spear was struck into his bowels and struck *from below*."

The revelation which follows, however, brings healing and change: it is the Grail itself, a chalice containing water streaked with blood, and within that "a shining fish", "Ichthus, the World Fish". From this experience Sam moves "across the gulf between his own ecstasies and the anguish he had glimpsed." At this point Powys himself steps forward and addresses the reader, taking up Sam's Grail-question:

"*Is it a Tench* ? Is there a fish of healing, one chance against all chances, at the bottom of the world-tank? *Is it a Tench*? Is cruelty always triumphant, or is there a hope beyond hope, a 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?"

The answer, from Sam's experience, is clearly affirmative, and it transforms him into Holy Sam and leads him to further mystical insights mingled in excremental depths, such as the application of Abel Twig's enema, which has already been discussed. The experience is not a 'closed' one: it cannot last for ever, and Sam experiences great difficulty in making anyone he tells believe him. But it sustains and transfigures the world, generating precisely that border of the miraculous around the ordinary that Powys discussed in his non-fiction.

Sam's climax is not, however, the climax of the novel. That is reserved for Johnny Geard. In temperament and character he is very different to Sam, and clearly part of Powys' message in this novel is that one does not have to be a particular type of person to achieve this 'apex-thought' experience. Before the novel's apocalyptic conclusion, Geard has already acquired some sense of what the Grail is - "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!"¹ But though he has worked miracles by the use of this power, it is not until the very end of the novel that he sees it clearly for the first time, in death:

"What he stared at now was Glastonbury Tor; and on the top of the Tor was the tower; and the tower was like the handle of an enormous cloudy goblet that grew larger and larger and larger -" (1115)

With his death by drowning, Powys steps forward for the last time, with the voice of authorial authority, to invoke "the great goddess Cybele, whose forehead is crowned with the Turrets of the Impossible." In the heady rhetoric of these closing paragraphs, Powys reveals fully, in all its rich paradox, the true 'eternal vision':

"For she whom the ancients named Cybele is in reality that beautiful and terrible Force by which the Lies of great creative Nature give birth to Truth that is to be.

Out of the Timeless she came down into time. Out of the Un-named she came down into our human symbols.

Through all the stammerings of strange tongues and murmurings of obscure invocations she still upholds her cause; the cause of the unseen against the seen, of the weak against the strong, of that which is not, and yet is, against that which is, and yet is not.

Thus she abides; her Towers forever rising, forever vanishing. Never or Always." (1120).

¹A *Glastonbury Romance*, p. 458. Here, typically, Powys punctures the pretentiousness of the moment by reference to "the old couple in the room below relieving Nature" - the excremental again! Compare the similar blending of the significant with the earthly mundane in *Darkness Visible* (see Chapter 6).

Chapter Five

Golding: **The Non-Fiction**

*"Woe unto me if I speak of the things of God; but woe unto me if I do not speak of the things of God."*¹

Turning from the non-fiction of John Cowper Powys to that of William Golding, one is struck by remarkable differences. The most obvious can be measured in terms of volume: against Powys' eighteen full-length works and numerous shorter pamphlets, prefaces, records of debates, Golding's output is brief indeed - two volumes comprising essays, transcripts of lectures and book reviews, a travel book and a scattering of literary ephemera (mostly interviews and yet more book reviews). Evidently there is nothing in the piecemeal collections of **The Hot Gates** (1965) and **A Moving Target** (1982) or the genial but insubstantial **An Egyptian Journal** (1985) to set against Powys' "tracts for the times" or **The Complex Vision** or the huge, idiosyncratic **Autobiography**.

It is also more difficult to come to any systematic judgement of the relationship between Golding and his work. Powys was adept at self-advertisement; and even where this demands sceptical assessment, there are many hundreds of his letters now in print, and Richard Graves' corporate biography of **The Brothers Powys** gives a detailed picture of Powys' life. Against this, though it is possible to give sketchy outline of Golding's life and formative experiences, one is faced with relative obscurity.²

Finally, there is a contrast in intention that underlies the non-fiction. Powys saw himself as a propagandist, a preacher; he wrote

¹**A Moving Target**, p. 202.

²Golding has said nothing recently that would seem to contradict his insistence that no biography should be written of him - see Virginia Tiger's **William Golding - The Dark Fields of Discovery**, p. 13 - and though Golding has worked daily on a diary-cum-journal for the last twenty years, it is clearly not meant for public consumption, at least not during Golding's lifetime.

theoretical treatises about his 'system' of belief (such as it was) and practical manuals on the daily application of this view of life. This implies, without doubt, that Powys believed that he had a message to communicate to his readers, quite apart from what might be deduced from his novels. This cannot be said of Golding. Though he does seem to attach sufficient weight to the pieces in *The Hot Gates* and *A Moving Target* to want them to be preserved in book form at all, and though he does appear to want to project through these and other articles some picture of what he is like, and how he interprets the life that goes on around him, he returns repeatedly to the assertion that he is a story-teller, not a philosopher. He conspicuously draws attention to the confused muddle he finds himself in when weighty pronouncements are expected of him.

Evidently, therefore, it is not sensible to expect Golding's non-fiction to reveal a precise or cogently argued philosophical system. What it can do, on a more informal scale, is explore what Golding, in a homely phrase, calls his "mental furniture".¹ In this way it is possible to assemble, from tiny fragments of evidence, some picture of Golding's understanding of nature of man, his view of the world, his perception of the function of art (especially literature) and glimpses of vision, which occupy him in life as they do in his novels. And though in terms of temperament, cultural background, the practice of their art and essential beliefs, it might appear that Powys and Golding have little in common, this chapter, taken in conjunction with Chapter Two, attempts to show that surface differences are misleading, and that the visionary tradition, in surprisingly similar ways, flourishes in the thought and writing of both men.

¹See Frank Kermode's discussion with Golding, 'The Meaning of It All' (*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, pp. 9-10).

"I am by nature a pragmatist with a touch of empiricism."¹

In Golding's attempts to talk about his life and family background there is evidence of the clash of the major preoccupations of the non-fiction: the urge to be a pattern-maker set against the urge to accept the random confusions of everyday life. It is from this creative tension that Golding forges his fiction; in the non-fiction it generates a tone of voice characteristic of Golding's attempts to organise his past, the voice of a man making patterns in spite of himself.

This tension manifests itself on several levels, and can be traced through the various periods into which Golding has divided his life in discussion of it (which is in itself indicative of a desire to schematise things). But it is most apparent in comments made between 1955 and 1960, in the years that separate *Pincher Martin* and *Free Fall*. In these years, largely due to a developing realisation that the relationship between fiction and life was more subtle than he had realised, there occurred something akin to a revolution in vision. In 1958 Golding claimed that "In all of my books I have suggested a shape in the universe that may, as it were, account for things."² Yet within two years Golding was confessing that "I'm moving much more towards novels where I don't understand what everything is about. I'm trying to get what one might call the immediacy of inexplicable living more firmly into my work."³ It is not difficult to demonstrate this tension at work in more recent comments that Golding has

¹A *Moving Target*, p. 156.

²See the interview with Owen Webster, 'Living with Chaos' (*Books and Art*, March 1958, p. 16).

³Quoted in Owen Webster, 'The Cosmic Outlook of an Original Novelist' (*John O'London's*, January 1960, p. 7). This conflict can be traced explicitly in the novels of the time: *Pincher Martin* asserts that "men make patterns" (*Pincher Martin*, p. 109), whereas Sammy Mountjoy confesses to "translating incoherence into incoherence" (*Free Fall*, p. 8).

made, to the effect that "I have always been a curious mixture of conservative and anarchist."¹

The tension is also present when Golding comes to consider the function of assessing or evaluating this shape he imposes on his life, though again the tendency is to move from an early forcefulness into a more subtly-shaded neutrality. In conversation with Professor Biles in the mid-sixties he confesses to being a moralist, even an objectionable one, in the sense of seeing patterns in such a view of life which would prove him 'right'²; in a more recent interview, this moralising tendency has become ambivalent:

"I think that in a sense there is nothing but the nowness of how a man feels. One side of me thinks that, and the other side of me - with thousands of years behind it - thinks that you are the sum of your good or your evil."³

Golding's comments on his own life are sketchy. There seems to be no attempt at creating a complex mythology out of family relationships, in the way that Powys interpreted the beliefs and attitudes of his brothers and father. The nearest that Golding comes to this is in the characterisation of his father as "incarnate omniscience"⁴; in the essay 'The Ladder and the Tree', a reminiscence of childhood, Golding's father assumes something of the fixed immobility of an attitude, a view on life, and it is perhaps in the rejection of his father's reasonable and ordered universe that Golding's vehement anti-rationalism is to be found.⁵

Looking back at his childhood, Golding claims for his behaviour both

¹A *Moving Target*, p. 149.

²Quoted in ed. J.I. Biles, *Talk: Conversations with William Golding*, pp. 86-7.

³The comment was made in 'William Golding: an Interview' with John Haffenden (*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 10).

⁴*The Hot Gates*, p.168.

⁵The following comment, about the genesis of *The Inheritors*, is illuminating here: "My father was a rationalist, and the *Outline of History* was something he took neat Wells' *Outline of History* is the rationalist gospel, in excelsis I got this from my father, and by and by it seemed to me not to be large enough to be too neat and too slick" (*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, p. 10).

the influence of original sin and also a kind of innocence - that is, life without self-knowledge and therefore without any concept of choice or guilt. The desire to exploit, to injure and to control was purely instinctive: "I had a clear picture of what school was to bring me. It was to bring me fights. I lacked opposition and yearned to be victorious." Billy the Kid appears in various guises in Golding's novels, from Jack in *Lord of the Flies* to Sophy in *Darkness Visible*.¹

Alongside this 'innocent' exploitation was a sense of spontaneity and disorganised urgency which characterises a child's full and vivid response to life. This is perhaps where Golding looks back on his childhood with the greatest sense of loss, since experience develops the ability to control and exploit - to make patterns - which is absent from a life felt in its raw state. Like Sammy Mountjoy thinking back to his childhood, Golding contemplates his early years from the vantage point of adulthood, which only hindsight can infuse. Before the arrival of patterning, Golding's memories were of an early enchantment with words and sounds - "deebri and Skirmishar, creskant and sweeside"² - and with "incantation, whether it meant anything or not"³.

Elsewhere, Golding's commentary on childhood fear strikes chords reminiscent of earlier contributions to the history of ideas of the unconscious. The cellar image, invoked with such insistence in *Pincher Martin* and *The Spire*, was referred to by Golding as "a whole philosophy of

¹The *Hot Gates*, p. 159. As an example of the way this kind of view is transmuted into fiction, consider the infant Henry in *Lord of the Flies*, toying with minute sea creatures at the water's edge, "absorbed beyond mere happiness as he felt himself exercising control over living things" (p. 66). The way Golding has carefully shaped this sentence implies Henry's guilt in exploitation, yet it is not conscious guilt, an action which is the result of a choice based on knowledge.

²The *Hot Gates*, p. 160.

³The *Hot Gates*, p. 52.

life", a concept which implies an allegiance not only with traditional religious teaching, but with Freudian analyses of the unconscious.¹ A study of Golding's description of one such memory reveals a great deal about the process by which recollection is formed into artistic vision. Of the cellar, he wrote:

"Once there was a south window in the cellars but now only the rotting sill is left, a beam crushed in the wall. My father amiably rigged me a swing in one dark corner for use on rainy days but I never used it unless he was there - never dared to stay alone with the gloom and the crushed wood underground, where a footfall overhead seemed to come down out of another world."

The verbal echoes which link this to **Pincher Martin** are obvious.²

For Golding, fear led to isolation, and isolation to the ability to analyse his behaviour. In the world of rationalistic optimism that his father and family exuded Golding was helpless to communicate: "How could I talk to them about darkness and the irrational?"³ Analysis leads to partial understanding. A mock-heroic description of a school fight stresses the crushing loneliness of the young Billy, leading to an uncharacteristic outburst of grief, and the adult Golding adds sardonic comment on the new level of understanding that has been achieved:

"There was Billy grieving, smitten to the heart; there was Billy who felt the unfairness of having to get this grief all

¹This phrase is from Golding's 'Letter Fragment Answering John Peter's Queries', quoted in ed. Nelson, **William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies': A Source Book**, p. 34. Interestingly, though probably coincidentally, Lawrence described Freud's idea as "a cellar in which the mind keeps its own bastard spawn". (See Kermode, **Lawrence**, p. 88.)

²**The Hot Gates**, p. 166. It is not, though, a simple transposition; what was literal becomes infused with symbolic meaning. The recollection of the neighbouring graveyard makes the windowsill into a rotting coffin, and the unwilling but seemingly inescapable passage down the cellar becomes for Pincher a confrontation with death. Death, and also judgment - because childhood memory links up with Golding's interest in Egyptology. The branch-end becomes the tree-trunk of Osiris, "in the hall where the forty-two judges ask their questions of the dead man, and the god weighs his heart against a feather". (**The Hot Gates**, p. 79). In this way one of the thematic links in the complex chain that is **Pincher Martin** is forged.

³**The Hot Gates**, p. 170.

the way home where his mother could inspect it; and there was scientific Billy, who was rapidly acquiring know-how."¹

Without consciously understanding what it was that he knew, the young Golding was beginning to be aware of levels of existence. He was experiencing the characteristic dislocation which, Golding insists, it is man's guilty lot to suffer. Knowledge brings fragmentation, the awareness of choice and the concomitant potential for duplicity. Innocence may never in fact have been experienced; approaching adulthood brings the consciousness that it exists no longer.

The pattern-making facet of Golding's temperament, encouraged by historical circumstance, treats young adulthood as a distinct phase in the evolution of vision. The period has neat boundaries - in 1930 Golding went to Oxford, in 1940 he joined the Navy - and, according to Golding, its own special characteristics. In the essay 'Thinking as a Hobby', he classified it as an era of "grade-two thinking", which

"is a withdrawal, with eyes and ears open. It became my hobby and brought satisfaction and loneliness with either hand. For grade-two thinking destroys without having the power to create."²

It is here that Golding's chief 'bete noir', rationalism, rears its head. With the painful hindsight that war brought, Golding claimed that he had disposed of the visionary in favour of the purely rational, since this could more easily be abused to serve the needs of the self. Pincher Martin is Golding's quintessential rationalist and grade-two thinker - "the best bloody juvenile".³ Yet if Golding's thesis is tested, it is surely only partially right. Perhaps after any 'conversion', any significant change in

¹The *Hot Gates*, p. 162.

²'Thinking as a Hobby' was printed in *Holiday*, August 1961, p. 11.

³Pincher Martin, p. 135. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that Pincher is a (suitably distorted, not to say damned) self-portrait of Golding at the time. Connections are not merely external (Oxford, provincial theatre, the navy) but influence mannerisms as well: compare the vain experimentation with profile photographs in *Pincher Martin*, pp. 75-6 with Golding's own memories in 'It's a Long Way to Oxyrhynchus' (*Spectator*, 7 July 1961, p. 9).

belief, it is natural to paint the time before it as black as possible - and so Golding's discovery of the reality of human nature in the war is contrasted with this preceding wasted and self-satisfied decade. Yet the one indisputable piece of evidence from the 1930s, the *Poems* (1934), gives the rationalist case short shrift. Moreover, while it is true that much of this verse is the maudlin posturing of adolescence, and while it is to a large extent painfully derivative (as Golding notes, with self-deprecating irony, in the article 'My First Book' in *A Moving Target*), there is the occasional resonance of the distinctive Golding voice of the future, as I will illustrate in a later discussion of Golding's attitude to poetry.

The end of this decade was marked by the seismic convulsion of the war. This was the most significant single event of Golding's life to have made its presence felt in the shaping of his vision, and it has been the most widely discussed, both by the author and his critics.¹ His experiences in war-time certainly allowed Golding to be dogmatic, as the lecture-essay 'Fable' demonstrates:

"I believed that man was sick - not exceptional man but average man. I believed that the condition of man was to be a morally diseased creation and that the best job I could do at the time, was to trace the connection between his diseased nature and the international mess he gets himself into."²

This was the temper that produced *Lord of the Flies*, felt with an intensity that, a quarter of a century later, was still present when Golding affirmed that "the theme of *Lord of the Flies* is grief, sheer grief, grief, grief, grief, grief."³

It is, however, as incomplete, as a statement of Golding's mature vision, as was the delusive rationalism of the pre-war years. *Lord of the*

¹This is perhaps inevitable - the second, and, I would argue, more important upheaval was simply a dawning personal realisation rather than a vast international cataclysm. Moreover it was by its very nature a realisation that prompted not the austere pessimism of the early novels but a tentative and vitally undogmatic approach.

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 87.

³*A Moving Target*, p. 163.

Flies was the response of a particular moment to a particular set of circumstances. In the honesty of hindsight, Golding confessed to having had a view of history which was too mechanistic, taking too little notice of individual personality:

"I wasn't good enough, wasn't clever enough, to put this over completely; all I could say at the time was, 'Look, for God's sake, this could have been *us*.'"¹

About the immediate causes of the change of perspective Golding has been unforthcoming, but it seems likely that the most significant was the actual practice of writing fiction. On reflection, Golding saw the whole process that produced *Lord of the Flies* as "a kind of adolescence, a feeling that one has specific ideas that have to be put over."² By 1965 he was able to make articulate this numbing realisation, which had the power to paralyse and to liberate:

"I believe one surely has to go through, after a period of knowing what one thinks a period of knowing what one does not think, of being astonished."³

I have traced Golding's account of his understanding as it has evolved from childhood to maturity, arriving at the creator of Sammy Mountjoy, the "burning amateur", and Jocelin, who confessed, "Now, I know nothing at all".⁴ It is clear that Golding attempted to practise in his

¹Talk, p. 38.

²Talk, p. 31.

³Talk, p.31. There is much evidence to locate this 'astonishment' at precisely the point at which Golding came to work on *Free Fall*. The following interview remark, despite the triteness of expression, makes this very clear: "It's absolutely essential that I should understand, make a coherence of this daily business of living. And I must confess I don't you know, and that in a way is what the last book is about. The first three began to get me a reputation as a man who knew all the answers. Well *of course* I don't. It's a sort of pious hope I have that if I reveal my own ignorance plainly enough people will stop thinking that I ought to turn up with the Tablets of the Law in the last chapter." (John O'London's, January 1960, p. 7).

⁴*Free Fall*, p. 5; *The Spire*, p. 223.

fiction, from **Free Fall** onwards, what he was tentatively preaching in the comments just quoted.¹ It is this quality of 'astonishment' that characterises Golding's observations on himself in the last two decades. Certain aspects of his character have come to be revealed, in both fiction and non-fiction, that were previously hidden, such as a sense of humour.² This may not seem particularly important, but humour and a recognition of the comic weaknesses of humanity permeate the more recent fiction.

There is also Golding's unease at being turned into an institution. He laments becoming a 'set text' and fuel for an 'academic industry'; he is wryly aware of the suffocating tendencies of "Nobelitis".³ It is this, surely, which has prompted the frequent assertions that Gabriel Josipovici finds so unconvincing⁴, that Golding is not to be tied down, mummified (to use his own image in 'Belief and Creativity') in response to a life which he frequently finds inexplicable. Hence, for instance, the claim, in reply

¹This does not mean, of course, that each attempt has necessarily been successful. **Free Fall**, for instance, has always been the least critically acclaimed of the novels, a view with which Golding seems to agree - see his interview in **Quarto**, November 1980, p. 11. In this novel Golding, gripped by this feeling of knowing and then somehow not knowing, was prompted to question the nature of his art. In choosing to write a novel explicitly about that, though, he was trapped into self-absorption. Sammy's position at the beginning of the novel is Golding's too. The mode of retrospective commentary suits his intentions too well. It appears that the novel underwent extensive revision, and there is evidence that Golding tried to remove as much autobiographical material as possible. For example, the periodical **Two Cities** (Summer 1960, pp.27-9) published a passage omitted from the final version of **Free Fall**, which can be matched almost word for word with the autobiographical 'Billy the Kid' (**The Hot Gates**, pp. 161-5). And if in the end the novel is purged as an 'inverted' autobiography, the tone of voice is still too close to Golding's own. It is a novel of good ideas, and like **Lord of the Flies**, the response to a particular (though more complex) set of circumstances, but it goes no further than that.

²"I like to laugh. I like wit and humour, funny stories - clean and dirty ones I would like to put more humour in my books" (**Quarto**, November 1980, p. 11).

³The frustrations with academia can be heard in most of the 'Ideas' pieces in **A Moving Target**. The constraints of being a Cultural Object can be felt in **An Egyptian Journal**, (p. 60, for example), and the faith the Nubians entrust in him is, he feels, perhaps misplaced (p. 134). But did Golding's subsequent letter to **The Times** effect the speedy return of the Sphinx's beard? An interesting question!

⁴**Times Literary Supplement**, 23.7.82, p. 785.

to a questionnaire about anthroposophy, that

"though I've looked fairly hard and would like the peace of agreeing and belonging - though I know that of course it's only one sort of peace and there is much rough stuff to go with any acceptance - nevertheless I haven't succeeded in aligning myself with any philosophy, system, world-belief, church, party, or what have you."¹

This has its consequences, when views in which Golding has had an untested faith are disrupted by untidy experience. Thus, he went to Egypt, at the age of sixty-five, with a neat philosophy of what Egypt was like. The resultant experience, superbly conveyed in 'Egypt from my Outside', was something Golding could not incorporate into his previous understanding of the place, lacking "a steady eye and a steady belief."² In the end there are simply too many Egypts, partial, confusing, contradictory, to be subsumed under a single vision.

In conclusion, though, there is in Golding's identification with Ancient Egypt a key to his understanding of himself and his function in the late twentieth-century. To John Haffenden he confessed that "I can't locate myself in the twentieth century."³ Instead, in the essay 'Egypt from my Inside' he declares "I am, in fact, an Ancient Egyptian, with all their unreason, spiritual pragmatism and capacity for ambiguous belief."⁴ What is important here is the desire to believe in something alongside the inability to commit himself to a specific system of belief. This is, in a sense, the ultimate creative tension in Golding's character, and it is this that fuels the visionary impulse in the later novels. Golding's beliefs are not fixed, despite all that he has written and all that has

¹Golden Blade, 1966, p. 118. This sort of comment is echoed in his view that he is "an incompetently religious man" (Talk, p. 83).

²A Moving Target, p. 81.

³Quarto, November 1980, p. 12.

⁴The Hot Gates, p. 82. Interestingly, even here Golding has retreated slightly, into a more tentative view: "It would be going too far to say that I felt myself to be an ancient Egyptian. But I felt a connection, an unusual sympathy." (An Egyptian Journal, p. 10).

been written about him (including this thesis); he remains "a moving target" in the sense that he is "alive and changing as live things do."¹ But though this is a recognisably truthful thing to say, there is still a sense in which Golding looks at the universe around him with the fixed, uncomprehending stare of an Egyptian sarcophagus, with "a sense of continual astonishment". Hence, he arrives at a conclusion which is not a conclusion, looking back over seventy years of life:

"I herewith deliver an interim report and announce that it is possible to live astonished for a very long time; and it looks increasingly possible that you can die that way too."²

Thus Golding's view of himself, in his striving to interpret his own experience, has had a profound impact on the shaping of his art. But this has been an analysis of one man alone; I want to turn now to Golding's examination of man as a species.

II

"What man is, whatever man is under the eye of heaven, that I burn to know and that - I do not say this lightly - I would endure knowing."³

For Golding, man is infinitely mysterious. He is divided within himself, evil, greedy, lustful, cruel, vain, exploitative; he is also loving, compassionate, creative, irrationally joyous, funny, made in the image of God. Yet there is more to say, deeply felt and cogently argued in both fiction and non-fiction, than Golding would have one believe from

¹A Moving Target, p. 170.

²A Moving Target, p. 199.

³A Moving Target, p. 199.

his description of himself as "someone who finds everyone quite extraordinary and, to a large extent, incomprehensible".¹ However, what a cautionary statement like this should do is to warn against taking a 'Golding the pessimist, dissecting the darkness of man's heart' approach to this subject, which has been especially popular with American critics of the early novels.

In a review of Grahame Clark's *World Prehistory* Golding observed:

"It is not too much to say that man invented war at the earliest possible moment. It is not too much to say that as soon as he could leave an interpretable sign of anything he left a sign of his belief in God."²

These two qualities, in Golding's eyes, make up man's nature now as they did then. This would imply that Golding has no concept of a Golden Age, a prelapsarian undivided existence. In fact such a concept does figure in his understanding, but in this idyllic existence the inhabitant was not homo sapiens.³ He assents theoretically to the existence of a 'fall' - but the fall happened because of humanity, not simply to him. He places the fall, in imaginative terms, at the point at which Neanderthal man was superseded by homo sapiens (in *The Inheritors*); this allows him to propose the existence of a dim racial memory of a Golden Age, while asserting that man is what he always was.

In what I have called his 'knowing' phase, Golding made clear statements about the human condition. This, in part, explains the extremity of tone: in the era of *Lord of the Flies* Golding was at pains to make his views plain. In such comments, a repetitive insistence on certain

¹ 'Golding on Golding', *The Guardian*, 15 January 1960, p. 9.

² 'Before the Beginning', *The Spectator*, 26 May 1961, p. 768.

³ When evidence for apparently 'unfallen' human behaviour does appear - as was presented to Golding in the book *The Gentle Tasaday* by John Nance, reviewed in 'The Love Children' (*The Guardian*, 23 September 1975, p. 9) - he is wary: "They are indeed simple, gently, loveable. Clearly they would stand no chance in Our world. Yet they are surrounded by mysteries The Tasaday react to questions as if there were some kind of guilt The truth blurs."

words and phrases is apparent: man suffers from "an appalling ignorance of his own nature"; "humanity is suffering from a terrible disease"; "man is born to sin - set him free and he will be a sinner."¹ What these comments show is the ferocious power of personal wartime experience, the extent to which Golding felt himself to be set apart from contemporary philosophy, and instead, in this area at least, the extent to which his views accord with traditional Christian teaching, even when expressed with a simplicity which borders on the trite.²

Though Golding seems more at ease than Powys with the concept of 'sin', both writers explore the consequences of this, that man's is a fragmented consciousness.³ The situation is dramatised clearly in a work like *Free Fall*, but it exists even in Golding's overtly comic writing too: in the essay 'Body and Soul' for example⁴. In *Darkness Visible* Sim refers to his "Committee", a divided personality rendered confused and ambiguous by the complex interplay of the various fragments. In his more strident period, creating *Pincher Martin*, Golding proposes a more overtly disintegrated persona, under the control, initially at least, of its "centre". This idea, like the "irreducible monad" at the heart of man in Powys' *The Complex Vision*, presupposes the existence of an 'essence' of

¹These comments are from 'The Writer in his Age' (*The London Magazine*, May 1957); 'The Condition of the Novel' (*New Left Review*, Jan/Feb 1965, p. 34); an interview with Maurice Dolbier in the *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 May 1962, p. 6.

²Golding recognised this at the time: "Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous. I accept the theology and admit the triteness; but what is trite is true; and a truism can become more than a truism when it is a belief passionately held." (*The Hot Gates*, p. 88).

³The terms used to describe Golding's temperamental concerns - dislocation, division, split existences or modes, 'The Ladder and the Tree' - place him in the same predicament as is expressed in much Modernist literature, which conveys the sense that wholeness, community between man and his environment (physical, intellectual and spiritual) is no longer possible. Or, if it is, it comes only in those rare intuitive flashes that make up the Joycean epiphany. But existence, for the most part, heralded only fragmentation, finding its finest expression in, for example, the dislocated images of Eliot's early poetry, dry bones crumbling into dust.

⁴*The Hot Gates*, pp. 145-51.

individuality. Golding is wary of calling this 'personality' or 'the spirit', favouring instead a quasi-mathematical proposition:

"You think about yourself, and no matter how many layers you strip off, there is always something thinking about yourself. The thing which is thinking, which is examining, cannot examine itself, you see, because it is the thing which is examining. It's like the telescope, which can't examine itself; the eye can't see itself without a mirror, because it is actually doing the job. There is deep inside any man just this one point of awareness which cannot examine itself, because it is working when it tries to examine."¹

Taken at face value, this seems to appear morally neutral. However, this 'centre' is characterised often as 'dark' or 'selfish'. In the easy-going autobiographical fragment 'The Ladder and the Tree', the young Golding vainly labels his childhood fears, but these were "only outliers of a central, not-comprehended dark".² But it is in explaining the ideas behind *Pincher Martin* that Golding becomes most explicit. It would seem that the 'centre' is the aspect of man that is the point of contact with God, the 'scintillans dei'. But the fall has led to man's separation from God: "God is the thing we turn away from into life, and therefore we hate and fear him and make a darkness there."³ Thus the "unexaminable centre", this "darker dark", exploits its free will to manipulate the physical being at its disposal, like the 'Sophy-creature' at the mouth of its dark tunnel in *Darkness Visible*. This centre is, it must be said, also the potential point of 'rebirth'; on this theme Golding again sounds a note nearer to traditional Christian thought than the more lyrical fusionist approach to rebirth advocated by Lawrence in a work like *The Reality of Peace*. Only when a man 'dies' to himself, as Sammy does in the prison cell

¹Talk, p. 74.

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 167.

³Quoted in Biles, *Talk*, p. 75. Later in the same conversation, Golding elaborates: "You can either turn towards God or away from Him. And God can't stop you turning away from Him without removing your free will, because that's what free will is. This is the whole thing about *Pincher Martin*. It's that and nothing else. When you turn away from God, He becomes a darkness; when you turn towards Him, He becomes a light, in cliché terms" (p. 76).

in **Free Fall**, does the door burst open and the centre become flooded with light.¹

Golding has claimed that evil equates with intelligence (as distinct from knowledge). Thus, Neanderthal man knew as much as homo sapiens in terms of differentiating plants and animals; it was the application of knowledge, the ability to control nature (and his fellow creatures) through the operation of intelligence upon knowledge, that is the distinctive feature of the human race, and this is by definition post-lapsarian. Thus exploitation is to Golding the prime human sin, as it was to Powys. Moreover, it is exploitation on many levels: thus "sexual sin is exploitation of one person by another";² Nazism is racial and cultural exploitation; "the control of nature has become sinful".³

Again like Powys, Golding claims that at the root of exploitation is fear and loneliness. But where Powys proposes the existence of a malign First Cause, Golding unequivocally states that "evil enters the world through humanity and through no other creature."⁴ Thus the aim of man is to **externalise** this evil, to project it onto others. In a review of Norman Cohn's **Europe's Inner Demons** Golding observes in the witch-hunting purges precisely this tendency:

"the belief in a mysterious society consisting of THEM. THEY are wholly evil and wish to destroy us. THEY are so unlike us that we find it both necessary and satisfying to destroy THEM."⁵

¹I have been toying with the idea that Sammy's actions in the cell, particularly his imaginative response to the fragment of the mop-head, were a parody of the Lawrentian phallic rebirth, but I don't think Golding's sense of humour stretches that far.

²Talk, p. 111. This is not to say that sex, in itself, is exploitative, as Golding's more recent comment in **Quarto** (November 1980, p. 11) makes clear: "I believe and know that love-making can be enhancing, but I also know that it can be a destructive exploitation of another person."

³Talk, p. 110.

⁴'Living with Chaos', **Books and Art**, March 1958, p. 15.

⁵'Have Broom, Will Travel', (**The Guardian**, 27/2/75, p. 9).

Thus, man invents a demonology, as is portrayed fictively in *The Inheritors*.

'Fable' documents a twentieth-century example, with its analysis of on- and off-campus history. History can be a living message or it can be used to reinforce prejudice with the dead weight of biased and unforgiving self-deception. The former, campus history, is

"of supreme importance. It is the objective yet devoted stare with which humanity observes its own past; and in that state our only hope lies of having some control over our future."

This is history as "a kind of self-knowledge". But the other history is a mask behind which man may hide, even in the guise of patriotism: "It is history felt in the blood and bones", leading to

"a failure of human sympathy, ignoring of facts, the objectivising of our own inadequacies so as to make a scapegoat."¹

Thus the emotions attendant upon man's fragmented state - possessiveness, the will to power, fear, greed - find expression in Golding's non-fiction. Only the powerful sensation of shame, so significant in the novels, is rarely discussed, except in its social manifestations. In 'Belief and Creativity' Golding returns to an idea first expounded in the essay 'Thinking as a Hobby', that there are levels of belief or grades of thinking within each of us. (This finds its most explicit fictional treatment in the character of Sim in *Darkness Visible*). In the later essay he describes man with "whole high-rises, whole congeries of belief inside us, seldom knowing which is going to govern us at a given moment".² In this context such an explanation seems more appropriate, since 'thinking' implies something largely cerebral or intellectual, which is not usually the case.

¹The quotations are taken from *The Hot Gates*, pp. 90-94.

²*A Moving Target*, p. 189.

It may seem, however, that the preceding discussion is far too gloomy and pessimistic to justify the sense of the mysterious in man that Golding evidently finds there. I believe it is important to stress these aspects of the issue, since Golding's vision of man is, in the last analysis, a tragic one, but it is by no means despairing. Indeed it cannot be, if man is beyond full 'explanation'.¹ At the heart of this inexplicability is the spontaneous and invasive quality of vision, which will be the subject of the final section of this chapter. But there is plenty of evidence, on the fringes of vision, as it were, for mystery. Thus, on narrating the purely invented episode with the mummy that is central to the essay 'Egypt from my Inside' Golding remarks: "He is part of the whole man, of what we are. There is awe and terror about us, ugliness, pathos, and this finality which we cannot believe is indifference."²

Part of the mystery, and this is perhaps where the tragic preoccupations shade into the comic, is man's persistence in pursuing aspirations to the point of foolhardiness. This, at least, is Golding's conclusion in reviewing a number of books describing feats of endurance.³ This would seem to be the obverse of what Golding has referred to as "our capacity for surviving at all costs",⁴ the will to live that would even make virtue of necessity. The closing paragraph of his review of *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* by Piers Paul Reid describes how a group of Uruguayan rugby players

¹In this respect, Golding returns repeatedly to the great inexplicable characters of literature, like Pierre in *War and Peace*: "This creature, knowledgeable and ignorant, incompetent at bed and duel, tremulous, wealthy, astonished, slave of five appetites, slothful and vigorous, selfish and generous, educated and undedicated, an awareness of living, with nothing to lose but his brains. We know them and we do not understand them, nor did Tolstoy." (*The Hot Gates*, p.124).

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 75.

³As examples, note 'Tacking up the Andes' (18/9/75, p. 12) and 'North About' (9/6/67, p. 8), both published in *The Guardian*.

⁴*New York Herald Tribune*, 20/5/62, p. 6.

"invested the eating of their companions' bodies with the mystery of Christ's last supper. They did not see - perhaps were unwilling to see - the hideous Galgenhumor of the inversion. It is so plain and moving a picture of the human carry-on, this doing of what he must do by his very nature and then wrapping it up in a clean napkin of theology. Whole vistas of human history and prehistory open before us as we hear a survivor explaining the lofty experience he had been through in eating the bodies of his companions. He said, 'I am full of God.'"¹

Here, mixed with the awe and the terror, there is a form of heroism.

Whilst accepting that heroism is generally fuelled by selfishness, Golding does recognise and celebrate a sacrificial heroism. This is evoked most powerfully in the history of Leonidas in 'The Hot Gates', with his "inarticulate and bitter passion for freedom", resisting Xerxes' invading army. This is almost the sacrificial heroism of the saint, who is the glory of man in Golding's view, and though his conclusion to this essay has a perhaps over-sweet simplicity, it communicates the power of Leonidas' achievement:

"It is not just that the human spirit reacts directly and beyond all argument to a story of sacrifice and courage, as a wine glass must vibrate to the sound of the violin. It is also because, way back and at the hundredth remove, that company stood in the right line of history. A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free."²

Freedom: the word is important in Golding's vocabulary. It is, for example, the key word in Matty's understanding of his task in *Darkness Visible*. But though it is occasionally achieved by heroic action, it is more often an attitude of the heart which is significant. One is reminded of the inscription that prefaces *The Pyramid*: "If thou be among people make for thyself love, the beginning and end of the heart". Discussing his own books, Golding has frequently asserted that *The Inheritors* is his favourite, since "it seems to me to have more compassion than perhaps some of the others have."³ Golding has found the depiction of love in his

¹'Survival', *The Guardian*, 9/5/74, p. 11.

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 20.

³*Literary Review*, November 1981, p.1.

novels to be an elusive and difficult task, but it is one that, in the more recent fiction, he has explored in the actions of characters as different as Matty in *Darkness Visible* and Summers in *Rites of Passage*¹

Another significantly redemptive human quality that has surfaced in Golding's recent work is humour. If Golding once claimed "an Aeschylean preoccupation with the human tragedy,"² he came to realise, in his phase of 'not knowing', as it were, that this preoccupation was in many ways distorting his true view of man. Thus, he tentatively suggested that

"it could be, in this great, grim universe I portray, that a tiny, little, rather fat man with a beard, in the middle of it laughing, is more like the universe than the gaunt man struggling up a rock."³

There is a gentle humour in *An Egyptian Journal*, a love of the comic frailties of diarists in a piece like 'Intimate Relations' from *A Moving Target*, and *The Hot Gates* contains four superbly funny essays describing Golding's stay in America. To claim that Golding is humourless is to ignore his ability to exploit comedy of character ('Body and Soul') and situation ('Gradus ad Parnassum').

Moving closer to more intensely visionary preoccupations, Golding has a deeply-held faith in creativity as a means of breaking out of the bonds in which man is shackled. Having described in 'Gradus ad Parnassum' how creativity does not happen, he has been at pains to articulate this most mysterious of man's abilities. I will turn in a later section to a discussion of how such notions of creativity influence the writing of a novel; though most of Golding's comments on this subject have been to do

¹Critics could be forgiven for concluding, on the basis of the early fiction, that Golding's was a somewhat loveless universe. Gilbert Phelps, in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Modern Age* (p. 522), in a superficial but representative comment, finds in these novels "the relentless harping on the power of evil and the apparent hopelessness of the human situation." This kind of attitude was seemingly encouraged by Golding's regular insistence that "Good can look after itself. Evil is the problem" (*Books and Art*, March 1958, p. 16).

²*London Magazine*, May 1957, p. 45.

³*Talk*, p. 24.

with the creation of literature, he insists that creativity in some measure exists in all men, and, in all walks of life, laments the tendency of "that sort of critic - either through ignorance or jealousy - who tries to explain away the act of creativity."¹

The act of creativity happens at the visionary moment, transcending both the man and the moment but working through both in a way that is both revelatory and creative. However, in the last analysis, one's impression remains that Golding's concern with man is eschatological. He believes in God, and that man is made in the image of God.² As has been made clear already, this does not mean that he subscribes to a formal religious system - and indeed he laments the limitations, the tendency to close off aspects of human experience, that seem to be the product, often, of such a view.³ But there is something of God in all men, and it is with an analysis of that aspect of the human condition that Golding concludes his anatomy of man. Again, his comments have been marked by an increasing tentativeness, within a perspective in which the 'end things' have loomed very large. His most thorough-going fictional analysis of man and death occurs in *Pincher Martin*. Of his thinking behind that novel he remarked:

"If you're not a Christian and die, then if the universe is as the Christian sees it, you will still go either to Heaven or hell or purgatory. But your purgatory, or your heaven or your hell won't have the Christian attributes they'll be things that you make yourself."⁴

Thus, by the operation of the Miltonic principle "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" Golding conceives of man retaining a certain amount of free will even after death:

¹Quarto, November 1980, p. 9.

²This is stated with an unequivocal clarity in 'Belief and Creativity' (*A Moving Target*, p. 192) and in the discussion with John Haffenden (Quarto, November 1980, pp. 9-12).

³The reactions of Luther and Melanchthon to the ideas of Copernicus, discussed in *The Hot Gates*, p. 39, are a good illustration of Golding's opinion here.

⁴*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, p. 10.

"If you give Pincher free will, there is only one way in which you can get Pincher out of hell, that's by destroying him, because if you take his free will away, he's no longer Pincher. He's no longer made in God's image. So God is stuck with a paradox which He can resolve, presumably; I can't."¹

All that, however, was twenty years ago, and was, more to it, the analysis of a purely fictional hypothesis. Like Powys in old age, Golding has come to "hope there is no afterlife," since "if I have a scintillans Dei in me, it's so little like me that you might just as well say that, when I die, I disappear."² But of man now, here on this earth, Golding suggests, "I guess we are in hell."³ Yet this is not, of itself, a cause for despair; it only becomes one if creativity is denied, and Golding looks out, in the illumination offered by glimpses of vision, to a tentative redemption:

"To be in a world which is a hell, to be *of* that world and neither to believe in nor guess at anything *but* that world is not merely hell but the only possible damnation; the act of a man damning himself. It may be - I hope it is - redemption to guess and perhaps perceive that the universe, the hell which we see for all its beauty, vastness, majesty is only part of a whole which is quite unimaginable. I have said that the act of human creativity, a newness starting into life at the heart of confusion and turmoil seems a simple thing; I guess it is a signature scribbled in the human soul, sign that beyond the transient horrors and beauties of our hell there is a Good which is ultimate and absolute."⁴

III

*"Wiltshire has a particularly ancient and mysterious history, antiquity on a timescale to compete with Egypt."*⁵

In my earlier discussion of Powys' non-fiction, I observed Powys' intense attachment to the locally numinous, and his belief that specific

¹Talk, pp. 76-7.

²Quarto, November 1980, p. 11.

³A Moving Target, p. 201.

⁴A Moving Target, pp. 201-2.

⁵A Moving Target, pp. 4-5.

places were charged with the power of communication. Though Golding's universe is not so thoroughly animist as was Powys', it is nonetheless true that for Golding too there are certain localities that are rich in 'mana', and it is possible to show that this goes further than a generalised romantic faith in the communicativeness of the natural world. For Golding, as the quotation heading this section would imply, the areas of special interest are Wiltshire, where he has spent almost all his adult life, and Egypt (particularly the Nile delta), an examination of which reveals a great deal about how the 'real' world relates to Golding's mythologised construct.

Golding's enthusiasm as an amateur archaeologist (revealed in various places in the non-fiction, notably 'Digging for Pictures' and the 'travel' essays collected in *The Hot Gates* and *A Moving Target*) has exerted a strong influence on his assumption that the landscape has secrets to reveal to those who care to look:

"We all know the face of the earth to be a delicate palimpsest with our own history inscribed there. Our cloudy faith, since Tutankhamen . . . has been that enough devotion would decipher the palimpsest."¹

This touches on an important distinction between Powys and Golding: for Powys the natural world itself speaks, whereas Golding looks for evidence of human communication inherent in certain localities.² It is in this sense that places possess 'mana'. Of Olympia, for example, Golding says:

"The original primitive impulse was one of the strongest in the world. It took invasion by Germanic tribes, destitution, an earthquake, the advent of the Christian religion and archaeology to reduce the site to the jumble of stones the visitor might find there. If you linger, only at sunset may you find some reminder of the mana that once inhered, as the crowds depart, the cicadas fall silent and the fading light softens

¹The Spectator, 25/5/61, p. 768.

²This is not absolutely the case. In conversation with John Haffenden, discussing levels of awareness, he says: "I don't think a tree has an awareness, but I think that maybe a forest has some kind of glimmering, dreamlike awareness." (Quarto, November 1980, p. 11).

the crudity of the ruins by breathing a rose colour magically over the whole."¹

This might seem merely whimsical; but it is repeated eloquently of Delphi, Thermopylae and Stonehenge, for example, so that it comes to be seen as an essential part of the way Golding observes the landscape he is in.²

One might take, as a detailed example, the essay 'An Affection for Cathedrals'. In this piece too he believes, despite recognising the illogicality of it, that "we have a primitive belief that virtue, force, power - what the anthropologist might call mana - lie in the original stones and nowhere else."³

The essay goes on to analyse the sensations that have been accreted around Winchester and Salisbury cathedrals, and in so doing it makes plain the essential subjectivity of the response to the environment. Thus familiarity and years of contemplation make Salisbury rich in mana where Winchester is not.

What, then, is the experience that Golding has in these key places? In attempting an explanation of this, things become complex, since the examples he gives attempt to recreate the past imaginatively, as the very title 'Digging for Pictures' suggests. This is a subtle and personalised form of the 'off-campus history' Golding scorns. The tale in 'Digging for Pictures' of the discovery of the battered body of an old woman can scarcely be treated as evidence for the imaginative framework Golding weaves around it. It does communicate a very important message - that it is a wilful distortion to fabricate a view of the human past as any kind of Golden Age - but not much more. I would suggest that whatever theories Golding may have evolved about this subject, for him the elaborate game of

¹The Guardian, 29/1/76, p. 8.

²Thus: "Suddenly, the years and the reading fused with the thing. I was clinging to Greece herself. Obscurely, and in part, I understood what it had meant to Leonidas and by the double power of imagination and the touch of rock, I was certain of it." (The Hot Gates, p. 19) - and cf. the essays on 'Wiltshire' and 'Delphi' in A Moving Target.

³A Moving Target, p. 10.

participating in archaeological digs offers something very different. I would define it as a strange and very personal form of hypnosis; a discovery provides him with a peak experience, a moment of full and intuitive contact which is a revelation. It seems to require that same 'one-pointedness of the will' that prefaces the act of creation. Thus, of the incident at Thermopylae, Golding commented, "I stayed there, clinging to a rock until the fierce hardness of its surface close to my eye had become familiar."¹ In 'Digging for Pictures' he admits, "For me, there is a glossy darkness under the turf the land is aglow with every kind of picture."²

As I have observed, the two places which sound most evocatively for Golding are Wiltshire and the Nile delta. Wiltshire, the rural heartland of England, is as charged with elemental power as Powys' Dorset.

"If you examine a topographical map of England, you will see that the Southern part of the country is dominated by a huge starfish of high chalk Downs Where they meet, at the centre of the starfish, was a prehistoric metropolis; and the cathedral of that metropolis was Stonehenge. The whole of this area is sown thick with ancient peoples."³

That the whole county is one for which Golding has a deeply personal affection is amply illustrated in the essay 'Wiltshire'.⁴ And at the centre of Wiltshire is Salisbury, and, for Golding, its most eloquent feature, the cathedral spire. The unpublished preface to *The Spire*, which finally appeared in the essay 'A Moving Target', is a beautifully warm and loving evocation of how the spire affects all inhabitants of 'Barchester' with "a sort of spiritual squint".⁵ The influence of personal experience

¹The Hot Gates, p. 19. Likewise, struggling to come to terms with Egypt experienced in reality for the first time, he said, "I am seeing the outside of things when I want to see the inside. Do I know what I mean? There *must* be some virtue in a thing seen in its proper place. I will isolate myself in fierceness and concentration. I will see what is there." (*A Moving Target*, p. 70).

²The Hot Gates, pp. 62, 64.

³The Hot Gates, p. 61.

⁴A Moving Target, pp. 3-8.

⁵A Moving Target, pp. 164-6.

on the writing of **The Spire** thus becomes obvious; but I would suggest that the experience of living in a historically rich town shapes Greenfield in **Darkness Visible** also, as Chapter 6 demonstrates.

If Wiltshire acquired its levels of significance through actual physical experience, Egypt acquired it through years of mental, or rather imaginative, contemplation. In this sense the confrontation of two Egypts, seen from Golding's 'inside' and 'outside', as it were, reveals in yet another area the clash between 'knowing' and 'not knowing'. While Golding 'knew' Egypt (from his inside), it was a place of infinite mystery, but a mystery under his control; when he visited it for the first time (seeing it from his outside), and again on his recent Nile journey, the country became not just mysterious but infinitely multifarious. It offered yet another lesson that the world is more complex than any picture of that world could be, and the two Egyptian essays in **A Moving Target** form a fascinating diptych in this respect.

Egypt from Golding's inside dates from the age of seven, at the latest, when, as Golding has often recounted, he began to write a play about Ancient Egypt, but realised that he ought really to learn the language first.¹ When he was about to embark on the second trip to Egypt, in 1984, he recalled this attitude:

"My childhood's stance, then, was romantic though terrified, even a bit religious though pagan I could more readily believe in Ra, Isis and Osiris than in the Trinity. To me the contradictions of Egyptian belief were not implausible; or rather, since they were religious beliefs, contradictions were just what I had come to expect."²

The obscure familiarity of hieroglyphics and Egyptian tomb paintings, the 'timeless' stare emphasised by the formalised concentration on the eye in Ancient Egyptian art, the hours of brooding and imaginative reconstruction in museums and galleries - all these flourished in Golding's imagination,

¹This is recalled in **The Literary Review**, November 1981, p. 1, for example.

²**An Egyptian Journal**, p. 10.

culminating in the mysterious episode with the mummy which is the central feature of 'Egypt from My Inside', to which I will return at the end of this chapter. Thus, at the heart of this Egypt is what might be called a poetically-generated mystery: this is what compels Golding as he looks at "the eye of Osiris until that impersonal stare has made me feel as still and remote as a star."¹

As Golding recounted in 'Egypt from My Outside', this country remained purely mental territory, and as such it conferred a kind of solace: "The supposed immobility of Ancient Egypt stood over against the change which is the experience of daily life."² Though on one level Golding knew it to be illogical, it was this naive imagined Egypt which he took with him on his first trip to the country in 1976. The shock was immediate and comprehensive: time and again Golding recounts how imagined stillness was crushed by real confusion, just as the past was by the present, and the mystery was by the invasion of guided tours round plumbed and scarified and neon-lit tombs. Thus:

"We touched the great pyramid with outstretched fingers. It seemed the natural thing to do. It seemed an instinct - *I am touching the Great Pyramid.*"³

But entry into this sacred place of Golding's imagination brings no contact with the 'mana' of the place: the mystery has disappeared. An *Egyptian Journal* reveals Golding persisting in his naivete, as when he strives "to exercise that geological imagination" in contemplating the Nile valley,

"to see through the surface, to turn back, as it were, successive blankets on a bed of rock and to realize vividly - poetically - that this was a place like any other, welded into the total nature of the planet and an expression of it."⁴

We are back in the world of 'Digging for Pictures'; but modern Egypt

¹The Hot Gates, p. 74.

²An Egyptian Journal, p. 9.

³A Moving Target, p. 61.

⁴An Egyptian Journal, pp. 20-1.

stubbornly refused to conform. Instead there was baffled fear (a first impression of "deceit, lying, broken promises, cheating, indifference and an atmosphere which veered hour by hour from sloth to hysteria") and then baffled diffidence ("The language of experience in a strange country is every bit as enigmatic as tomb paintings What relevance, I thought, have we to them, or they to our purpose?")¹

An *Egyptian Journal* is full of this kind of response, yet it seems that the lessons were slow to filter through until at last knowledge dawned:

"I had resisted the realization for months but had now to accept that whatever I wrote would not be about Egypt, it would be about me, or if you like, us middleclass English from a peaceful bit of England, wandering more or less at will through infinite complexity There were so many Egypts in me, none of them conflicting but none of them connected."²

This kind of experience is of a piece with other aspects of the state of 'not knowing', which have given Golding's recent fiction its greater tentativeness. In the final analysis, place is important to Golding, but largely because, as Wales was for Powys, it is a landscape of the mind. The difference between the two writers is essentially this: that where Powys dug himself deeper and deeper into fantasy, where landscape could continue to be viewed 'from his inside', Golding has striven to juxtapose internal and external landscape, to make connections between them. If the end result has been inconsistent and untidy, it does seem rather more true to life.

IV

*"I think that the pyramidal structure of English society is present, and my awareness of it is indelibly printed in me, in my psyche, not merely in my intellect but very much in my emotional, almost my physical being."*³

¹A *Moving Target*, pp. 58, 74-5.

²An *Egyptian Journal*, p. 200.

³The *Guardian*, 11/10/80, p. 12.

Until the publication of **The Pyramid** it would have seemed illogical to regard Golding as in any sense a social novelist. Yet the novels published from **The Pyramid** onwards have revealed what has also become steadily more apparent in the non-fiction - that Golding is profoundly conscious of social pressures and that the relationship between the individual and society is more complex and ambiguous than he had hitherto supposed.

On one level the old 'knowing/not knowing' crisis makes itself apparent here as elsewhere in Golding's thinking, and the erratic but nonetheless evident progression in his fiction from treating man in isolation, "sub specie aeternitatis"¹ to viewing him as an integrated social animal is proof of a change of approach. The earlier, rather naive view was of society as a collection of individuals; this arose as a reaction against the rationalist faith in social progress which Golding espoused before the war:

"Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you could remove all social ills by a reorganisation of society."²

The early novels, therefore, appear to be based on the assumption that man's behaviour is his own, individual responsibility. But the repeated probings of critics, on the implications of **Lord of the Flies**, led Golding to see, quite sensibly, that society is more than the individuals who comprise it; it takes on an autonomous life of its own, and shapes individual behaviour to an extent. Thus Golding came to confess, in a 'textbook' phrase, that the situation was vastly more complex than might be guessed from his naive hope that "**Lord of the Flies** was an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of the individual." Instead, Golding began, tentatively, to recognise the

¹London Magazine, May 1957, p. 45.

²The Hot Gates, p. 86.

positive values of society:

"We don't even get opportunities to sin or virtuize in a great way. We are pretty well balanced between the two. It's this complicated social system again, because, on the whole, the fall off the straight and narrow tends to be a fall into something worse than one would be otherwise. So that society, taken whole, is a good thing."¹

Yet even this is no longer a satisfactory explanation. For if social conventions keep the original sin in man in check, they also repress and suffocate, and Golding the critic of contemporary society finds his prompting here. As for Lawrence, the major rebellion is against the stifling nature of encroaching civilisation. Lawrence was horrified by the disruptive power of mechanical industry (particularly, and obviously, in the mines) which was separating man from the natural rhythms of the environment and turning him into a strange almost sub-human creature. It marked the beginning of the disintegration of the organic way of life celebrated in the early parts of *The Rainbow*. For Golding the battle has moved on: social man has been tamed by the suffocating system, as *The Pyramid* indicates (by the very name 'Stilbourne', and the recognition that, for example, the sky is no longer seen as a setting for boundless human aspiration but as a 'roof'), and in this much, perhaps everything, that was worth having has been lost. *Darkness Visible* takes one a stage further with its poignant (almost Powysian) lament against the invasion of stillness and peace by the constant bombardment of aeroplanes and juggernauts and transistor radios.

But this is perhaps, at its root, a gut feeling of anti-modernism rather than an attack on society as such. It is in his understanding of all societies, modern or not, that Golding reveals a true visionary characteristic: he sees that society is markedly stratified, the layers kept apart by the iniquitous operation of the class system. It is here

that his favourite phrase about "the social pyramid", with its connotations not just of a hierarchical structure but of death, is located.²

Why, then, is Golding so intensely class-conscious? He has talked of the "ghastly" social structure that controlled the behaviour of his family and those around them in his childhood in Marlborough. His father taught at the local grammar school, opposite which was "this very famous, or middling famous public school" which "made every social interface red-hot by pressure from above". He concludes, "It was about as stratified a society as you could well find anywhere in the country", and confesses, "I am enraged by it and I am unable to escape it entirely It's fossilised in me."³ I find that final comment vividly illuminating: it shows a man fighting unsuccessfully against the rigidities of a system, which is felt to be iniquitous but which cannot be avoided. It is not surprising, I think, that *Rites of Passage* or *The Pyramid* are so attuned to social nuance while abhorring the sort of society that could create and destroy a Colley or an Evie Babbacombe.

¹Talk, pp. 41, 43.

²That this phrase is an integral part of Golding's 'mental furniture' is apparent not just in a quotation like the one heading this section of the chapter, or in the title of a novel like *The Pyramid*. There are uncomplimentary references too in 'Prospect of Eton' (a book review in *The Spectator*, 25/11/60, pp. 856-7), and in discussion of *Rites of Passage*: of its principal characters, Talbot and Colley, he says, "I would reduce their differences to the question of their respective positions on what I've come to think of as the social pyramid." (*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 9).

³Quotations from *The Guardian*, 11/10/80, p. 12.

Golding, then, is intensely conscious of the 'social interface'; even at lighthearted moments it is part of his way of seeing.¹ And it accounts, I think, for the part shame plays in the novels - not just, though most obviously, in *Rites of Passage* - a shame which is present too in the autobiographical fragment 'The Ladder and the Tree':

"In the dreadful English scheme of things at that time, a scheme which so accepted social snobbery as to elevate it to an instinct, we had our subtle place. Those unbelievable gradations ensured that though my parents could not afford to send my brother and me to a public school, we should nevertheless go to a grammar school. Moreover we must not go first to an elementary school but to a dame school where the children were nicer though the education was not so good. In fact, like everybody except the very high and the very low in those days, we walked a social tightrope, could not mix with the riotous children who made such a noise and played such wonderful games on the green."²

Thus, Golding's upbringing appears to have given him a view of society hedged around by boundaries, the crossing of which leads, at the very least to embarrassment.³ It is little wonder that his social vision is so despairing, and that it is only the rare saint whose personal example, as I will show, keeps the clock of communal human expectation wound up.

¹Consider for example, this moment of realization in Cairo: "We have, I said to myself, and then out loud to the others in a suitable jargon, 'we have identified an interface'. How about that for splendour of language, precision, penetration, abstraction and objectivity? We stood on the street corner, laughing at the ingenuity and particularity of words which by happenstance can illuminate a situation and at the same time ensure it is given the precise degree of importance of which it is worthy. We were so happy with our interface!" (*An Egyptian Journal*, p. 173). For other examples, note the lugubrious humour of 'A Touch of Insomnia' (*The Hot Gates*, pp. 135-9).

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 168.

³This is present even in the latest non-fiction. It is partly shyness but also a sense of social difference that stops him from mingling with the crew, or even making eye-contact with them often, in *An Egyptian Journal*. In the same book he recounts feeling "bogus and embarrassed" in the presence of 'real' poor people (p. 62).

"I practise a craft I do not understand and cannot describe."¹

Given the superficial radical differences between the novels of Powys and Golding, one would expect their 'theories of the novel', their understanding of the craft of writing, to be at odds with each other. And, to an extent, their comments in the non-fiction on such subjects appear to support such a view. Josipovici, reviewing *A Moving Target*, made the following comment:

"If in his essays Golding often sounds like the best of the English individualists, such as . . . John Cowper Powys, he is a better novelist than any of them. And he is a better novelist because he takes his vision seriously enough to want to find precisely the right means of conveying his insights."²

Yet the paradox, in all this, is that Golding's serious consideration of the art of the novel has led him to a tentativeness of judgement that goes far beyond Powys' self-effacing, freewheeling, mediumistic approach whilst at the same time producing fictions which are demonstrably more consciously crafted than even the most coherent of Powys' novels, *Wolf Solent*. And beneath this paradox is another more fundamental to this thesis, namely that Powys and Golding use radically dissimilar methods to achieve a recognisably similar end, the communication of the visionary moment. Nevertheless, the temperamental differences of the men are what come across most powerfully from a study of their comments on writing: Powys' haphazard hit-or-miss approach is replaced by Golding's insistent straining to arrive at the moment at which imaginative vision takes over and flourishes beyond the conscious craftsman's control.

Golding has striven on numerous occasions to define the function of literature, though often ending with the sort of helplessness of the

¹*A Moving Target*, p. 195.

²*Times Literary Supplement*, 23/7/82, p. 785.

quotation heading this section, or this kind of vague generalisation, contemplating "the spectrum of literacy that emerges from the sands of Egypt": "to discover in oneself a new respect for literature and a new evaluation of its purpose as life-proclaiming and life-enhancing."¹

Why write at all? Rejecting the slickness of Lawrence's remark that one sheds one's sickness in books, Golding nevertheless believes:

"There is an objectivising factor in writing a book which is not based on this self-cure idea, but there is certainly self-help, self-heal, perhaps even self-forgiveness."²

But this cannot be all, any more than the fiction which a writer produces can be reductively tied to one particular aspect of the writer's character. Sounding very like Lawrence, Golding claims that

"A book is produced by the whole man, who is more complicated than any other single object in the universe and its motivation is therefore just as mysterious and ineluctable."³

Alongside this view of writing as the expression of deep personal qualities, Golding evidently has a place for writing as "finding a way to approach the big issues of humanity".⁴ Here, though Golding has tempered the strident tone of comments dating from the time of the early novels, there remains an enduring preoccupation with the exploration of 'the human condition', with the writer as physician, and perhaps, as I will show, with the writer as healer.⁵

¹An *Egyptian Journal*, p. 181.

²Quarto, November 1980, p. 11. Similar remarks can be found dotted about Golding's written musings on the subject: on writing as therapy (*An Egyptian Journal*, p. 188), and on assuaging and solacing the need to write by keeping a journal (*A Moving Target*, p. 58), for example.

³Quarto, November 1980, p. 11. It is in this context, I think, that Golding's frequent assertion that the novelist writes the books that he can, not the books that he should, and his comments on the relationship between writing and personal experience, should be placed. See *Talk*, pp. 15-21, for example.

⁴Quarto, November 1980, p. 11.

⁵This remark is a typical illustration of the former proposition: "The novelist does not limit himself to reporting facts, but diagnoses them, and his vocation has the same value as that of the doctor." (*New Left Review*, January/February 1965, pp. 34-5).

Golding has published remarkably little literary criticism as such, which might be interpreted as self-restraint, given the evident antagonism he feels towards critics of his own work. There are passing comments on the preferences of childhood - often seemingly profoundly characteristic ones like the love for the "mystery" of Rider Haggard over the "logic of deduction" of Conan Doyle¹ - but most other comments are perhaps best described as being in a gentlemanly 'belletristic' vein. The most substantial remarks come in the lecture-essay 'Rough Magic', which has a great deal to say, 'by implication, about how Golding sees the craft of writing. His praise is reserved for writers who demonstrate their skill in holding a reader, whether by the firm grip of Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* or the rather limp hand of Henry James' *The Ambassadors*. But highest praise - and characteristically, of an author whose work drew virtually no comment from Powys - is reserved for Jane Austen, "the novelist's novelist". His reasons may seem, on the surface, a little naive ("for all her ambiguity, objectivity, instability, she brings us little by little to a great friendship for (her characters) and a need to know what will happen to them"²) but beneath them is a respect for unobtrusive craftsmanship, close physical observation, authorial detachment and yet compassion. They appear to be qualities that Golding would like to share.

These aspects of the novelist's art, so apparently simple, have come to seem more elusive as Golding has assessed what is involved in the light of over three decades of practising the craft, and it is fair to say that it was not until *Pincher Martin* had been published that he began to realise to the full the complexities involved in novel-writing. His first novels were not, of course, particularly naive; rather they appeared to be offered without any consciousness of their limitations. *Lord of the Flies*,

¹An Egyptian Journal, p. 9.

²A Moving Target, p. 136.

for example, strikes a marvellously self-assured note, yet the whole is somehow too crystalline, too "dry" (in the sense used by Iris Murdoch).¹ This sounds like carping at perfection, but Golding came to see that the early novels were too tidy, too exquisitely formed, too concerned with the verification of a theorem to 'live'.²

Instead, Golding has come increasingly to value the sort of attitude to art which he put into the mouth of Sammy Mountjoy: "Art is partly communication but only partly. The rest is discovery."³ Discovery here is pre-eminently self-discovery. Thus, knowing becomes not knowing; communication gives way to the discovery of the immediacy of inexplicable living.⁴

While Golding knew, ideas were more important than people; when he began not to know, people assumed a complex inexplicability. In the early novels homo fictus is delineated with startling clarity, but his relation to homo sapiens is oblique. The motivation here is an idea, a concept, and the result is a pattern. By 1965 he confessed:

"I think it is probably true that I'm more interested in ideas than people If you are dependent upon, if your motivation in a sense *is*, an idea, then it can't be a character. And I think this is a bad thing."⁵

¹See 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch' (*Encounter*, January 1961, pp. 16-20).

²In 'A Moving Target' Golding recounted the initial motivation behind *Lord of the Flies*: "I said to my wife, 'Wouldn't it be a good idea if I wrote a story about boys on an island and let them behave the way they really would?'" The rueful comment of hindsight is revealing: "A story about boys, about people who behave as they really would! What sheer *hubris*! What an assumption of the divine right of authors!" (*A Moving Target*, p. 163).

³*Free Fall*, p. 102.

⁴There are reminiscences here of Lawrence, trying to make his life into art, yet such art as still retains life: "Any man of real individuality tries to know and to understand what is happening, even to himself, as he goes along. This struggle for verbal consciousness should not be left out in art. It is a very great part of life. It is not superimposition of a theory. It is the passionate struggle into conscious being." (From the American preface to *Women in Love*. Quoted in ed. Josipovici, *The Modern English Novel*, p. 110.)

⁵*Talk*, p. 8.

This, I feel, is more than a belated realisation that within each individual is 'a central opacity'; after all, the "dark centre" occurs even in **Pincher Martin**. Rather it is an urge to rebel against patterning of all kinds.¹

Golding's statements of intent concerning **Pincher Martin** and **Free Fall** demonstrate a revolution in vision in this respect, as is clear from the juxtaposition of the following quotations:

"I would have said that I fell over backwards making that novel (**Pincher Martin**) explicit. I said to myself, '.... I'm going to write it so vividly and accurately and with such an exact programme that nobody can possibly mistake exactly what I mean.'²

"The difference between being alive and being an inorganic substance is just this proliferation of experience, this absence of pattern This time (in **Free Fall**) I want to show the patternlessness of life before we impose our patterns on it."³

However, the writing of **Free Fall** proved that this was not only untrue but impossible. The realisation that patterns were not 'given' turned communication into quest; now the novel had to discover pattern, not simply reveal it (as in **Pincher Martin**) or reveal that the author didn't know where to find it (as in **Free Fall**). In this sense, **The Spire** exemplifies the triumph of discovery.

Golding sees this change of tack as a "letting go" on the author's part, and it has ramifications in two main areas of his work. One relates to how other readers interpret the novels. In conversation with Frank Kermode in 1959 he denied, by way of an excessive caricature, the perfectly reasonable claim that the novelist does not have a monopoly on potential interpretations of his work:

¹Once more, there are echoes of Lawrence: "In the novel, the characters can do nothing but *live*. If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead." ('Why the Novel Matters', quoted in ed. Lodge, *20th Century Literary Criticism*, p. 135).

²*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, p. 10.

³*Books and Art*, March 1958, p. 15.

"This business of the artist as a sort of starry-eyed inspired creature, dancing along, with his feet two or three feet above the surface of the earth, not really knowing what sort of prints he's leaving behind him, is nothing like the truth."¹

At the time he preferred the word "craftsman" to "artist" and described the creative process as being "in complete control"² of one's material. But by 1962, Golding was endorsing the Lawrentian dictum: "Never trust the artist; trust the tale":

"I no longer believe that the author has a kind of patria potestas over his brain children. Once they are printed, they have reached their majority."³

This doesn't seem to have altogether freed Golding from a sense of irritation and frustration with critics of his own work. While it is not necessary to see the grotesque progress of author and critic in *The Paper Men* as a direct personal comment, it does seem to be cathartic, judging by comments scattered throughout *A Moving Target*. 'A Moving Target', 'Utopias and Antiutopias' and 'Belief and Creativity' all lament what Golding sees as a critical over-simplification of his work.⁴ From personal experience, I have to agree with Golding when he concludes: "The books that have been written about my books have made a statue of me, fixed in one not very decorative gesticulation, a po-faced image too earnest to live with."⁵ And yet, that glimmering realisation that his books are public property, that "provided he is being bought by people, he has no right to complain at all"⁶ when his book is treated as a sort of joint-stock company, is yet

¹Books and Bookmen, October 1959, p. 9.

²Quoted in *Talk*, p. 53. There is a sense in which this workmanlike approach has not been abandoned. There is still, in writing, "much routine and some dull daily stuff on the level of carpentry" (*A Moving Target*, p. 125) - and cf. comments in this vein in *Quarto*, November 1980, p. 10.

³*The Hot Gates*, p. 100. This view was restated when, in 1963, in his own introduction to *The Brass Butterfly*, he advised: "Read the book first and be so interested that you turn back to the introduction to see what the author thought he was up to." (*The Brass Butterfly*, Faber Educational Edition, p. 1)

⁴Look, for example, at the opening paragraphs of 'Utopias and Antiutopias' (*A Moving Target*, pp. 171-2), or the appeal in 'Belief and Creativity' against "literary mummification" (*A Moving Target*, pp. 185-6).

⁵*A Moving Target*, p. 169.

⁶*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 10.

one more area in which Golding has replaced authorial certainty with tentative ambiguity.

But there is another, more significant sense in which Golding began 'letting go' of his novels: he was led to relax his hold on the literary model which had been the major influence on the structure of his work, Greek tragedy. An omniscient Golding could confidently construct his tragic heroes and choreograph their demise, but to Biles he confessed to wondering

"if I haven't been too much concerned with the tragic hero and whether this isn't one of the reasons why my books lack a number of dimensions of reality."¹

The consequence was not a total renunciation - even in 1980 he observed that "if you examine most of my novels you'll find they fulfil the Aristotelian canons of tragedy"² - but a desire to be more inclusive.

This involves being more tentative: Golding's respect for Jane Austen is in part based upon the 'natural' process of change that her characters undergo. Talking of *Rites of Passage* - in this I think one could say without incongruity, his most Austen-like novel - he has said,

"It did seem to be a valid picture of the way a person develops. Talbot's learned certain things, but not other things the onlooker feels he should have learned - just as we haven't in our lives."³

It is essential therefore that the author does not explain too much: again of *Rites of Passage*, Golding reflected:

¹Talk, p. 20. The favourite example among critics who endorse this opinion is *Pincher Martin*, and it is indeed true that 'reality' is not particularly relevant to that novel. In terms of not 'letting go', but instead of controlling his material, this is the most densely crafted of Golding's novels, an explicit morality play (see Golding's comments in *John O'London's*, 28/1/60, p. 7). In the terms of my discussion - communication and discovery - the following quotation is particularly illuminating: "*Pincher Martin* is a book in which, once you start with a basic premise, there is really nothing which is irrelevant, and the difficulty becomes one of choice - or of one's selection if you want - not one of discovery". (*Talk*, p. 69)

²Quarto, November 1980, p. 11.

³Quarto, November 1980, p. 9.

"The more you look at the characters, the more you'll find that none of them are entirely explicable. If a novelist makes an entirely explicable character, then his story drops dead."¹

(This is not the death knell of **Pincher Martin**, I would insist - it is a warning about how not to read the book, which should surely be approached as an immense prose-poem rather than as a novel, in the 'realistic' sense.) Looking back at **Lord of the Flies**, Golding came to realise that if he had 'let go' where instead he strove to control the meaning and force of the book, the range of the novel would have been far greater, and in this sense it was not until the writing of **The Spire** that Golding produced a novel in the conscious awareness that there were several levels of available interpretation.²

Returning to **Lord of the Flies**, Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes are surely right in regarding the 'conversation' scene between Simon and the pig's head as such a point of growth or authorial release. While accepting it as a weakness in terms of the controlled world of the fable, Golding, by 1962, certainly saw this assumption of control by the artistic imagination as a step forward in technique. At that point of imaginative contact, when the writer and his created world become one, there is, for the author, both communication and discovery. In 'Fable' Golding defined this by the rather prosaic analogy of drilling a hole through armour plate, which is presumably intended to get across the sensation of concentration and growth. At that point, Golding talked about the fictional world "shoving the real world on one side"³ which again reveals a great deal about the change in his relationship to his work. Elsewhere he has described the writing of **Lord of the Flies** as "tracing over a pattern that already existed",⁴ but the conversation scene, as Golding ruefully admits, bursts

¹Quarto, November 1980, p. 9.

²See his discussion on this matter with John Haffenden in **Quarto**, November 1980, p. 10.

³**The Hot Gates**, p. 97.

⁴See the essay 'Fable' in **The Hot Gates**, pp. 85-101.

through the armour plating, blossoming out into a whole new imaginative universe.

Golding's discussion of the visionary moments themselves will be the subject of the final section of this chapter, but there are aspects of such flashes of perception that contribute to this discussion of Golding's view of the author's role. He once observed that "The novelist is a displaced person, torn between two ways of expression You might say I write prose because I can't write poetry."¹ This is revealing - as though for Golding poetry was more highly charged, more visionary almost, than prose. Technical discussion of visionary moments in his novels shades into images of poetry, or of music. The language of music evidently means a great deal to Golding, and the conclusion of the essay 'Rough Magic' evokes this language as a hint towards the explanation of which words are incapable:

"For all the complexity of literature there is a single focus in literature, a point of the blazing human will. This is where definition and explanation break down. We must call on a higher language. The strength, profundity, truth of a novel lies not in a plausible likeness or rearrangement of the phenomenal world but in a fitness with itself like the dissonances and consonances of harmony. Insight, intuition. We are at a height - or a depth - where the questions are not to be answered in words."

Instead, as for Shakespeare, there is in the end "music, a solemn air, nothing but music".² This illuminates Golding's understanding not only of the novel's function but of its structure. In a sense it asserts the impossibility of language (criticism too!) ever being able to explain what is beyond words - and this is indeed the claim *Darkness Visible* makes, as I hope to show in the next chapter. But it also shows that visionary moments can only be alluded to by analogy, by a metaphor that can never entirely become the thing that is being described, but always retains the,

¹College English, March 1965, p. 480.

²A Moving Target, p. 146.

as it were, polluting trace of mere comparison.

Golding made his most profound attempt at describing what might truly be said to be beyond description in the address 'Belief and Creativity', when he said of the novelist's task,

"The heart of our experience is not unlike that of the poet at his height. There is a mystery about both trades - a mystery in every sense of that ancient word."¹

What arrives at this moment is "absolute conviction, a declaration to be held in the face of all the world." Unlike the lyric poet, though, the novelist must arrive at such moments via the workaday carpentry of the trade, since the novel is full of that apparently patternless contingency which was the keynote of *Free Fall*. Yet through this "he must come not to the crystal of a verse but to the extended replica, map, chart, simulacrum of an abundance which is naturally indescribable." Golding goes on to describe one such "moment":

"There is exultation but there is also fear, sometimes a kind of terror, since the method of expression is not a few sentences but pages of them, not stanzas but incidents, an incident, a whole happening in the world that has flared up inside him so that he knows this is it, this is what the book is about, this is what he is for."

Inevitably this moment can only be approached via metaphor, and it affords an illuminating comparison with Powys. Thus far Golding has seemed to be advocating the Powysian inspirational method of writing at full stretch, with the author as medium. But, remembering Josipovici's comment quoted earlier, about Golding taking his vision more seriously, there is a controlling 'voice', which, if it does not manipulate creation itself, at least arranges the expression of it:

"Somewhere - shall we say metaphorically? - somewhere in the shadows at the edge of the area of consciousness stands a creature, an assessor, a judge, a broken off fragment of the total personality who surveys the interior scene with a desperate calm and is aware how he wishes it to proceed. He is

¹This and the following quotations are from a *Moving Target*, pp. 192-7.

all the time controlling things, admonishing them. He is a divided creature."

This sounds like the selection process which forged **Pincher Martin**, but Golding does not stop there, but waits for the mystery to appear:

"Then it may be, if he has - what? Luck? Grace? Lightning? the new thing appears from nowhere. We will stick to the spacial metaphor that I have used because here it is at the very centre. The new thing appears from a point in the area of his awareness, from a position without magnitude, which of course is quite impossible. Yet this is the occasional operation of creativity."

The conclusion carries the conviction of personal experience:

"The writer watches the greatest mystery of all. It is the moment of most vital awareness, the moment of most passionate and *unsupported* conviction. It shines or cries. There is the writer, trying to grab it as it passes, as it emerges, impossibly and heads to be gone. It is that twist of behaviour, that phrase, sentence, paragraph, that happening on which the writer would bet his whole fortune, stake his whole life as a *true* thing. Like God, he looks on his creation and knows what he has done."

I have quoted at such extreme length from this essay not only because it is appropriate to my argument but because it strikes me as one of the most vivid and illuminating descriptions of the visionary moment coming to fictional life that I have ever read. For all his protestations of inarticulate fumbling with words that don't fit the case, this is surely the equivalent of Powys' "apex-thought", and it is to this that Golding's art comes at its finest, as it does in **Darkness Visible**, when he 'lets go' of his fiction and at the same time watches vigilantly to catch a glimpse of the evanescent mystery of creation.

All this may make it seem that the art of writing a novel is a rarified, mystical and private experience. However, though its creation may have its moments of exaltation, its function, in its designs on the reader, extracts from Golding a much bluffer language. For the reader, the shock of discovery is all-important: "I want people to see things my way

.... so I don't simply describe something, I lead the reader round to discovering it anew."¹ Paradoxically the reader is obliged to make the greatest discoveries in those novels where Golding's authorial control is at its tightest - in discovering the fate of Liku in *The Inheritors*, for example.

Golding appears simultaneously to scorn and to show great respect for his reader in his discussions of his craft. On one level, there is the need to deceive the reader, to string him along in partial awareness in order, in the end, to communicate more powerfully:

"This is the responsibility of his position: to say, 'I *must* fool him this long, because at the end of it I'm going to hit him for six; you see, I'm really going to hit him hard there.' Because he needs to be hit hard there."²

It is this that is at the heart of accusations of 'gimmickery' which still hang over Golding's novels,³ where the sudden revelation of information (notoriously in *Pincher Martin*) or switch of point of view (in *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, for example) offends those readers and critics who do not like to be led by the nose along one route in order to be forcibly struck by the understanding that all is not as they had assumed it was. Of late Golding may have accomplished this more genially - in the dual perspective of *Rites of Passage* - but the technique is the same. The consequence, Golding hopes, is a sudden burst of revelation, of new understanding springing up miraculously as he himself found as a child struggling with *The Odyssey* in the original Greek.⁴

Though in this sense the reader is manipulated - for his own good,

¹*Books and Art*, March 1958, p. 16. This is a rather prosaic defence of Conrad's famous exhortation to make you see. Golding would certainly endorse the rider which Conrad attaches to this: "You shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm - all you demand - and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask." ('Preface' to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, p.13.)

²*Talk*, p. 67.

³To be fair, the description was initially his own (in *Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, p. 10).

⁴*A Moving Target*, pp. 92-3.

Golding would claim - nevertheless the reader's complicity is essential, and it is this that lies behind Golding's thought that "a reader is someone who is magical."¹ Where the dramatist sees his ideas given form and texture in production, and his audience can simply observe the result, the novelist must accomplish everything within the reader's head. In this sense, the reader is the novelist's accomplice in the act of conjuring, and, as Golding ruefully recognises in 'Rough Magic', the reader has at least some control, since if he chooses to put the book down, walk away and never come back, the novelist has lost.

In the last analysis, though, Golding's view of his craft is now frankly undogmatic. The debates about myth, fable and signs, which were current in early Golding criticism and in his own comments of the late 1950s and early 1960s, seem less relevant now, given the desire to include the messily contingent in the novels that have followed *The Pyramid*.² Golding sees himself no longer as a fabulist, or a myth-maker, or a dialectician or a rhetor, but simply as a storyteller.³ Moreover, like many other aspects of life, storytelling is infinitely mysterious, beyond all but the most unsophisticated of bluff generalisations. Thus, "Have one hand holding your pen and the other firmly on the nape of the reader's neck Once you have got him, never let him go"; next "the novelist's characters must be seen to undergo a change"; next, "change must be carried. Change is event"; next, bend or break rules in order to "keep us

¹Talk, p.68.

²For this reason I have neglected completely any discussion of this topic. Those interested in it should read the opening chapter of Virginia Tiger's *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*, which usefully summarises the (then) existing material. Golding's comments in *A Moving Target* and the last three novels make the matter far less vital than it might once have appeared.

³See *A Moving Target* (pp. 158-9, 202, for example); as he disarmingly notes in *An Egyptian Journal*, "The trouble with a storyteller is that he can't even grieve without watching himself grieving. Why expect truth from such a creature?" (p. 135)

in suspense and ignorance for our own good"; and finally, write with "a passionate insight" which "defies analysis"!¹

Of course, this will not entirely do, but it is interesting to consider why Golding projects such an image. In part, I think it is to avoid the appearance of becoming 'sageified'. In part, too, it is a typically English self-deprecating amateurism, a reaction against overt conceptualisation by an emphasis on pragmatism. But in the end, perhaps somewhere under all the disclaimers is a note of truth: Golding simply does not know why fiction works, why creativity blossoms under some circumstances and not others, why he is read.² Communication, let alone discovery, is enough of a struggle: "Men are prisoners of their metaphors".³ The word that surfaces most often in Golding's discussion about art is 'mystery', and perhaps the most appropriate last word on the subject can be drawn from Golding's response to Ancient Egyptian art, which affects him personally, in a profound and finally inarticulate way:

"Their great art I cannot understand, only wonder at a wordless communication. It is not merely the size, the weight, the skill, the integrity. It is the ponderous moving forward on one line which is nonetheless a floating motionlessness. It is the vision. Beyond the reach of the dull method, of statistical investigation, it is the thumbprint of a mystery."⁴

VI

*"I would call myself a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist."*⁵

At the heart of Powys' 'world-view' is personality. This does not

¹These quotations are from *A Moving Target*, pp. 131-143.

²An illuminating comment, in response to an interviewer's probing about the relationship between writer, reader and text, on the subject of *Rites of Passage*: "I simply am aboard a ship of the line at that period with these people, and if I have described them clearly it is because I see them clearly, and I hear their speech." (*The Guardian*, 11/10/80, p. 12)

³*A Moving Target*, p. 82.

⁴*The Hot Gates*, p. 81.

⁵*A Moving Target*, p. 201

appear to be true for Golding, but there are glimpses of a view of the universe that tend this way. In the review 'Gaia Lives, OK?' there is the following playful comment on the earth's consciousness:

"If we ourselves experience a spark of awareness as we cook puddings in our skulls what are we to make of auroras or tropical storms? Dare we guess at the mind that may be staring out at us from the unimaginable violence of the sun; and so on out to the glitter of the farthest star?"

The piece is rounded off with an image which poetically intuitively personality to the earth in language rich in anthroposophical overtones:

"Surely, eyes more capable than ours of receiving the range of universal radiation may well see her, this creature of argent and azure, to have robes of green and gold streamed a million miles from her by the solar wind as she dances round Helios in the joy of light."¹

What is to be made of this sort of thing? Either it is merely fanciful, or there is here a declaration of faith about the nature of the universe that, while it does not attribute personality to everything (with the half-creating, half-perceiving properties of the constituents of Powys' vision), does at least relegate to a subordinate place man's arrogant egocentricity, in assuming that he is the measure of everything.² Indeed, though he has not Powys' certitude when it comes to the existence not just of one universe but of 'multiverses', there are moments when the glimmerings of a faith in such things becomes apparent:

"It would deny the nature of our own creativity, let alone the infinitude of God's creativity, if there were no more than one universe, one hell. There must be an infinite number of them, parallel, perhaps interpenetrating, some ugly, some beautiful, some sad, joyous - most, surely - though this may be the limitation of my own imagination - somewhat like our own, a mixture of the lot and all restless, all sustained by the creatures that inhabit them"³

I am wary of building too substantially on isolated remarks like these,

¹A Moving Target, p. 86.

²There are occasional fleeting remarks that sound extraordinarily Powysian in this context, such as the following: "I don't think a tree has an awareness, but I think maybe a forest has some kind of glimmering, dreamlike awareness." (Quarto, November 1980, p. 11).

³A Moving Target, p. 201.

because it is not the sort of thing Golding often comes out with, but there is some indication here of that visionary speculation that informs Powys' writing on the subject.

One significant idea to come out of the preceding quotation is that this universe we inhabit is a confused and broken mixture of the sad and the joyous, the ugly and the beautiful. This shows that Golding no longer regards the world around him as a 'whole' place, unified. Yet it is important to Golding, as to Powys, to propose the earlier existence of a state of awareness that was so unified. In part, this is simply another version of Yeats' Byzantium, Lawrence's Etruscan places, Eliot's pre-seventeenth century unified sensibility.¹ Golding too has his version of wholeness from the past - the world of Ancient Egypt - but he is wise enough to appreciate that there is probably little literal truth in the imaginative picture that he creates. The essay 'Copernicus' describes the Egyptian view of certain natural phenomena that, in our dissociated awareness, would have no causal link. But, for the Ancient Egyptian,

"there was one thing you would never think, that the position of the star and the rise of the Nile were coincidental. It couldn't be coincidence, not if you felt the unity of things, the overriding human necessity of finding a link between separate phenomena."²

This "overriding human necessity" finds its most profound expression in uniting life and death. The Kings of Egypt, implacable and serene in their death masks, communicate not only to Sammy Mountjoy but to his maker, bringing life and death together tangibly. 'The Scorpion God'

¹Eliot, in 'The Metaphysical Poets', for example, claims that in that period "a mechanism of sensibility could devour any kind of experience", but the consequence of the "dissociation of sensibility" is that "the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary". (See Kermode, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, p. 64). Lawrence, unifying traditional Christian imagery of the fall with Golding's literary speculations in *The Inheritors*, observed that "at a certain point in his evolution, man became cognitively conscious: he bit the apple: he began to know. Up till that time, his consciousness flowed unaware, as in the animals. Suddenly his consciousness split." (*Phoenix*, p.377)

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 31.

evokes comically the concept of the Eternal Now, that longed-for pure and unshakeable "stillness" in which man achieved perfect fusion with eternity. That Golding chose to mock this state in his fiction is evidence that he was not going to be forced into a slavish evocation of the myth of his own invention. The idea of a myth of unified sensibility is more important than to fix that myth in historical time and place.

The closing pages of the 'Copernicus' essay return to this faith in the unity of experience and awareness:

"For knowledge displays no dichotomy at last, but is one. The intuition of Copernicus was the intuition common to all great poets and all great scientists; the need to simplify and deepen, until what seems diverse is seen to lie in the hollow of one hand."¹

This, however, is a statement of faith: it is what Golding wants to believe, and it is based on the experience of those lambent moments of visionary intensity such as the one described in the preceding section of this chapter. It is not, it must be stressed, Golding's quotidian experience of life.

This is not, though, a 'naive' unity such as a person might seem to exist in before the confusions and contradictions of experience have challenged the framework of one's first perceptions. Indeed, Golding contends that such a system of belief must of necessity be broken before true, experiential wholeness is possible. Thus, citing Catholicism and Marxism as examples, he comments:

"anybody who is born into any of those systems, who lives in one of them, has, at some point, to shatter them. He may come back to them, but they've *got* to break down into this at first incomprehensible - maybe *always* incomprehensible - well, this chaos that is really what we live in."²

Given that the above quotation is from a conversation, as opposed to a finished article, what is perhaps most illuminating is Golding's

¹The Hot Gates, p. 40.

²Talk, p. 102.

inarticulacy, which demonstrates the very broken-down chaos he is describing. However, if he had ended there, his views might well be described as existentialist, but Golding goes on to express the faith in striving towards a new unity: "Somehow or other, (man) *has got to bring the whole thing together* . This is what I think men are for."¹

Still, for most people, most of the time, Golding included, there are at least two worlds to be lived in simultaneously. In Golding's thought, the concept of the dissociation of sensibility is channelled into two distinct forms, the material/rational and the spiritual. Thus:

"This experience of having two worlds to live is a vital one, and is what living is like. And that is why this book (*Free Fall*) is important to me, because I've tried to put those two worlds into it, as a matter of daily experience."²

The next step, using the imagery of *Free Fall*, is to acknowledge that to live in two worlds only makes sense if there is a bridge between them. In a review of a book of essays on Rudolf Steiner (important to Golding in that he was a visionary, a seer whose work was produced at a time when the tide of rationalism was flowing most swiftly in the opposite direction), Golding offers the promise of potential wholeness:

"Any man who claims to have found a bridge between the world of the physical sciences and the world of the spirit is sure of a hearing. Is this not because most of us have an unexpressed faith that the bridge exists, even if we have not the wit to discover it?"

This is the bridge that Sammy searches for in *Free Fall*, and if there he has not the wit to discover it fully, Golding in this review finally affirms that "the bridge is still there, to be tested by any man who cares to take the trouble."³

Golding has devoted a substantial amount of his non-fiction to challenging views that would deny the existence of such bridge, or of the

¹Talk, p. 102.

²Talk, p. 79.

³'All or Nothing', in *The Spectator*, 24/3/61, p. 410.

need for it, and views that propose the existence of 'false' bridges. I have quoted already from an article in which Golding explains his inability to belong to a group or party or doctrinal position, and certainly political or socio-political world views are to be avoided.¹ In conversation with Biles he describes himself as being "*bitterly* left of centre" politically, in the knowledge that in ultimate terms such a view is unsatisfactory, but is the best that can be made of a bad job.²

The 'political' explanation is, however, only one aspect of wider malaise: a trust in rationalism, which Golding calls 'the Herodotean method', to 'explain', as it were, life, the universe and everything. He contrasts an attitude of blinding pride in man's recent view of himself with that of the Ancient Egyptians. Thus, man has developed a willed ignorance of his own nature. Golding accepts that the Greeks, though they saw in the method a system which would iron out the complications of earlier theories of life, nevertheless did not want to be truly inclusive. But what began in such a way has been abused:

"I salute the Herodotean method grudgingly and am wary of it. It is a lever which controls limitless power The method has begotten that lame giant we call civilisation as Frankenstein created his monster. It has forgotten that there is a difference between a puzzle and a mystery."³

This method has its roots in "mere measurement", which, in the Steiner review, Golding scorns as an approach to making connections between worlds. This view modulates into a profound anti-rationalism and an antagonism towards the great god, Science. In part, one could attempt to explain this by reference to Golding's own career, with its 'false start' as a scientist, but it has much more to do, I feel, with the fact

¹This is wittily articulated, in Golding's comments on his outlook (which shaped his early poetry) in the 1930s: "I saw the engagement of my contemporaries move farther and farther away from what was important to me. I had no interest in politics, none in the USSR, none whatever in tractors." (*A Moving Target*, p. 151).

²See *Talk*, p. 49.

³*The Hot Gates*, p. 72.

that many of Golding's pronouncements on this subject date from the early to mid-1960s when, to put it crudely, the media (and hence popular culture) espoused in simplified form the belief that technological improvements would give men an easier, more comfortable, and therefore happier and more fulfilled life.

There is much autobiographical evidence for his distrust of the Herodotean method in 'The Ladder and the Tree', and in essays like 'Belief and Creativity' Golding issues declarations of his outlook with a stridency which, if it sounds overstated, it at least unequivocal. The apotheosis of the Herodotean method, according to this view, leads to a "Western world conditioned by the images of Marx, Darwin and Freud; and Marx, Darwin and Freud are the three most crashing bores of the Western world." As it stands this is, without doubt, too crudely self-opinionated, but Golding goes on to qualify the accusation in such a way that the outburst becomes recognisably part of Golding's mature vision:

"The simplistic popularization of their ideas has thrust our world into a mental straitjacket from which we can only escape by the most anarchic violence. These men were reductionist, and I believe - saying not what I *ought* to think but what I find my centre thinking honestly because in spite of itself - I do indeed believe that at bottom the violence of the last thirty years and it may be the hyperviolence of the century has been less a revolt against the exploitation of man by man, less a sexual frustration, or an adventure in the footsteps of Oedipus, certainly less a process of natural selection operating in human society, than a revolt against reductionism."¹

'On the Crest of a Wave' is an impassioned plea against the proliferation of such reductive views in educational circles. The wearied tones of the personal experience of the old-fashioned schoolteacher can be heard in parts of this essay but there are also passages of deeply committed invective:

¹A *Moving Target*, pp. 186-7. It may be noted, in passing, that one of the keys that might unlock the mysteries of *Darkness Visible* is present here: in some sense this surely is the starting point for the Stanhope girls.

"Our humanity, our capacity for living together in a full and fruitful life, does not reside in knowing things for the sake of knowing them or even in the power to exploit our surroundings Our humanity rests in the power to make value judgements, unscientific assessments, the power to decide that this is right, that wrong, this ugly, that beautiful, this just, that unjust Now the educational world is full of spectral shapes, bowing acknowledgements to religious instruction and literature, but keeping an eye on the laboratory where is respect, jam tomorrow, power. The arts cannot cure a disease or increase production or ensure defence. They can only cure or ameliorate sicknesses so deeply seated that we begin to think of them in our new wealth as built-in: boredom and satiety, selfishness and fear."¹

One paradox (noted by Golding himself) is that his fiction, at least up to *Free Fall*, attempted to depict the inherent weaknesses of rationalism by a method which was itself rational: this can be best exemplified perhaps in the precisely-ordered logic of *Pincher Martin*. In the non-fiction there is less argument, more simple declaration; for the most part, Golding presents us with gut feelings about the world, occasionally elaborated by anecdote but more often simply stated, for us to accept or reject. It is perhaps when he is trying to convince himself of the futility of making rational patterns, having first constructed them and discovered their flaws, that Golding is most likely to convince the reader of the strength of his argument. This is more, therefore, than dividing views of the world into the Herodotean and the Egyptian, and siding, on the basis that "it was common sense and experiment at odds with vivid imagination and intellectual sloth", in favour of the latter.² Rather it is a product of trying out rational patterns, finding that they don't fit the case, and discarding them. This started, Golding would have us believe, when he was quite young: "I was a structuralist at the age of seven, which is about the right age for it."³ Yet whatever one feels about such jibes at academia, there is in Golding's thought an insistence on trying out patterns, even in the awareness that they will not work.

¹The *Hot Gates*, p. 130.

²A *Moving Target*, p. 45.

³A *Moving Target*, p. 160.

This can be seen, on a homely scale, repeatedly in *An Egyptian Journal*. From the early declaration that "I was planning to write the book without needing to go to Egypt at all", through the gradual subversion of his conveniently idealised "immemorial angle", Golding at last arrives at the inevitable conclusion: "all the generalisations came apart into a mess of particulars."¹

The consequence of this view, it would seem, is that ultimately man needs to learn how to live in the absence of pattern. Around the time that he was writing *Free Fall* Golding made a number of comments to this effect. The review 'Astronaut by Gaslight', discussing types of 'free fall', refers in passing to "the modern sort which can be endless."² This is clearly commenting on more than a physical phenomenon, and in conversation with John Haffenden Golding explores the issue further:

"The twentieth century is the ambiguous century and I'm a child of my century. I don't feel any enormous, ultimate certainties I would be very happy to meet someone who could tell me one single, incontestable truth. I've never found one."³

Like so much of what Golding says in interview, this is provocatively overstated, but the sense of rootlessness that is present is the important thing. In philosophical defence of such a view Golding often invokes Heraclitus. Thus "Time is exact or place is exact, not both. The world *is* Heraclitan. You cannot bathe *once* in the same river!"⁴

However, as I have indicated already, to live like this is, to Golding, not "what men are for". There is always the aspiration to connect, to build bridges between worlds, to make sense out of

¹*An Egyptian Journal*, pp. 13, 30, 144.

²*The Hot Gates*, p. 115.

³Quarto, November 1980, p. 11.

⁴*A Moving Target*, p. 71. It must be stressed that this attitude is not a cause for despair. Elsewhere in *A Moving Target* Golding ponders more optimistically on the ramification of living in a state of continuous flux: "Though Heraclitus declared that *everything flows* and that *you cannot bathe twice in the same river* he also said that *the sun is every day new.*" (p. 184)

patternlessness, whilst all the time being wary of false contrivance, since "we may be simplistic but life isn't."¹ Golding senses that that there are moments when one is offered hints towards a pattern, instances when one finds, as he says movingly of the pyramid of El Meidun, "a moment of myth made visible".² *An Egyptian Journal* offers a number of other examples of this way of seeing. Golding is fascinated and delighted by processes, chains of event that can be revealed in the midst of the apparently chaotic. The evident pleasure with which he records visiting a Nile sugar factory or observing the "return of the native" or waiting in receptive stillness before the singing water-wheel at El Fayoum is one of the most satisfactory things about that book.³ These are on the same plane, I think, as the processes that both Matty and Sophy discover in *Darkness Visible*; they are evidence of pattern in the midst of flux, and as such they offer keys to individual progress and understanding.

For progress is possible, but for Golding just as for Powys it is individualist and idiosyncratic. It is not a question of systems of belief but of personal morality.⁴ Here, by 'personal morality' Golding means not the adherence to a publically-defined code, but an integrity which correctly values all aspects of personal experience. Progress is not achieved by 'movements' but by individuals:

"The only kind of real progress is the progress of the individual towards some kind of - I would describe it as *ethical* - integration and his consequent effect upon the people who are near him."⁵

It is here that Golding's 'cosmic optimism', as evidenced in the quotation at the head of this section, comes into play. Conventionally, Golding has been regarded as a 'pessimist' about the human condition, but

¹An *Egyptian Journal*, p. 9.

²An *Egyptian Journal*, p. 185.

³See *An Egyptian Journal*, pp. 63, 85-6, 183.

⁴See Golding's discussion of this in 'Utopias and Antiutopias' in *A Moving Target*, especially p. 84.

⁵Talk, p. 41.

though, as I have already noted, his comments about man being a "morally diseased creation", for example, still stand, this belief in individual ethical progress allows him to, as it were, face in two directions simultaneously:

"Though universe and cosmos are the same thing in the dictionaries I will distinguish between them, making words, like Humpty-Dumpty, mean what I tell them to. I will use cosmos to mean what Tennyson meant with all in all and all in all - the totality, God and man and everything else that *is* in every state and level of being. Universe I will use for the universe we know through our eyes at the telescope and microscope or open for daily use. Universe I use for what Bridges called 'God's Orrery'. With that distinction in mind I would call myself a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist."¹

Universal pessimism is, it seems, his view of the day-to-day material world. Cosmic optimism informs his awareness that there is **more** to human life than that material world, and this is where individual ethical progress has its role. For average man, such a sensibility would be enough to return to living what Golding would call its proper value. But there are intensely charged moments, visionary moments, that flash across and irradiate this quotidian awareness, and transform it. It is, finally, to the cultivation of these visionary moments that I want to turn.

VII

"Where there is no vision, the people perish.' I think that is literally ^{true} literally true."²

As the above quotation makes clear, vision is vital not just for the individual, but for man in general. But since, as I have just demonstrated, Golding sees vision as prompting "individual ethical

¹A *Moving Target*, p. 201. The comment is reiterated in almost precisely the same terms - thus implying, I think, that it is a carefully thought-out and reliable aspect of Golding's 'metaphysic' - in *Quarto*, November 1980, p. 11.

²Talk, p. 42.

progress", it is with the individual, not the mass, that this last section is concerned. For vision is personal or it is nothing: though its effects may be far-reaching, it cannot itself be got at second hand.

Its starting point is an attitude of prayer, of personal humility and of awe. Golding has written comparatively little directly on this aspect of the visionary imagination, but its assumptions underpin his comments on what follows from it. That prayer can be seen to be significant is demonstrated back-handedly in his remark about the now sharply-illuminated Salisbury cathedral,

"as if inviting anyone who should pray in the cathedral to do so with eyes open, lest he should be led astray by some sense of awe and mystery, and the feeling that a church is a different sort of place from anywhere else."¹

Clearly, from this quotation, a church should be a different sort of place from anywhere else, and that intangible quality of "awe and mystery" is a valuable one to cultivate.

Once again, though, it must be emphasised that Golding proposes the need for a religious sensibility which is not doctrinally 'committed'; vision can invade anywhere, not just in a church. What is more important is awe, humility and the acceptance of mystery. Acknowledging that not everyone has this awareness to the same degree, Golding turns to two types of person to exemplify the quality in a refined form. First, there is the genius. The final paragraphs of the polemical 'On the Crest of a Wave' (as it was originally published) reveal an affirmative faith in the fact that genius will simply flourish, come what may. The passage was deleted when the article appeared in *The Hot Gates*; I suspect the two reasons for this are its overly strident tone and a fundamental change in Golding's conception of history. In the years that followed the writing of that article Golding came to see, I believe, that the rise of genius is not

inevitable but is subtly linked to the health of society as a whole. Yet it is also true that genius cannot be explained away, as the review 'Thin Partitions' makes clear.² Golding has recorded with suitable awe his one brief meeting with an undisputed genius, Alfred Einstein³; elsewhere, in the essay 'Copernicus' there is this meditation on Copernicus' face and temperament: "It is the face of a poet There was a supreme and dangerous knowledge, and initiates felt toward it as a poet feels - by intuition."⁴ Golding here yokes scientific genius with poetic inspiration, which gives some indication both of his assessment of the value of the artist and of the way genius functions intuitively. This, of course, is not "a picture of the wild man, the artist destroyed as a kind of human sacrifice, almost a kind of Christ-substitute hung on the cross of his own art."⁵ It is a picture of the lyric poet, whose work, at its best, has evoked awe in Golding, as can be seen often in the essay 'Belief and Creativity', for example.⁶

However, of far greater visionary significance is the saint. Golding has written at considerable length about saints, and in the fiction one thinks, I suppose, of Simon in *Lord of the Flies* as the embodiment of sanctity. He values saints for the incarnation of qualities to be found nowhere else in humanity, and he criticises Kermode for trying to wave a kind of *Golden Bough* over him which would play down a saint's inspiration and function:

"A saint isn't just a scapegoat, a saint is somebody who in the last analysis voluntarily embraces his fate he is for the illiterate a proof of the existence of God."⁷

Eliot and Yeats likewise placed their faith in the child and the

¹A *Moving Target*, p. 16.

²*The Spectator*, 13/1/61, p. 49.

³In 'Thinking as a Hobby', *Holiday*, August 1961, pp.8-13.

⁴*The Hot Gates*, p. 36.

⁵A *Moving Target*, p. 155.

⁶See *A Moving Target*, pp. 192-4, 197, 200, etc.

⁷*Books and Bookmen*, October 1959, p. 9.

illiterate - it is perhaps in the nature of the religious writer to do so. For Golding there appears to be something illiterate, or at least beneficially unlearned, about the saint himself. The book review 'Man of God' comments on the implausible but undeniable existence of "sword-in-hand saints", like Shamy1 the Avar.¹ But more commonplace and intimately illuminating are figures like Jimmy Mason, an Essex hermit, the subject of a book by Raleigh Trevelyan, reviewed by Golding. Among the naive and inarticulate longings evoked in his diary,

"there is even a record of a religious experience 'Went to bed at half past 11, and had not lain many minutes before felt something so strange come down from heaven. It seemed as if come so many times and would never go away. How bad it made me feel. I cried and prayed to God. Directly it went I felt no more. It could never be anything evil, but good as one of the angels of God.'"

Appended to this quotation, Golding adds the following remark:

"An account of some obscure mystical experience, says Mr Trevelyan, or a dream, or a naive description of a purely physical function? Desperately fair, judicious and scholarly, he is unable to make up his mind. Among the -ologists he consulted, the theologian is absent. He would have told Mr Trevelyan that Jimmy's description contains what may have been the key to his whole life, the hallmark of an effective mystical experience."²

The nature and quality of these experiences clearly fascinates and impresses Golding. His own fictional 'saint', Simon, he has described as "solitary, stammering, a lover of mankind, a visionary, who reaches commonsense attitudes not by reason but by intuition." Though he is afraid to go into the jungle,

¹The Spectator, 7/10/60, p. 530.

²The Spectator, 25/3/60, pp. 448-9. It is curious to consider what use Golding has made of this information. Jimmy Mason appears in an essay about diarists, 'Intimate Relations', in *A Moving Target*. In that essay, Golding quotes extensively from this book review, but he doesn't cite evidence of Jimmy's mystical experiences or what he, Golding, deduces from it. As there are striking resemblances between the experiences of Jimmy and Matty in *Darkness Visible*, and between their diaries, could this be an example of Golding covering his tracks?

"go he does, and prays, as the child Jean Vianney would go, and some other saints - though not many. He is really turning a part of the jungle into a church a spiritual one."¹

It is perhaps questionable whether the fictional character of Simon in *Lord of the Flies* can actually bear this weight of interpretation, but Golding clearly saw his function and value in these terms.

In the essay 'Rough Magic' Golding wrote again about saints, and in particular about the Cure d'Ars, Jean Vianney, a spiritual touchstone to whom Golding returns. Once more there is the apparent limitation of illiteracy: "he was near enough a half-wit He was quite unable, for example, to learn Latin." But the miraculous insights of sanctity are more powerful than intellect:

"He knew about people, not in the way of the trappings and exterior appearances - even the vital processes and movements, the beating of their spiritual hearts. As a confessor he was able to see clean through his penitent in a way you may call miraculous or inexplicable according to your individual taste."²

The value of the saint, to Golding, is thus amply demonstrated. He, more than most, has access to visionary insight on deep levels. He is one of the "spiritual people" without whom there is no progress and without whom the people perish. But vision is not exclusive, and Golding has dwelt, of necessity elliptically, on vision itself, to which, given the appropriate conditions and to varying degrees, all have access.

The key word in Golding's vocabulary here is "mystery". In quotations used elsewhere in this chapter it has occurred many times. It involves both an attitude to and a recognition of the state in which man exists. In conversation with Biles, Golding made the following somewhat prosaic assertion about the existence of "bridges":

"It seems to me that you can't have done anything in life, if you can't put fetching the milk in in a morning into quasars and all the rest of it, into the latest of astronomy and the deepest kind of experience. The whole thing surely *has to be* a

¹The Hot Gates, p. 98.

²A Moving Target, p. 143.

unity. If there is one faith I have, it is that there *is* a unity."¹

The crucial word in this statement is one that Golding does not emphasise: "faith". Why he has faith Golding could not say and he certainly does not attempt to justify it. Yet it is there. This is perhaps the greatest enigma that Golding reveals: the man who demands intransigence in the face of accepted belief, who refuses limiting explanations, yet has faith. Moreover, it is a purposive faith - not what man is but what he is for - which is, "to bring the whole thing together."²

The faith, therefore, is first of all a faith in the possibility of vision:

"I believe that life is central to the cosmos and that there are some times for some people when the deeps of that cosmos like the deeps of our minds open out."³

It seems, too, that vision is a product of humility. An important review, 'In My Ark', discusses Gavin Maxwell's *The Ring of Bright Water*, but Golding's comments have a wider application. Of Maxwell, Golding says that he "has the great gift of intransigence in the face of popular belief. He recognises mystery and he values it, as any man must whose mind has not come to a full stop." This is no longer the confident Victorian optimism in labelling and systematising nature, since "Belsen and Hiroshima have gone some way towards teaching us humility." The consequence of such humility is a truer knowledge of our state: "We know nothing. We look daily at the appalling mystery of plain stuff."⁴

The word - "mystery" - resounds insistently through such passages. It is profoundly illogical: "The ground of believing rather than the

¹Talk, p.102.

²Talk, p. 102.

³A Moving Target, p. 82.

⁴The Hot Gates, p. 105.

structure built on it grows more mysterious, it seems to me, the more I examine it. It grows more irrational."¹ It is also, of itself, inarticulate, and can be ambushed, as was the case when Golding was evoking the existence of creative moments, which I quoted earlier in this chapter, only by analogy: "They are moments no more to be defined than taking a Sacrament or bearing a child, or falling in love. But.... once experienced they put a crown on life."²

Now, it is clear that vision can be faked - Golding describes one such instance in 'My First Book'³ - but at its most authentic (one thinks of the sarcophagus' stare in 'Egypt from My Inside') it is compelling and unavoidable:

"It is the face prepared to go down and through, in darkness. I too can go down and through I can comprehend the silent mummy by meeting those eyes, and understanding them, outstaring them."

But understanding, with its implication of being intellectually in control, is impossible. The only course of action is submission to experience:

"They outstare infinity into eternity. The wood is rounded as in life, but not my life, insecure, vulnerable. It dwells with a darkness that is its light. It will not look at me, so frightened yet desperate, I try to force the eyes into mine; but know that if the eyes focused or I could understand the focus, I should know what it knows, and I should be dead."⁴

Here is a glimpse of authentic vision in Golding's most personal terms. It is a revelation of the Eternal Now. It is worth dwelling a little longer on what this experience communicated, since it was clearly influential in shaping Golding's subsequent development. First, the experience was transcendent; and, as the following quotation makes apparent, this is not a rationally apprehended transcendence:

¹A Moving Target, p. 190.

²The Hot Gates, p. 60.

³See A Moving Target, p. 152.

⁴The Hot Gates, pp. 79-80.

"I know about symbols without knowing what I know. I understand that neither their meaning nor their effect can be described, since a symbol is that which has an indescribable effect and meaning. I have never heard of levels of meaning but I experience them"¹

Clearly, the description puts this event into the same category as, say, Jocelin's cumulative visions at the end of **The Spire**.

Next, the experience moves out of time, in a mode of pure and unshakeable "stillness", akin to the Eternal Now:

"Man himself is present here, timelessly frozen and intimidating, an eternal question mark He commands attention without movement or speech He is at the point where time devours its own tail and no longer means anything."²

There is more to this than simply viewing events synchronically rather than diachronically, as Golding's metaphor for the nature of life, in the lecture 'Utopias and Antiutopias' makes clear. This picture, like a number of others that Golding offers, is trivial - a man riding a bicycle - but the point is that Golding does not see himself as a 'utopian', in that he does not take a snapshot of that action and deduce from it man's condition. In that sense his 'timeless' moments are not synchronic. Rather they are more like the analogies Eliot uses in **Four Quartets**, "the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts", for example. Indeed, the process of learning to be still in humility, evoked in 'East Coker', is very similar to that which Golding proposes. In other words vision is both static and kinetic. It cannot be 'isolated', like a snapshot in time, but at each moment in time, to go back to the cyclist analogy, "I believe in another spiritual dimension which crosses that journey at right angles, so to speak."³ This, I would claim, is the prosaic equivalent of

"the pattern is new in every moment/And every moment is new and shocking/Valuation of all we have been."

However (and Golding in his discussion of visionary moments is always

¹The **Hot Gates**, p. 74.

²The **Hot Gates**, p. 74.

³A **Moving Target**, p. 178.

conscious that there is bound to be a 'however') vision may be glimpsed timelessly but it has to be practised in the here and now. It is a consideration of this by Golding the novelist that has led him to be in many ways more conditional, more tentative than the lyric poet. For where the lyric poet's visionary moments merely exist, in a kind of crystalline lucidity, the novelist is obliged too to manipulate the before and after, to put vision into practice in time and place. His question is therefore Marx's question - "How are you to bring it about?" Here the purity of vision becomes flawed and tainted by the inevitable corruption of humanity. Consider *The Spire*. In conversation with John Haffenden, Golding concedes that there are numerous levels of "available interpretation" which would account for Jocelin's behaviour, but he asserts bluntly: "my own personal belief is that Jocelin was used to make the spire and that his original vision was absolutely right." But for a vision to be turned into stone, it costs.

"I accepted the fact, the postulate, that Jocelin had a valid spiritual vision of completing this bible in stone, or whatever you like to call it - then the human problem is, how does he do it? I could see no difference between that and any other problem except taking refuge in a kind of quietism. If you're going to do anything like that, you have to use what means there are to hand. Therefore you're going to affect people and, in this case, you're going to destroy people: that to me was a basic thesis, and I still see no way round it."¹

However, though such consideration might lead one to question the validity of vision, it is, Golding insists, not only unavoidable but must be embraced. Thus, those whose interpretation of *The Spire* ends with Jocelin's thought, "I traded a stone hammer for four people", have an interpretation, but it is not Golding's: "You *can* call him a bastard; I can't, but you can if you want to I remain committed to him, yes, for better or worse."²

¹Quarto, November 1980, p. 10.

²Quarto, November 1980, p. 10.

This is the end of vision. I think again of Eliot's line about achieving "the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts". The most appropriate end, it seems to me, is a line which Golding gives to Matty in **Darkness Visible**: "it is the music that frays and breaks the string". But, as I hope to show in the next chapter, it is the music, the music that matters.

Chapter Six

Golding: **Darkness Visible**

*"What good is not directly breathed into the world by the holy spirit must come down by and through the nature of men."*¹

In the epigraph to **Darkness Visible**, Golding's first full-length novel for twelve years, Aeneas asks permission of the gods to retell what he has been told of things buried in the dark and deep of the earth. The title of the novel, from Book One of **Paradise Lost**, is the oxymoron with which Milton describes the fires of hell. Both references imply a tone of gloom, if not outright despair, and most initial critical responses to the novel were couched in these terms.²

However, there were signs even among early reviewers that this was not only one of Golding's most significant and profound fictions, but also a deeply compassionate novel.³ I wish to devote this chapter to a detailed critical analysis of this one novel. It reveals, I believe, a spectacular development in Golding's fictional technique. It illustrates perfectly Golding's cosmic optimism and universal pessimism, which is at the heart of his world-view and which underpins his understanding of and belief in the working of vision. It contains his most wide-ranging and searching

¹**Darkness Visible**. pp. 237-8.

²"Despair seems to have caught up with him in this deeply pessimistic book, the heroic labour of a tired seer." (**The Guardian**, 3/10/79, p. 9)

³"**Darkness Visible** begins and ends in flames and in between all we do see is hellish 'sights of woe', on which little light is shed, morally or psychologically." (Michael Waterhouse, 'Golding's Secret Element of Gusto', **Essays in Criticism**, January 1981, p. 10). At times such reviews become not simply hostile but abusive - see Paul Ableman in **The Spectator**, 13/10/79, p. 23, for example.

³The most illuminating criticisms came from Craig Raine (**New Statesman**, 19/10/79, pp. 552-3) and A.S. Byatt (**The Literary Review**, 5/10/79, pp. 10-11).

social analysis - it is, it seems to me, the 'condition of England' novel he had been aiming to write in **Free Fall** and **The Pyramid**. It explores in great detail the role and function of the saint, as a vehicle for vision (without which, Golding insists, the people perish) and a counter to the forces of entropy. It is, I would assert, Golding's most complete, compelling and greatest novel to date.

To unravel its complex threads - to disprove such accusations as that "the jumble of too many events clogs the novel and leaves us with an impression of bleakness that is essentially unintelligible"¹- I wish to depart from the structural format of the other chapters in this thesis. The tripartite form of the novel - in which the 'Matty', 'Sophy', and 'One is One' sections suggest the thesis, antithesis and synthesis of Golding's argument - invites initially an analysis of the three characters (or groups of characters) who dominate those sections. Then I wish to turn to the style of the novel, since Golding's fictional technique is perfectly adapted to his vision, especially in its desire to depict events as simultaneously meaningful and arbitrary, predestined and yet contingent. On this basis, the rest of the chapter explores themes similarly analysed in the other chapters of the thesis: Golding's social perspective, his exploration of the human condition and, finally, the invocation of vision itself.

I

*"The cry that went up to heaven brought you down. Now there is a great spirit that shall stand behind the being of the child you are guarding. That is what you are for. You are to be a burnt offering."*²

¹Michael Waterhouse, 'Golding's Secret Element of Gusto' (in **Essays in Criticism**, January 1981, p. 11).

²**Darkness Visible**, p. 238.

I begin with Matty, not only because he begins the novel, but because the book's central mystery revolves around him. In coming to terms with Matty's nature and function, we are in a better position to grasp the book's structural meaning. If we are to have a faith in the novel's meaning then Matty is the author and finisher of that faith, for without him the book is the empty and despairing exploration of futility that many reviewers took it to be.

Matty is shrouded in mysteries that remain as impenetrable at the end of the novel as they were at the beginning. Part of Matty's complexity lies in the fact that he is, consciously, a purveyor of meanings. He both means and is, and what is more, there is a further ambiguity in that what he thinks he means and is, is not necessarily what Golding's ironic and detached narration implies that he means and is.

Matty's origin is obscure. He is an impossibility. In the paragraph in which he is first perceived:

"What had seemed impossible and therefore unreal was now a fact and clear to them all. A figure had condensed out of the shuddering backdrop of the glare The figure was impossibly small - impossibly tiny, since children had been the first to be evacuated from that whole area Nor do small children walk out of a fire that is melting lead and distorting iron."
(13)

The calmness of the language belies the miracle. It also suggests an explanation. Matty 'had condensed'. He is born out of the inferno, referred to as 'a burning bush'. He is in the bush and is not consumed, while around him even metal succumbs to the heat. Two pages further on his presence remains inexplicable though the trace clues multiply. To the bookseller in the fire-fighting crew Matty seemed

"to be perhaps not entirely there - to be in a state of, as it were, indecision as to whether he was a human shape or merely a bit of flickering brightness. Was it the Apocalypse? Nothing could be more apocalyptic than a world so ferociously consumed. But he could not quite remember. Then he was deflected by the sound of the musician being sick." (15)

Golding punctures his rhetorical mood characteristically. But the threads have been woven, and the reference to the Apocalypse leads us straight to the Book of Revelation, and to Eliot's treatment of this apocalyptic moment in 'Little Gidding'. As in Chapter Six of Revelation the cry of the saints goes up to heaven, so the closing pages of Matty's journal confirm what is hinted at here - that "The cry that went up to heaven brought you down." (238) Golding, like Eliot, takes the consuming and destroying reality of the Blitz, and makes from it an image of rebirth and redemption - "To be redeemed from fire by fire". Many textual similarities - of colours, roses, burning bushes, dancing, and so forth - confirm that Golding's connection here is very plain, and is made resonant particularly by these references to Eliot's verse. Matty walks naked from the fire, but he is fully clothed with implication.

These developments begin when Matty acquires a name. Elsewhere in the novel, Golding explores the relation between language and things in naming. Names of people, however, have long been regarded in Golding's fiction as signs pointing towards a meaning. Matty is no exception. His first two names, "Matthew Septimus" (because seven was his number on the hospital ward), imply that a look into the seventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel would reveal something. It begins: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." It is a direct invocation to be compassionate. The novel will come to be seen as being about judgment, and the ways in which men judge each other. I believe that this is the central meaning to be drawn from Matty's middle name, though a reading of the whole of Matthew 7 is enlightening, when the novel is seen in its light. In it, Jesus promises: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you". Questing and searching play a large part in this novel. For Matty, it is

the main motivating force, and it leads him on to his final transfiguring sacrifice. But the implications for Sophy, as we shall see, are equally significant, for as she confesses, she herself chose consciously not to seek, not to ask, but to follow her own way (p. 251) For Sim and Edwin, playing games with the quest, the picture is a similar one - though their rewards too, are in proportion to their endeavours.

"Matthew Septimus" then, but Matthew Septimus what? Matty's surname is mystifyingly fluid. On page 17, the hospital gives him a name, though it is not mentioned explicitly. By page 25 it has been shortened to the colloquial "Windy". From then on it continues to fluctuate, from "Wandgrave" (27) to "Windwood" (36), to "Wildwave" (229), to "Windgrove" and "Windrove" (230), and finally to "Windgraff", "Windgrove", "Windrave", "Windrove" and "Windgrove" again on page 231. A casual reading might lead to the assumption that whoever read the proofs was uncharacteristically slapdash, but such a concentration of variations as those on pages 229-231 implies that something significant is occurring. In fact, the ward superintendent's first name for Matty is never mentioned. A.S. Byatt claims¹ that this name is Windhover, as the passage in which the thought occurs to the superintendent suggests:

"He made his own substitution, though when he looked at what he had written it seemed not quite right and he altered it. There was no obvious reason for doing so. The name had first jumped into his mind with the curious effect of having come out of empty air and of being temporary, a thing to be noticed because you were lucky to be in the place where it had landed. It was as if you had sat silently in the bushes and - My! - there settled in front of you the rarest of butterflies or birds which had stayed long enough to be seen and had then gone off with an air of going for ever, sideways, it might be." (17).

The imagery, the language of flight, suggest Hopkins' falcon/Christ

¹The Literary Review, 5/10/79, p. 11.

figure, a suggestion which is borne out by Matty's final appearance in the novel as a great "gold-vermilion" bird to Mr Pedigree.¹ The reason why Matty's name is never pinned down and labelled with finality is that he never conforms to a closed pattern or system of behaviour. There are numerous examples of this in the novel, of which the most striking is probably the instruction to throw away his Bible, implying that he is to rely on the spiritual promptings of his "elders". Thus, the changing name is a literal illustration of the spontaneous instability of his spiritual quest - and we may note in passing that the most commonly-used form of his name, Windrove, explicitly calls to mind Jesus' instruction to Nicodemus about the spirit of God flowing as freely and as uncontrolled as the wind.

Matty's character traits are marked and highly idiosyncratic. First, there is his remarkable attitude to language, and the relationship between words and things. Consider the description of his first attempts to talk: "It was observed that his relationship to language was unusual It seemed that a word was an object, a material object." (17-18). Matty has not got the ability, at this stage, to conceptualise. He is a literalist; he can neither distinguish between modes of communication, nor separate into levels of meaning the terms in which communication, in this fallen and ambiguous world, is carried out. Hence he knows no irony, no metaphor, no verbal artifice, but only the literal truth where the word is a thing. Therefore he is comprehensively at peace with the nurse who calls him "My Matty" (19). Therefore too he is comprehensively fooled by Pedigree's maliciously ironic comment: "Never mind what I said, you *literal* creature! My goodness what a treasure we've come across!" (28).

¹Moreover, the spiritual significance of the name is hinted at by Golding's characteristic use of the image of a butterfly - compare the central episode concerning Simon and the pig's head in *Lord of the Flies*.

Literalism colours Matty's response not only to language, but to actions. A work of art, like a word (and especially the words of the Bible), is an object, a thing in its own right, guaranteed a solidity by the accomplishment of an act of making. His attitude to the Bible is especially interesting. It fits him out with a close-knit and detailed morality; he uses the Bible as a practical handbook which he can invoke to deal with his daily life. But his attitude is crudely naive, and it is in this area that Golding begins to develop his theme.

I said earlier that Matty's name is unstable because he never conforms to a closed pattern or system of behaviour. The literalist temper just illustrated would seem to contradict this, and inasmuch as this freedom has to be learned, we see that Matty begins from a position of closure, which is then challenged by crucial spiritual experiences which allow Matty to develop to his mature stature.

Before Matty's spiritual experiences begin, we are given the suggestion of his chosen role in the puzzling affair of Henderson and the gymshoe. In it, Matty consciously enacts the part of an Old Testament prophet, crying doom on the evil of his generation. He is being a signmaker. The sign misfires - it is only years later that the headmaster comes across a possible explanation (and again Golding goes out of his way to stress the uncertainty, the ambiguity of it all). But the importance of the event lies in what it tells us of Matty's conception of his role. He knows that his purpose is to make signs, but he does not yet know how - like all other professions, Golding implies, prophecy has to be learned the hard way!

It is in this state of confusion that Matty has the first of his 'experiences'. This intrusion of something beyond the 'natural' into the hitherto realistic, if bizarre, surface of the novel caused some reviewers a degree of concern. Through the paradoxically down-to-earth Matty, he

treats the intervention of the supernatural into the physical world with a calmness and a clarity that consciously evoke as little as possible of the enormous significance of what is actually being described. Nevertheless, if we are sensitive to the details of the text, the event resonates with meaning. It begins in the window of Goodchild's Rare Books, where "the titles did not help him. The books were full of words, physical reduplication of that endless cackle of men". (47) This is not merely a gratuitous repetition of the novel's theme, and of Matty's literalness (words as physical objects); it is a necessary prelude to the introduction of a new means of communication, the unfallen, unbroken transcendent language of the spirit. The realisation of this in print, in the broken ambiguities of the language we share, is of course impossible. Golding can only suggest the direction in which we may travel:

"It might be possible to go down into silence, sink down through all noises and all words, down through the words, the knives and swords such as *it's all your fault* and *ta* with a piercing sweetness, down, down into silence -" (47)

More important than the preciousness of silence is Matty's triumph over the limitations of words. Staring at what appears to be a reflection of the sun in a glass ball,

"He approved of the sun which said nothing but lay there, brighter and brighter and purer and purer. It began to blaze as when clouds move aside. It moved as he moved, but soon he did not move, could not move He was aware too, of a sense of rightness and truth and silence. But this was what he later described to himself as a feeling of waters rising; and still later was described to him and for him by Edwin Bell as entering *a still dimension of otherness* in which things appeared or were shown to him." (47-8)

Bell's quasi-Wordsworthian explanation suits his interpretation of existence. Likewise Matty's analogy accords with his view of things. But there is little sense that, as for Jocelin in *The Spire*, these are foul waters rising out of the cellarage of life; instead they are the

vitalising waters of baptism, akin to the physical enactment of immersion that Matty undergoes later.

Golding explicitly confirms the special nature of Matty's experience by the authorial commentary that describes the moment when Matty comes out of his vision (p. 48). Matty is just beginning to grasp at a meaning. Golding's prose is therefore necessarily tentative, the arguments ambiguous, the 'explanations' deliberately vague and all-embracing. But we should not ignore Golding's more explicit statements. Thus we are told that Matty has not just seen a reflection of the sun because it has been cloudy all day. This is trivial, but it pushes us towards an explanation that we might otherwise ignore.

Matty's vision itself is brief and certainly not reassuring. It is summed up in a sentence that could stand perfectly as a description of Golding's art: "He was shown the seamy side where the connections are". (48) This too is satisfyingly ambiguous - 'seamy' in the sense of unpleasantly corrupt, but also in the metaphoric sense of a woven carpet, an image continued in the next sentence. Much of his fiction, most explicitly perhaps in *Free Fall*, has been about making or recognising connections. Golding's art has always been woven with a highly-wrought intensity. Here in *Darkness Visible* the textual connections are looser; the connections of meaning, by implication, are tighter. It is as though Golding wants to show that events are at once both arbitrary and meaningful, a key insight in our understanding of the way Golding conceives of the operation of vision within his overall world-view. This is borne out by the next experience, which follows directly. First, Matty tries to find in the established church a sympathetic resonance to that which he has just discovered. He fails. The church is dead:

"The church was quite empty and not merely of people. It seemed to him empty of the qualities that lay in the glass ball and had found some kind of response inside him. He could not make

any connection and there was a lump in his throat too big to swallow. He began to say the Lord's Prayer then stopped, for the words seemed to mean nothing. He stayed there, kneeling, bewildered and sorrowful." (49)

In this state, Matty chances upon an event which, in itself, is comically trivial. In his agony Matty "cried out silently to nowhere. Silence reverberated in silence. Then a voice spoke, quite clearly. 'Who are you? What do you want?'" (49). The arbitrary impinges on the events of life, giving them a little nudge towards the eternal. By making this question come from a curate to a choirboy who has left a comic in the vestry, Golding deliberately punctures a spiritual 'atmosphere'. But as he shows elsewhere (most impressively in the 'seance' scene), the absurd and the metaphysical coexist. No matter what the immediate cause of the question, it means far more to Matty than any other question could:

The voice sounded right inside Matty's head. He answered it in the same place. Before the balance with its two scales, the one with a man's face, the other with a fire of anticipation and enticement, he had a time that was made of pure, white-hot anguish. It was the first exercise of his untried will. He knew, and it never occurred to him to doubt the knowledge, or worse, accept it and be proud of it, that he had chosen, not as a donkey between carrots of unequal size, but rather as the awareness that suffered He began to weep adult tears, wounded right in the centre of his nature, wept for a vanished prospect as he might have wept for a dead friend. He wept until he could weep no more and never knew what things had drained away from him with the tears. When he had done he found he was in a strange position. He was kneeling but his backside was touching the edge of a bench. His hands were grasping the top of a pew in front of him and his forehead lay on the little shelf where the prayer and hymn books were. As he opened his eyes and focused them he found he was staring down into the wetness of his own tears where they had fallen on stone and lay in the grooves of an ancient epitaph." (49-50).

The sustained and peculiarly calm intensity of this passage marks it out as one of Golding's visionary moments. It is his moment of choice, and can thus be compared with Sophy's later decision. Golding's prose at moments like these resonates in a way that is both exultant and elegiac. The language of pain is remarkably similar to comparable passages in almost any of his novels, but especially *Pincher Martin*, *Free Fall* and *The*

Spire. The imagery of scales, fires, and the evocation of "pure whitehot anguish" are particularly reminiscent of Pincher's suffering. So too is the language used to describe the fields of consciousness within him: "It was the first exercise of his untried will"; "wounded right in the centre of his nature". And with all this comes the disintegration of being ("He began to weep adult tears") that Golding regards as being an unavoidable constituent of adulthood. The poignance of what is always in his fiction a moment of loss is intensified by the shedding of tears.¹ Its significance as a kind of ritual moment in the progress of all humanity is stressed by the fact that the tears fall "in the grooves of an ancient epitaph" (cf. **Pincher Martin** in which Pincher's tears fall in the tree of knowledge carved on the rock in front of him). Finally in all of this section we may take note of Golding's sudden assumption of authorial wisdom. Though Matty "never knew what things had drained away from him with the tears", Golding is free to imply what the consciousness of Matty could never express. At moments such as these, the presence of Golding standing behind his creation, shading in the visionary resonance, is very evident.

The remaining fifty pages of the "Matty" section of the novel chronicle his pilgrimage, both physical and spiritual, to the point where he arrives at the 'right' place for his role to be fulfilled. It is a journey full of wrong turnings, and many cul-de-sacs. It is a story of Matty wandering in the wilderness, unsure of his vocation, making false signs, or the right signs in the wrong places, and gradually learning the wisdom and insight necessary to his task. The essence of this particular section of the novel can be summed up in the slowly evolving question which drives Matty on. The question "Who am I?" (51) becomes "What am I?" (56), and finally "What am I for?" (68) The mode of narration that

¹Compare the concentration on Matty's falling tears here with similarly intense treatment of Lok in **The Inheritors**, Pincher Martin, and Evie in **The Pyramid**.

Golding chooses for this section serves to distance us from Matty's behaviour, to make it seem almost deliberately incomprehensible. Part of this, undoubtedly, is due to the very nature of Matty's vocation, for the signmaker will only be understood by a few. But Golding wants us to see Matty from the outside as well as the inside (so successfully revealed in his journal) in order that we might have a better perspective in which to assess him. In his detachment, Golding sharpens the pathos and the excitement of Matty's evolving consciousness.

The question "Who am I?" provokes this bitter and empty response:

"You came out of nowhere and that is where you are going. You have injured your only friend; and you must offer up marriage, sex, love, because, because, *because*! On a cooler view of the situation, no one would have you anyway. That is who you are."
(51).

There is more to Matty's life than this, however, and Golding shows the complex pressures of individual vision and social forces moulding Matty's persona into an apt form. Mrs Sweet suggests that a hat would suit him, in order to obscure the sight of his deformed ear and scarred scalp. His individual genius suggests a broad-brimmed black one, and gradually clothes to match it, until his appearance is that of a seventeenth-century Ranter.

What happens outside, however, is nothing compared to the earthquakes that shake his mind. Of these, the most significant (both for him, and for the themes Golding wants to explore in the novel) is the revelation of the ambiguity of language. Once more Golding's introduction of the theme is comic - a confusion over his name with his new workmates: "'I don't care what you're bleeding called. When I say "Matey" I mean "Matey".'" (52). If this is only a minor confusion, Matty's discovery of the existence of more than one version of the Bible is a major convulsion. Having seen how words for him have the existence of physical objects, and how he has taken the words of the Bible with a literalism that is incapable of distinguishing a

meaning from the specific words in which that meaning is expressed, it disrupts totally all his conceptions of language:

"There was talk of the difficulty of moving from one language to another; but explanations must have failed before the present fact of black print on a white page. In the very middle of the twentieth century there was a kind of primitive grating between Matty and the easy world of his fellows that sorted out, it seemed, filtered out, ninety-nine per cent of what a man is supposed to absorb and gave the remaining one per cent the shiny hardness of stone. Now, therefore, he stood, the book in his hands, lifted his head from it and stared aghast through the bookshop.

"*It's different!*" (53)

The concept of difference disrupts his literal and methodical approach to language: it introduces him to ambiguity. Its short-term result is to cause him to dispose of his old Bible in favour of the one he has just acquired. It is nowhere stated but nevertheless seems likely, since he comes to his decision on the basis of the title pages, and since he afterwards quotes from this edition, that he chooses to retain the Authorised Version. Presumably the concept of authority sways him. Nevertheless, though he goes on with 'normal' life ("said his mechanical prayers" (54)) the disruptions and ambiguities of human existence are beginning to impinge on his literal routine.

With this discovery of layers of meaning within language goes the discovery of layers of meaning within himself. We have seen fleeting evidence of Matty's understanding that life is not all 'surface' before (for example, the private ritual of stabbing the back of his hand at the ironmongers) but it has not been articulate. Moreover his signs ("over Edom have I cast my shoe" (37)) have been nonsensically literal. Now he is led into performing rituals which have no articulate meaning. He defines this sensation to himself ("in a moment of quite brilliant and articulate explanation" (55) - Golding's merely slightly ironic comment) as "things moving about under the surface." (55) For Matty to even conceive of the existence of surfaces, and of things existing underneath

them, is a triumph of conceptualisation (and, necessarily, of a broken or fragmented consciousness) that denotes the 'adult' Matty recognising how much he has changed:

" *Must* drove him to things he could not explain but only accept as a bit of easing when to do nothing was intolerable. Such was the placing of stones in a pattern, the making of gestures over them. Such was the slow trickling of dust from the hand and the pouring of good water into a hole." (55)

Matty's "must", akin to Sophy's "This", propels him. We discover that the two are fundamentally different, but they are similar in that they 'inhabit' the physical frames of two people. Golding is deliberately vague about the relationship between the nature of the 'self' (in fact, the Powysian "I am I") and the spiritual force that inhabits or communes with that person (except for the brief explanation by Matty's elders at the end that they attempted to call Sophy before them, but that she chose not to respond), but Golding makes much of the divergent (though ultimately - paradoxically! - convergent) directions in which their opposed spiritual promptings take them.

The promptings take Matty through a kind of fantasy sequence that includes the seven exquisite daughters of Mr Hanrahan and the apparently irreparable mangling of his sexual organs by a temperamental Abo. The purpose of this is a tragi-comic illustration of Matty's wanderings under the threat of his two main preoccupations, sexual temptation and religious obsession. Thus, the confrontation with Mr Hanrahan's daughters leads him to a frightening confirmation of his understanding of his role in the verse "Some have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God." (61) The next step, the forcible making of himself into a eunuch (or so he thinks) follows swiftly, courtesy of the obscenely amusing Harry Bummer. But through all this, the question is transformed into its final shape:

"Yet still inside him the question pressed, altering now and becoming more urgent. It had been *who I* (sic), then become *what am I* ; and now through the force of his cruciforce or crucifiction by the black man leaping on him out of the sky it changed again and was a burning question.

What am I for ?" (67-8)

Golding is still playing ("crucifiction" is splendid) but the urgent themes now reassert themselves. "What am I for?" prompts the full flourishing of Matty the signmaker. He consciously emulates Ezekiel, and he gets the response that was given to Elisha ("Go up Baldhead!" (69)) from the children, and total incomprehension from officialdom, which assumes that he is making some kind of anti-nuclear protest.

The end of Matty's sojourn in Australia is marked by his most bizarre ritual yet, a kind of distorted self-baptismal rite. The action he undertakes is also related to an Aboriginal cleansing ritual, but with Christian overtones.¹ It may be that this sequence is totally explicable, but if this is so, I have not yet found the explanation. The significance of the wheels and chains, for example, is unclear: they may bear some resemblance to the vision of the awe of God seen by Ezekiel, and thus imitated for that purpose by Matty, but what lies behind it remains obscure. It is easier to see some significance in the relation between his totally immersed body and the lamp, preserved in its dry state. In this context, the idea of a baptism, with the burial of the old self and the resurrection, in the presence of the light, of the new, is rather more obvious. It is perhaps for this reason that Golding refers for the last time to the division in Matty's conscious being just prior to the accomplishment of this act:

"After that, when he was sure the lamp stood straight and safe in the mould, he turned to the first set of objects. He worked at them and they clanked and *everything was inscrutable except inside of the man's head where the purpose was.*" (74)

¹This Australian section and the visions therein, are fascinatingly reminiscent of Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*. There are distinct similarities between Matty and Alf Dubbo in White's novel.

After this act has been performed, though Matty still does many foolish and self-motivated things, he is described far more as one in the nature of a servant, motivated by a developing spiritual vision. It is for this reason, I believe, that Golding describes his departure from Australia in tones explicitly reminiscent of Lok in *The Inheritors*. After performing the ritual of shaking the dust from his feet, a sign of setting a seal and closure to his whole Australian experience, Golding narrates in a tone of dispassionate pathos the inevitable shedding of a tear. Like Lok, Matty is described with Golding's anthropological eye - as a creature of few human characteristics:

"He climbed the ladder, away from the many years he had spent in Australia, and was shown the place he had to sleep in with eleven others, though none of them had arrived. After he had stowed his one suitcase he went back up again to the deck and stood again, still, silent and staring at the continent he knew he was seeing for the last time. A single drop of water rolled out of his good eye, found a quick way down his cheek and fell on the deck. His mouth was making little movements, but he said nothing." (77)

A detail in this passage suggests more than an arbitrary choice - that there should be eleven other passengers, coupled with his emulation of the disciples' action of shaking the dust of a town from their feet, points inexorably to Matty's chosenness.

We have seen him pushed from the pathos of innocence into a destabilised awareness of humanity's fragmented consciousness, and then seen him offering himself again in a kind of dedicatory baptism that attempts to restore that wholeness; we are therefore more able to appreciate the tensions inherent in his own confession of events. For though he can affirm that the past in him is dead, and that he is in this sense a new creature, he has still to learn how to relate his present experience to what he has seen before. Hence the inaccuracies, the sudden enthusiasms, and the comic misjudgments that he makes.¹ However, the

¹Chapter Seven - Matty's journal - is in Golding's naive "artless" style,

themes of Golding's fiction run seriously through all this:

"I have been among the Baptists and Methodists and Quakers and the Plymouth Brethren but there is no dread anywhere and no light. There is no understanding except sometimes when I repeat my portion inside from memory." (88)

Contrasted with the lifelessness in organised religion is the flourishing of his own spiritual wisdom. But still it is confused. On the first experience of the spirits appearing to him he is at a loss to understand, and his lament reiterates Golding's perennial theme: "Then they appeared, to me. I cannot properly say how. *Remembering changes it* . I cannot say how." (86)

Remembering changes it - man's patternmaking instinct sorts experience into a false order for convenience of storage, and when the memory is hauled out into the light of day it has undergone a transformation in which the shell of experience might remain, but the essence is lost. Matty gets it wrong occasionally for this reason, as when he believes that on 6th June he should go round displaying the number 666. Even before that, on the 4th, he is confused:

"It seems to me that on 1/6/66 a voice told me what to do but I cannot be sure. It is all mixed up like when the display counter was turned over by that great dog." (89)

Nevertheless, in his willingness to respond, Matty begins to make extraordinary progress. Within the framework of Golding's contrasted illustrations of the development of his central protagonists, a number of Matty's characteristics stand out as being of particular importance. One is his willingness to be absolutely humble. Thus, when is is told that he is similar in many ways to the bulk of *The Inheritors*. This gives some clues as to how to interpret it. The communication of "innocence" in Golding's work has always relied on this kind of approach, requiring a style of deliberate naivety, the absence of grammatical features that would denote maturity and sophistication, and the description of events whose seriousness belies the evenness of tone in which they are described. A passage like the one in *The Inheritors*, where Lok mistakes an arrow fired at him for a present, shows the tensions inherent in this kind of style, for as readers we always know far more than the novel states. This is precisely the point - it is the only way in which we can experience innocence.

is near the centre of things, and this causes him to be proud, the result is immediate contrition:

"As I felt the pride of it I saw them both much dimmed. So I hurled myself down inside, down as far as I could and I stayed like that." (91)

Like Jocelin, Matty gives up his all; and like Jocelin, the result is spiritual illumination. But Golding here has the vision to build the superstructure of the novel on the illumination achieved. Secondly, Matty has a genuine (though initially limited) comprehension of the fluidity of vision. Through him Golding shows that what matters is not the pursuit of a closed plan or pattern of existence, but a responsiveness to visionary promptings that takes each change of direction and follows it through. The crucial experience in this context is the instruction to Matty to throw away his Bible. Initially, Matty's reaction is 'wrong' - "At this I think I cried out and they thrust me away from them." (91-2) But once he has ascertained the wisdom of the action - that the Bible has become to him an idol like the other trappings of life that he has given up, and that it is getting in the way of the vision - then he is able to carry it through. From the act of faith an affirmation comes almost immediately: "I said it was terrible knowing what to do or what not to do in such a matter.... They showed: Be obedient and you shall not fall." (93). Thirdly, Matty has obedience to his spiritual promptings. The simple and unconscious comedy of his learning to ride a bicycle in response to their instructions is marvellously handled. In the intensity of the theme he is outlining, Golding never loses a sense of proportion. Sententiousness is kept in check by the constraints of normality. And so Matty's earnest diary entries reveal in Golding a delicate wit:

"It is easier to ride a car than to learn to ride a bike when you are a grown man but today my knees and elbows seem better and the bruising has gone down." "My bike stands up to it. If the spirits had not told me to buy the bike I should have gone by train and it would have been cheaper." (95)

The most important fact to emerge from the concluding chapter of this first section of the novel is the partial answer to Matty's burning question as to what he is for:

"I said, hardly knowing what I did, Who am I? What am I? What am I for? Is it to do with children? Then they showed: It is a child. And when you bore the awful number through the streets a spirit that is black with a touch of purple like the pansies Mr Pierce planted under the rowan was cast down and defeated and the child was born sound in wind and limb and with an I.Q. of a hundred and twenty. Ask on. At this I cried out What am I? Am I human? and heard Mr Pierce turn over in bed with a great honk of a snore and the spirits removed me from them but gently."
(101)

Notice again the puncturing of a potentially sententious atmosphere. But as this section closes we see Matty installed in the role he is to play out for the rest of his life, gaining in spiritual wisdom and maturity.

In the culmination of Matty's life's work he is shown by Golding to achieve once again the wholeness of being with which he came into the world. The vital passages occur in the fragment of his journal that we are given in Chapter Fourteen. In them, Matty learns about signs, about his sexuality, and about his ultimate purpose. The sign is not made by Matty but by Sophy, and it leaves Matty at a loss. Sophy 'finds' the engagement ring she has just deliberately lost -

"I am lost like it might be the ring. Now I ask myself what this sign means. Can to lie be a sign I ask myself. She smiled and lied. She lied by doing not by saying. Her saying was true but not true. She did not find it but she found it. I do not know." (236)

Ambiguity is invading all areas of Matty's life. He is beginning to see things as mixed where before they were clear and sharply defined. But this is no longer a process leading to confusion and despair (unlike Sophy's vision of the mixedness of things - "It's all tangles!"). Instead, because Matty's vision has been honed to such a degree of sensitivity, he can now assimilate the immense variety of experience into his being without his wholeness of response being shattered. It is a return to the kind of

primal unity of vision that characterised Golding's Neanderthal people in **The Inheritors**.

The second barrier to fall is sexual, and with it Matty loses fear and shame. Having believed, mistakenly, that since his Australian experience he is sexually incapable, it comes as something of a shock for Matty to have a wet dream about Sophy. The point is that Matty tries to feel shame, but cannot. His sexual life has been incorporated into the unified vision, and the result is an evocation of the harmonic singing of all creation:

"I can see the sky now. I mean I can look into it and it is very slightly coloured all the way up. The boys came but briefly. I tried to tell them these things about everything rejoicing as it might be with Hallelujahs and that. But I could not. It is like going over from black-and-white to colour."
(237)

At such moments as these Golding's prose assumes a charged density of expression that requires careful disentangling. The first thing to notice is the particular aptness of Matty's simile, which is precisely what Golding's fiction is about. The freedom which comes from being released from the limitations of black-and-white vision is the same freedom that comes ultimately to Jocelin in **The Spire** (and we might note how colours - blacks and pinks - and images - trees and the sky - are common to these moments in both novels). The celebratory joy of all creation here is very like Sammy's transcendent experience on his release from captivity in **Free Fall**. In both cases singing (or music in general) is invoked as the purest expression of joy and harmony. In **Darkness Visible** Golding goes further, for Matty's newfound oneness is celebrated in the characteristic visionary image (cf. Eliot's use of it in **Four Quartets**) of dancing. Narrated in Matty's deadpan style, the moment is marvellously comic yet also poignant:

"The boys went off to music appreciation. I could hear but only a bit. So I *left my work* and went after them and stood by the garage near the music room window. They played music on the gramophone it came out loud and I heard it like I see the trees

and the sky now and the boys like angels it was a big orchestra playing Beethoven a symphony and I for the first time I began to dance there on the gravel outside the music dept window. Mrs Appleby came and saw me so I stood. She looked like an archangel laughing so I stood. She shouted to me marvellous isn't it the Seventh I didn't know you cared for music and I shouted back laughing neither did I. She looked like an archangel laughing so my mouth shouted no matter what I could do. I am a man I could have a son. She said what an extraordinary thing to say are you alright. I remembered then my vow of silence and it seemed very small but I thought I have gone near enough by talking to the boys so I blessed her with my right hand like a priest. She looked surprised and went away quickly. This is all what Mr Pierce used to call a turn up for the book." (237)

As with all Golding's heroes at moments like this, Matty's utter astonishment is at the heart of the text. In this case, Golding achieves the right tone by the simple use of italics ("*I left my work*") to convey the taking of this most un-Mattylike initiative. The choice of Beethoven's Seventh (the "apotheosis of the dance" to Wagner) is superb - joyous, radiant **solid** music ("I heard it like I see the trees and the sky now"). Then the final measure of the total integration of Matty's being comes in the hilarious interchange with Mrs Appleby. The language of the text tumbles ungrammatically over itself in a torrent of sheer joy and energy. Matty does say an extraordinary thing, but then it is an extraordinary moment. Shouting and laughing are the last things we have been led to expect from Matty. The declaration "I am a man I could have a son" is simply the welling up and overflowing of the fullness of life in Matty.

The novel here reaches its peak of optimism, and the obscurity of what follows should in no way blind us to the fact that this is its visionary heart. Directly after noting the events of the day in his journal, Matty is given "a portion of providence". (237) It is a vision of the spiritual world coexisting with the physical one. It is also a statement of Golding's fundamental belief (related at many other points in his fiction, and in his essays and conversation). It is a refutation of the view that at the heart of Golding's vision there is despair. The glory

transcends the pain:

"What good is not directly breathed into the world by the holy spirit must come down by and through the nature of men. I saw them, small, wizened, some of them with faces like mine, some crippled, some broken. Behind each was a spirit like the rising of the sun. It was a sight beyond joy and beyond dancing."
(237-8)

In **The Spire** Jocelin makes the same discovery. He sees his spiritual vision set to rights, and he recognises the human value in love between men that forgives (not just Roger, the master builder, but the hard-hearted Anselm and the crowd who revile him) and seeks to serve. Matty becomes the living (and dying) embodiment of service. It is no exaggeration, and more than a truism, to say that all Matty's life has led up to the moment of his death. The elders reveal to him the full answer to his life's question:

"The cry that went up to heaven brought you down. Now there is a great spirit that shall stand behind the being of the child you are guarding. That is what you are for. You are to be a burnt offering." (238)

There is no horror in this revelation, as there would be if Matty were not now totally secure. Instead, in a vision reminiscent of passages in the Book of Revelation in which Jesus appears clothed in white robes before the elders, Matty's spiritual life reaches that point of perfection in which he sees God. The references to the Son of God in Revelation which are quoted here should leave us in no doubt as to Golding's allusions. In the context of the fiction, Golding's apocalyptic message is clear:

"I was in great awe of the spirit in white but the red elder showed: This is the spiritual being who shall stand behind the child you are guarding. That child shall bring the spiritual language into the world and nation shall speak it unto nation."
(239)

Golding's fascination with endings and new beginnings here reaches new peaks. In a sense, as A.S. Byatt notes in her review¹, Golding's earlier

fiction, like the work of many other writers in the 1950s and 1960s, has been apocalyptic, on a small scale. Thus, broadly speaking, *The Inheritors* is a microcosmic exploration of the fall of man; *Pincher Martin* treats individual death in a similar way. After these, the visionary design of *Darkness Visible* is on a breathtaking scale. Naturally the language of the apocalypse is conveyed in signs, not in actions, for this novel is about *Matty*, not the end of the world. But from *Matty* the signs ramify outwards and in the demonstrated fulfilment of *Matty's* role the way to the potential fulfilment of the prophecies given to him is left clear.

The mechanics of the plot naturally take an obscure course. This is only what we might expect - the whole of the novel has demonstrated the seemingly arbitrary and the accidental working towards a fixed purpose. In this novel, the determinist streak in Golding's temperament is at its most relaxed. It seems to me that as a consequence the myth-making is not as strenuous as in his earlier 'closed'-form novels. Now we have a celebration of the meaningful arbitrariness of existence.

In this sense, *Matty's* death seems like the random fulfilment of prophecy. Golding handles the scene with a dispassionate distancing effect that he reserves for moments of intense significance, such as the death of *Lok* in *The Inheritors*. There, *Lok* was no longer individually named, but just "the red creature" - stripped even of the humanity that we endow him with over the course of the novel. Likewise *Matty* becomes "it", "the fire-monster". The language is blankly factual. We bring to it from elsewhere in the text the meanings that make it signify:

"A strange thing happened to the fire. It seemed to organize itself into a shape of flame that rushed out of the garage doors and whirled round and round. It made as if on purpose for the man and his burden. It whirled round still and the only noise from it was that of burning. It came so close to the man and it was so monstrous he dropped the bundle and a boy leapt out of it and ran away, ran screaming to where the others were being marshalled. The man dressed as a soldier struck out wildly at the fire-monster, then ran, ran shouting away into

¹The Literary Review, 5/10/79, p. 10.

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the cover of the trees. The fire-monster jiggled and whirled. After a time it fell down; and after some more time it lay still." (248)

There is an obvious tidiness about the fires - "In my beginning is my end" seems almost too convenient. But it is saved from triteness by the elders' prophecy and by the complex fulfilment of the involuntary sacrifice that Matty makes - a sacrifice that he cannot know has been successful. Golding goes out of his way to play down the inevitability of the action - the fire "*seemed to organize itself*"; Matty "*made as if on purpose* for the man". The pentecostal imagery is kept firmly under control. But it is there. Here, as so often in his mature work, Golding triumphs by understatement.

Matty's final appearance in the novel is to old Pedigree. It has long been his hope to heal the wounds in Pedigree's character. These may or may not have been caused by Matty - all we know is that, unassisted, Pedigree's "wave motion" has been swinging with an ever-increasing amplitude until Matty offers him the one thing he needs - freedom. As I have noted earlier, the language of Hopkins' 'Windhover' resonates throughout this section: Matty's function is specifically redemptive. Freedom has its price, however, and involves breaking the bonds that strap Pedigree to what would otherwise be a treadmill of despair. Freedom is imaged here as the removal of the multicoloured ball which Pedigree has used to entice "the little men". The process reveals that the acquisition of freedom is painful - but in performing this last redemptive act, Matty's chapter is closed. The final paradox of mixed love and pain is demonstrated in Matty's "loving but terrible" smile. The reminiscences of the end of *Pincher Martin* ("a compassion that was timeless and without mercy") are obvious. As the God-figure whittles away the egocentric world of Pincher, till only the claws are left, so Matty breaks through Pedigree's defences, in a process like the drawing of the root of a

diseased tooth:

"He clutched the ball closer and drew it in to avoid the great hands that were reaching towards him ...But the hands came and drew it away so that the strings that bound it to him tore as he screamed. Then it was gone." (265)

In Golding's world, there is no love without pain. To serve does not necessarily mean always doing that which would please the one who is being served. Golding's concept of love always presupposes the fact that there is a wisdom higher than that which man alone can perceive. Matty's final act of restitution belongs to such a world. Golding's final ironic comment - the view through the park-keeper's eyes - shows that the untutored eyes of man are incapable of seeing it. But in the consonance of the fiction Golding declares that it is there. Matty has finished his work; in him, for the first time in his fiction, Golding has pursued his vision to its ultimate goal.

II

"She was there and could hear herself or someone in the hiss and crackle and roar, the inchoate unorchestra of the lightless spaces."¹

Sophy Stanhope's role is to act as a curious kind of mirror image to Matty. In a sense, Golding here is breaking new ground. In the past, his female characters have been faceless and two-dimensional: the caricature Mary Lovell, reincarnated as the empty Beatrice; Goody Pangall, who exists (albeit necessarily because of the novel's construction) as a faceless projection of Jocelin's sexual obsession in his uncountrry. With Evie and Bounce in *The Pyramid*, Golding's women become recognisably human. Too little attention, I believe, has been given to this novel; as an

1

Darkness Visible, p. 167.

indication of Golding's developing skills it has been sadly neglected. Nevertheless, it is true to say that **The Pyramid** is essentially a 'surface' novel - it makes its 'serious' points by what is left out, by the things left unsaid, the issues avoided. With Sophy, Golding attempts for the first time an anatomy of a modern woman. Most reviewers, while recognising that this was an extraordinary sudden extension of the range of his fictional approach, nevertheless claimed that the attempt of a 70 year-old male author to step into the consciousness of a 'modern' teenager and young woman revealed his limitations rather more than it did his fictional insight. Whilst I would not deny Sophy's 'thinness' as a character, and whilst it is certainly true that some of her dialogue sounds like a novelist's stylisation of youthful speech rather than the thing itself, nevertheless Golding handles many of the novel's themes, through her, with a sensitivity that makes his earlier novels seem crude by comparison. Pincher is a simple 'type' figure, a catalogue of vices. Sammy is a rather more subtle treatment of the same subject, in that he has the power of self-analysis, and a degree of self-knowledge. But still, surrounded as he is by sets of 'alter egos', placed on archetypal landscapes, it is very difficult to view him apart from the trappings of fable which enmesh the novel. Here, because this is 'the real world', more than in any of Golding's other novels except perhaps **The Pyramid**, Sophy's individuality is under less of a threat. Consequently Golding's exploration of the inner workings of her being is much more subtle.

As in the case with Matty, it is Sophy's exceptional characteristics that stand out first. She is extraordinarily clever, something which Golding's women have never been before. She is also, by a process which is shown in some detail rather than merely stated for our acceptance, utterly amoral. The greatest contrast here is with Pincher Martin. He is what he is, defiant and unchanging, from the beginning of the novel to the end;

and, because his 'past' is narrated in isolated incidents, an "album of snapshots", we never find out why (indeed, to ask it at all is to step beyond the bounds of the novel). With Sophy, Golding explores a process of becoming. Each narrative event is a discovery and produces a change.

From the beginning Sophy demonstrates that central Golding concept, the fractured human consciousness, and the necessary consequence, 'living' from the head alone:

"Sophy on the other hand knew that she herself lived at the top end of a smoother and rounder and stronger body, inside a head with dark curls all over it." (105)

Sophy discovers the potential pleasure in realising that 'self' exists at the centre of one's being, and that this isolated self can be indulged:

"Sophy could do the step and would have liked to do it for ever, one, two, three, hop, one, two, three, hop; calm pleasure in the way that threeness always brought the other leg for you to do a hop with, and for some reason, no Toni." (106)

Feeding, and pleasing, this 'centre' becomes the chief motivating function of Sophy's existence. From here the implications of the interwoven textual strands start to be revealed. Pleasure appears difficult to find until, as the earnest but dull Roland is having sex with her, she characterises the sensation bathetically as "a faint, ring-shaped pleasure." (145) It is no accident that the only literal appearance of a ring in the book - the 'lost' engagement ring - should induce in Sophy a recognition of the complexities of the conventions of life that is thematically and textually similar to Matty's experience of "the seamy side where the connections are":

"And then out of the complications too vast for understanding, out of the lies not admitted but nevertheless known to be lies, out of the surmises and the complexities and the seamy side they collapsed in each other's arms, shaking with mutual laughter." (182)

Their contrasted responses - Matty's contrition, Sophy's laughter - are left unadorned by Golding, to form part of the book's pattern of meaning.

In the disintegrated human being, Golding claims, there is a 'centre', a heart of darkness almost, which is situated generally in the head. In *Pincher Martin* it is called "a darker dark, a fact like a bar of steel." It is the indissoluble core of self (the "I am I"). In *Darkness Visible* Golding's exploration of the existence of this core of being is conveyed with a particular subtlety by his study of the slowly evolving (disintegrating?) consciousness of Sophy. The analysis begins with that first realisation of the relationship between the inner self and the outside world that comes when, for Sophy, the rectangular walk falls into place, along with the reason for it (p. 106). Before this, life had hit Sophy with a randomness over which she had no control; now she begins to exercise her will, to make things happen, to understand the relationship between things. Again, Golding works by images. In this case he observes Sophy's discovery of her preference for a brook over a canal, though we are left to theorise for ourselves that this is because a canal is static, merely there, whereas a brook is a continuous process of change. It is a gentle suggestion that man loves process, and loves even more the process over which he has control.

Thus, Sophy discovers "Of course", the apparently arbitrary but necessary combination of elements which, occurring in life, suggest a meaning quite out of nothing. In Matty's case, though Matty is (relatively) untroubled by the claims of 'self', we have seen this occurring in, for example, the chance overhearing of the curate in Greenfield church. For Sophy, whose 'centre' is beginning to assume control, "Of course" operates to nourish this self-centredness and to give it definition:

"Now - and this was where the 'Of course' thing came in - now there was a large pebble lying to hand among the grasses and drying mud, where no pebble had any business to be unless 'Of course' was operating. It seemed to her she did not have to look for the pebble. She just moved her throwing arm and the

palm of her hand fitted nicely over the smooth, oval shape."
(108)

The transition from the arbitrary into the automatic is accomplished so smoothly that Sophy never questions what is happening. She is merely part of the process, which is quite inexorable:

"There it was, a fact like any other, she *saw* the curve which the stone would follow, saw the point to which the particular first chick would advance while the stone would be in its arc. 'Would be', or 'Was'? For also, and this was subtle - when she thought back later it did seem that as soon as the future was comprehended it was inescapable. But inescapable or not she could never understand - at least, not until a time when understanding was an irrelevance - how she was able, left arm held sideways, upper arm rotating back from the elbow past her left ear in a little girl's throw - was able not merely to jerk her upper arm forward but also to let go the stone at the precise moment, angle, speed, was able to let it go unimpeded by the joint of a finger, a nail, pad of the palm, to follow - and really only half meant - to follow in this split and resplit second as if it were a possibility chosen out of two, both presented, both foreordained from the beginning, the chicks, Sophy, the stone to hand, as if the whole of everything had worked down to this point - to follow that curve in the air, the chick swimming busily forward to that point, last in line but having to be there, a sort of silent *do as I tell you*: then the complete satisfaction of the event." (108-9)

This superb paragraph, carefully precise in the manner of all Golding's crucial moments, evokes the tantalising inevitability of events. Several points require comment. First, in some inexplicable way, Sophy 'sees' what will happen. Like Matty, she has a special, almost intuitive, foreknowledge. Like Matty ("like wishing things and then seeing them happen; or even *having* to wish something and then seeing it happen") cause and effect, and the roles of choice and inevitability, confuse Sophy. "'Would be' or 'Was'?" - it makes no difference on one level, since things simply happen to both of them "because, because, because!" But as a final explanation this is unsatisfactory. The result depends on Sophy choosing to make herself part of the process. Sophy "learns to be simple" - "she could never understand - at least not until a time when understanding was an irrelevance." This is more complex. Matty and Sophy both discover a kind of simplicity in service; but Matty's service is to

others, where Sophy's is to the "This" that inhabits the tunnel in her skull. The textual links do not end there, though, for the deeds of both Matty and Sophy at times like this are described "as if it were a possibility *chosen* out of two" (cf. Matty the "fire-monster" making "as if on purpose" for Bill and the boy). But "Of course" is the exertion of Sophy's control - "a sort of silent *do as I tell you*". And the result is pleasure, the focus and goal of all that Sophy does - "the achieved contemplation". Sophy has discovered process, and discovered that she can have control over process - and Golding's prose mirrors this superbly, in the mechanistic precision of the description of her throwing action. Yet Golding also manages to imply - "and really only half meant" - that Sophy never has a **total** control, and the fear that events are running her, or at least running away from her, dominates her actions.

Thus, Sophy's philosophical choice, her decision to serve self, to serve "This" at the mouth of her tunnel, is obviously important as part of Golding's general scheme of ideas in this novel. I have already noted how in **Pincher Martin** Golding avoids from the outset any exploration of choice for his protagonist. But in **Free Fall**, the action hinges on Sammy's decision, "Evil, be thou my good". Or at least, we are told so. The scene in which this occurs is, like all the others, overtly symbolic, and therefore it is sententious and obviously 'meaningful'. Because it has to serve this symbolic function, Sammy's individuality seems to diminish in inverse proportion to the 'significance' of the action. Therefore we are less likely to be convinced about the necessity of his action, and, consequently, the book is more likely to 'creak' in its structural moralising. Sophy's philosophical choice is just as important as Sammy's, but Golding has learnt to let his fiction speak for itself - a quiet thoughtful paragraph that digests Sophy's experience so far, and shows her choosing, inevitably, a future for herself:

"She saw something. She had been told it often enough but now she *saw* it. You could choose to belong to people the way the Goodchilds and Bells and Mrs Hugeson did by being good, by doing what they said was right. Or you could choose what was real - your own self sitting inside with its own wishes and rules at the mouth of the tunnel." (123)

Free from all the machinery of the fable, Sophy's choice is made and the consequences pursued.

The first, childish attempts at stealing are a necessary consequence, as is the reason - and here Golding is rigorous and piercingly acute - for giving it up: because it is boring. But Sophy's piercing amorality adds another link to Golding's chain of necessity - the discovery of the nature of the object that inhabits Sophy's tunnel. It is a discovery that upsets the stable progress of what we might take to be Golding's mechanistic universe. Yes, Sophy has a moment of choice, and from it all things follow. But, as I said earlier, there is a sense in which Sophy is not in total control, and this is imaged here as the unknown, the "x" in Sophy's equation:

Once or twice she thought about this matter so piercingly, it was as if right and wrong and boring were numbers you could add and subtract. She saw, too, in this particularly piercing way, that there was another number, an x to be added or to be subtracted, for which she could find no value." (124)

It is, as I observed before when discussing Matty, Golding's point that there is a meaningful arbitrariness in things. Golding's is a world in which free choices are made, but in which the consequences of every choice are accountable. So, Sophy chooses "This":

"*This* lived and watched without any feelings at all and brandished or manipulated the dark Sophy-creature like a complicated doll, a child with all the arts and wiles and deliberate delightfulness of a quite unselfconscious, oh a quite innocent, naive, trusting little girl." (124)

The paradox of being and seeming, of inside and outside, is demonstrated explicitly here. "This" brandishes Sophy like a doll - the inside manipulates the outside. The consequence is an attitude to all that is

outside - the world, other people - that treats them as objects, and exerts control over them. This surely is the reason for her enigmatic attitude to the glove puppet which Roland finds on her dressing table: "'That's not a doll. It's a glove puppet. Fingers in here. I used to do this a lot. Sometimes I felt -'." (144) What Sophy feels is "This" manipulating her just as she manipulated the puppet. It is a neat illustration - and all the better for Golding's muted use of it.

However there is another consequence of head-controlled humanity which usurps this seemingly mechanistic universe which "This" would like to exploit. As human consciousness is disintegrated, so the body does not always take to being brandished with such ease. This is a complex and ambiguous area in Golding's work, and it is one that has led to a trivialisation of his attitudes by many critics who have claimed that Golding is motivated by hatred for humanity. As I have tried to show, Golding's ideal is a world in which head and body are unified, and not fragmented. That the head manipulates the body, in the manner of a glove puppet, is true. But the control is not total - and the body asserts its own rights from time to time. The nightmare, for Sophy, or rather for "This", is the revelation that sometimes it fails, and that the body has its own way.

Hence, "Periods, when they happened, hurt Sophy and enraged her." (130) Her rage is confused and aimless, precisely because her periods are inevitable and beyond her control. Hence too her confused attitude to sex, and her frustration with her sexual experiments. It is in this area that, in the past, Golding's misanthropic, not to say misogynist, views have been subject to most criticism. Until this novel, it had been claimed, Golding had never described a 'normal' sexual relationship. It seems to me that we are intended to take Sammy's life with Taffy as normal, but it is certainly true that they do not figure very largely in the novel's

structure. Elsewhere, sex is almost always described as a means of exploitation, of the subjection of one ego to another. Because the body is reduced to the status of an object, this is seen to be inevitable.

It is in treating her own body as an object that Sophy begins her own sexual exploration. Her "experiments" are again described in the mechanical tone which Golding reserves for head-controlled activity ("She tried a couple of boys who proved incompetent and their mechanisms ridiculous" (135)) before she eventually succeeds in losing her virginity. The whole point of the episode is that the sexual act is meaningless, indeed quite as distasteful as Sophy finds it, if it is not an action of the unified human being. Sophy's disgust with her own body is intense. In the internal explorations in which she indulges afterwards, Golding is crudely, disgustingly explicit:

"She came on the other shape, lying opposite the womb but at the back, a shape lying behind the smooth wall but easily to be felt through it, the rounded shape of her own turd working down the coiled gut and she convulsed, feeling without saying but feeling every syllable - *I hate! I hate! I hate!* There was no direct object to the verb, as she said to herself when she was a little more normal. The feeling was pure." (138)

This is deliberately obscene. Its purpose is to jolt us into an understanding of the extent to which Sophy's body is the object of her hatred.

The failure of "This" to exert control is at the root of two other curious experiences which Sophy has, and for which Golding offers no explanation. One is the sudden and inexplicable invasion of her world by the freak wave, on the day Winnie takes them to the sea. The sea "went wrong" - a childish locution, but one again which sees things in terms of a mechanical function - and they were nearly drowned. This gives Sophy nightmares, something else over which "This" has no control, and a feeling of enveloping fear, even when waves are not physically present, but only there on the television:

"At one moment the screen was full of a wave approaching, and the camera zoomed right up, right in, so you were right inside the immense green hollow. Sophy felt a terrible pang in her stomach and a fear of everything and she shut her eyes to keep out the sight though she could still hear the wave, or some wave, or other, roaring and roaring." (116)

Coming early in the novel, this seems quite inexplicable. But when we recognise that a wave is caused by a force moving through an object, things become clearer. The power which makes the wave is invisible, inexorable and beyond her control. A similar thing happens at the party she goes to with Gerry, where the guests indulge in a party game that resembles Rorschach ink blot tests. The point of the test is that, confronted with a random shape made by an ink blot, the interpretation given reveals something about the workings of the viewer's subconscious.

The game misfires:

"When Sophy had her turn she looked at the black shape in the middle of the paper and nothing happened at all. Then without any kind of intermission she found she was lying on the sofa and staring at the ceiling and there was no party roar and people were standing round and looking down at her. She got up on one elbow and saw the woman who was giving the party standing by the open door of the flat and talking to someone who was outside it.

'Nothing my dear Lois, nothing at all.'

'But that dreadful screaming and screaming!'" (157)

Golding volunteers no explanations, but the text reveals the clues. When Sophy looked at the blot, "nothing happened at all". This is precisely the point - Sophy is staring at nothing. The ink blot is a kind of black hole, and therefore Sophy's terror is induced because, confronted by nothing, she has nothing to feed on.

This brings me to an exploration of Golding's most complex use of Sophy as a character. The service of "This" requires action, and it is in her philosophy of action that Sophy approaches closest to a vision of all-encompassing nihilism. Her goal is described most accurately as a "destroying consummation". Now we can begin to see how the novel's clash of ideologies, of faiths almost, works itself out. Golding has observed

that the Satan of our twentieth-century cosmology is the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Things are running down. Entropy dictates our progress, or rather our regression. But, he claims, this deteriorating process is countered by the lives of saints, of visionaries. Therefore we have a confrontation between Matty, who is 'positive', a life source, and Sophy, who is the agent of decay. How, then, does Sophy's vision come about, and to what does it prompt her?

Embryonically, the process begins with "Weirdness", discovered in the childish naivety of her 'revenge' on Winnie and her father:

"She found herself overcome with a passionate desire in the darkness to be Weird - there was no other name for it, Weird and powerful. She frightened herself and curled down in the bed but the dark tunnel was still there; and in that remote security she saw what to do." (126)

Sophy's experiences form a kind of compost, a prepared ground, into which the seeds of her mature ideology can fall. These spring from two radio talks she hears on Winnie's transistor. The talks are directed not at outside-Sophy (like Kim, "little friend of all the world") but "directly to the Sophy-thing that sat inside at the mouth of its private tunnel." (131) One is about entropy, and to Sophy it makes immediate sense and explains so much. The other is about a kind of extra-sensory perception:

"Sophy listened enthralled to the man who spoke about this nonsense, as he called it. He said there was no magic and how if people could guess these so-called cards more than they ought, statistically speaking, then fiercely, oh so very fiercely the man's eyes must be popping out, *statistics must be re-examined* She saw that what they missed out of their experiments in magic which gave them no or little result, was just the stinky-poo bit, the breaking of rules, the using of people, the well-deep wish, the piercingness, the - the what? The other end of the tunnel, where surely it joined on." (131-2)

The enmeshing of all these themes is what produces in Sophy the unique perceptions of her specialness, her sense that, as she says to Gerry many times, they are in a special time, separated from the run of normality. And the rationalisation of Weirdness that these broadcasts lead her to is

an explicit confrontation not just with the everyday world, but with the 'spiritual' forces on whose side Matty is.

Sophy's progress from this point onwards is essentially a sharpening of the focus of her vision. The details of her downward spiral need not be chronicled. Golding's prose is basic and functional, describing her dabblings in stealing, prostitution, and dropping out, until the plan is finally conceived. She meanders into a casual and meaningless relationship with Roland. In casting about for a sense of purpose, of motivation, she discovers the next step. She achieves an orgasm not during intercourse but through violence. The change in the language of the novel is immediate. The desultory tone is replaced during the description of the stabbing by Golding's 'technical' detailed approach, and then, at the moment of fulfilment, the prose bursts out, malignantly lyrical:

"Something strange was happening. The feeling from the blade was expanding inside her, was filling her, filling the whole room. The feeling became a shudder then an unstoppable arching of her body. She cried out through her clenched teeth. Unsuspected nerves and muscles took charge and swept her forward in contraction after contraction towards some pit of destroying consummation into which she plunged.

Then for a timeless time there was no Sophy. No *this* . Nothing but release, existing, impossibly by itself." (146)

"Destroying consummation" - this is the paradoxical goal which Sophy discovers. It is to play an active part in the process of destruction. Now, in the discovery of the sexual pleasure of violence, she has found a way to the target. As the practical step has its physical repercussions, so too it has its theoretical corollary: being simple -

"The pebble or the knife to the hand. To act simply. Or to extend simplicity into the absolute of being weird." (147)

Sophy has learnt to adapt the things that life thrusts at her to "be a part" in the running down:

"I want to know about pebbles and the hissing transistor and the running down, running down, endless running down!" (155-6)

Therefore the chance glimpse of Fido on the television leads naturally to

the hatching of the kidnap attempt. In all this Sophy has learnt to recognise signs. In this there is an explicit connection with Matty - his 6/6/66 and her 7/7/77 - since both feel a kind of prescience, though the novel will go on to reveal how, for both of them, "Judgement is not the simple thing you think." (101) Like Matty, she finds no words to express why things are like they are: "just *because*" But Golding's message comes through again from "the other side": "Sometimes there are coincidences; but sometimes the arrangement of things is - deliberate." (166) Golding is knitting a structure of reciprocal connections. In describing this, a collapsing world, Golding's prose fragments, becomes increasingly inarticulate - "What it wants, the dark, let the weight fall, take the brake off -." And then a truth appears to her, as to Matty - "The way towards simplicity is through outrage ." It is the next, the necessary step. It takes Sophy, or "This" at the tunnel's mouth, and releases it to be a part of the nothingness. Notice how Golding uses images that have trapped Sophy before - particularly waves and black holes - and shows that now Sophy takes them in her stride, rides them down into nothingness, because she is a part of them, since they no longer invade her unwilling consciousness from without:

"The long, long convulsions, the unknotting, the throbbing and disentangling of space and time on, on, on into nothingness -' And she was there; without the transistor she was there and could hear herself or someone in the hiss and crackle and roar, the inchoate unorchestra of the lightless spaces.

'On and on, wave after wave arching, spreading, running down, down, down -'" (167)

"The unchoate unorchestra of the lightless spaces" - the whole of Sophy's vision is a kind of negative version of Matty's. Golding suggests this particularly by the use of images of music and light being replaced by noise and darkness.

The event for which she waits, the last outrage, forms the climax of the novel. Golding's approach to the description of events is interesting

- the passage describing Matty's final sacrifice comes immediately before Golding's last long look at Sophy. Therefore we know already that the threat has been defused and that her plan has failed. The result suggests a similar approach to that of Pincher Martin, in which the ego goes on frantically deluding itself when reality ceases to conform to what the ego wants.

In the passage, Golding shows us just how the child Sophy is related to the adult - how the nourishing of "This" is simply stealing sweets from immigrants blown up onto a larger scale. But onto this naive glow of adrenalin Golding lays the cold hand of horror. She passes a rabbit caught in a trap. The image is perhaps a little too contrived - certainly, Golding makes a meal of its implications, spelling out what has only been hinted at elsewhere in the novel. I feel that there is something of the 'old' Golding in this passage:

"It was a rabbit in a snare, down there by the ditch that lay between the towpath and the woods. It was flailing about, not knowing what had caught it and not caring to know but killing itself in an effort just to be free, or it may be, just to be dead. Its passion defiled the night with grotesque and obscene caricature of process, or logical advance through time from one moment to the next where the trap was waiting." (249)

The "grotesque and obscene caricature of process" has a definite function: it points us directly to Sophy's progress in the novel. It is an image of finality, giving us by a kind of necessary extension, a vision of Sophy trapped and impaled on the jaws of her own endeavour. It is an obscene image of what Sophy has come to, but it is surely too convenient, too obvious to be quite acceptable.

In the pages which follow there are four crucial moments in which Sophy's vision is seen to be horrifying, obscene and finally delusive. The first is a moment of exultation, a declaration of outrage, and a blow struck on behalf of the self. The explosion which signals the beginning of the kidnap attempt is a public declaration of the power of the Sophy-

creature to disrupt, to defy and to outrage:

"Suddenly she knew it was her own fire, a thing she had done, a proclamation, a deed in the eye of the world - an outrage, a triumph! The feeling stormed through her, laughter, fierceness, a wild joy at the violation." (250)

The second moment is the recognition by Sophy of the choice she has made. Again it is important to see exactly the order in which Golding takes us through her thought processes. For the description that follows Golding prepares us by making us aware of its total unreality. She is explicitly leaning against a tree, while the Sophy-creature is having its fantasy of the last outrage. The action - emasculating the captured prince - is described like a childhood fantasy, which it is. The textual connections - with the old barge, the duck's eggs and the beginning of weirdness - make it apparent that the aspirations of the Sophy-creature have changed only quantitatively since those early days. The language of the description ("she could smell wee-wee"; "should he not have been in his pyjams") takes us back to the pre-pubescent Sophy focusing her weirdness on the old urinal (p. 132). As Sophy acts out her fantasy, the old Golding catchwords come out in force. Most crucially, the boy is described as "the creature". In the exploitation of others Sophy has committed Golding's ultimate sin. It is in this context that we get the confession of choice, the recognition that she is not inevitably like she is (as Pincher is) but that she has decided on this course; and Golding highlights the point by making the recognition stand alone in a new paragraph:

"She felt an utter disgust at the creature itself sitting there on the stinking loo, so disgusting, eek and ooh, oh so much part of all weirdness from which you could see that the whole thing was a ruin and
I chose." (251)

From the choice we move directly on to the consequences. The last outrage is an extreme orgasmic fantasy on the lines of Sophy's earlier

experiences. It has in it an element of ritual that is new - the bound prisoner, who becomes, magically, ready for sacrifice, "waiting for her on the flat stone" - but the essential steps in the action are simply her experiences with Roland and then with Gerry on the Downs writ large. The stabbing is like it was before until the delirium takes hold. Then, once again, there is release. Notice how, in this, Sophy's individuality disappears - "She was, or someone was, frightened a bit, far off and anxious." And, later, she becomes part of the experience, the initiator and participant - "So she thrust more still and felt it touch the leaping thing or be touched by it again and again." Finally she achieves the moment of fulfilment, of complete ecstasy. The image is again the reverse of Matty's transcendent experience:

"She thrust with all the power there was, deliriously; and the leaping thing inside seized the knife so that the haft beat in her hand, and there was a black sun." (252)

"A black sun" - in the simple light and darkness imagery of the novel it is the most fitting final illustration of Sophy's vision - the absence of heat, of light, of energy - an emblem of entropy.

Finally there is the moment of Sophy's recognition of defeat. The details of the action are confused and garbled, but the painful truth - that Gerry has thrown in his lot with Toni - cuts Sophy more than the failure to kidnap the boy. The sudden recognition that her fantasies are in a different league to her sister's terrorist activities gives Sophy a moment of rare illumination. She is not the perfect terrorist. She is simply the perfect selfish ego - indeed, Golding implies, it is Toni's selflessness, the lack of personality and hence the freedom within her for ideas to hold sway, that makes her so successful.

But Matty's victory is Sophy's defeat, and it is at this moment that Golding introduces the idea of the book's title. I have shown how frequently the theme of darkness is associated with Sophy, particularly in

the darkness that denotes the centre of the self. Now Golding introduces darkness naturalistically - for the fire at the school has died down - but there is no doubt that this is meant in a more than literal sense:

"She turned away from the boat and the fire and began to pick her way back along the towpath, where there was now nothing visible but darkness." (253)

"Darkness visible" - the image of despair, of emptiness, of entropy.

III

"Sim at this point began to rehearse his own particular statement. It is all reasonable. It is all, equally unreasonable." ¹

The 'thinness' of Golding's supporting casts in earlier fictions has illustrated both a strength and a weakness in his work. Because his concern with one central protagonist was often obsessive (Pincher, Sammy and Jocelin are the best examples) the novels in which these appear have an intensity of focus and a tautness of construction that suited the apocalyptic fervour of his vision. But these same qualities are attended by necessary drawbacks. In the three novels referred to above, Golding is trapped by his method into an inflexible treatment of other characters. The reasons in each case, though plausible, are detrimental to the overall impact of the novel. Pincher Martin treats all those around him as objects to be devoured. He is explicitly referred to as a 'type', and the novel's structural and ideological links with morality plays lead us to regard all the 'characters' in the action as two-dimensional projects of points of view. There is nothing 'wrong' in this approach - we just need to recognise the kind of fiction we are being presented with, and not to look to it to provide us with fictional approaches to which it does not aspire. Pincher Martin is like a narrow channel dug very deep; we shall look in

¹Darkness Visible, p. 200.

vain for breadth. Golding tried for breadth in **Free Fall**, but in what is generally acknowledged to be an unsatisfactory way. The crucial difference that separates Pincher and Sammy is Sammy's ability to analyse those around him. But herein lies the problem: Golding's eagerness to show how Sammy has been shaped by his environment, social and physical, leads again to typecasting. The novel's structure - a collage of antithetical attitudes - encourages this. Evie and Ma, Johnny and Philip, Beatrice and Taffy, Nick and Miss Pringle - the very precision of this arrangement precludes individuality. Golding has been trapped by the limitations of his technique.¹ Finally, in **The Spire** we are back in a world similar to Pincher Martin's. Like Pincher, Jocelin sees others merely as appendages to his own ego. Therefore they are necessarily faceless (as both Father Adam and Goody Pangall are literally described). Again, this suits the novel's obsessiveness, but not its particularity. As I think Golding came to realise at this point, what was needed was a different kind of novel. **The Pyramid** offers one approach, taking in social and personal idiosyncrasies at the expense of profundity. **Darkness Visible**, I contend, marries the two.

The marriage bond is strengthened by the attention Golding gives to three characters: Pedigree, Sim and Edwin. It is interesting to note that all of them are about the same age as Golding, and they are a generation older than Matty and two generations older than Sophy. On one level, they represent a repository of traditional values, looking on at a world which

¹It is interesting to consider **Free Fall** as an unsuccessful trial run for the kind of novel Golding eventually produced in **Darkness Visible**. The desire to write about modern England, about changes in social attitudes, about changes in the tempo of life and places in which it is lived out, whilst at the same time continuing his exploration of human nature - in all this **Free Fall** prefigures **Darkness Visible**. But how Golding's art has matured can be seen in the way he handles the themes. The basic difference, and the one that concerns me here, lies in the range and depth of Golding's characters, who are allowed to develop beyond caricatures, and, because they are individuals, are better able to represent a complex and changing society.

is becoming increasingly incomprehensible. They enable Golding to articulate a sense of change. On another level, the text affords ample illustration of the continuity of human nature - confused, lonely, searching and self-condemned - in the links that bind them to the central protagonists, particularly Sophy. It is here, I think, in the precise detail with which Golding binds their individuality into the action of the novel, that the extension of range is most marked. These men are not merely choric commentators. They initiate, they act and they respond: they are implicated in the machinery of the action.

Pedigree is more important for what he means to Matty than in his own right in the novel, but this does not prevent Golding from studying him in careful depth. Homosexuality has figured, at least tangentially, in Golding's novels before, but if we consider Pedigree's precursors, Father Watts-Watt in *Free Fall* and Evelyn de Tracy in *The Pyramid*, who are really comic grotesques, and whose contribution to the moral statement of the novels they inhabit is slight, then it is clear that in *Pedigree*, Golding brings homosexuality more completely into the ethical issues, and indeed the spiritual battles, that govern the book. At first it does not look as though this is to be the case, as Pedigree is introduced with comic aptness as "Old Pedders" (24). Furthermore, his speeches to his class seem to have that brittle superficial wittiness that has falsified Golding's dialogue in the past. But as we move into his thought patterns the tone suddenly deepens, and we see that in the spectrum of the novel *Pedigree* has his place somewhere between Sophy and Matty. Golding's exploration of the complex relations between freedom of choice and a kind of moral (rather than physical) predestination is given greater subtlety by the many points of reference we have to draw on. What we notice first, perhaps, are the similarities and differences between Pedigree and Sophy. Sophy chose - but at the same time she is seen to be a medium through

which the force (here, for evil) works. The imagery by which Golding illustrates this - waves and rhythms - is explicitly taken up in the descriptions of Pedigree:

"'I have a rhythm. Perhaps you remember, or are you too young to remember, when it was said that all God's children had rhythm? Mine's a wave motion ...Every so often I can feel the time coming, creeping up on me. You don't know what it's like to want desperately not to and yet know you will, oh yes you will! To feel the denouement, the awful climax, the catastrophe moving and moving and moving.'" (260)

There is much more that might lead us to see in this novel a philosophy of despair. For instance, there are links with Sophy on other levels - in the attachment they both have to the old urinal by the bridge, and particularly in the rectangular walk (p. 82) by which Pedigree eludes the police, which is identical to Sophy's. Also, Golding shows for both of them that the body has a degree of authority over the head (cf. "the body has its reasons and feet are selfish", (262), with similar discussions of Sophy's actions earlier). Clearly Pedigree is dominated by his bodily rhythm to an extent that Sophy has never been. Clearly too, we never see that Pedigree has to choose. The seeming inevitability of his actions throws hers into a new perspective.

It is Pedigree's textual links with Matty that reveal Golding's resolution of his issue. Though Matty in the end offers Pedigree a way out, a freedom from his inexorable wave motion, we begin, as might be expected, by references which bind them together. To choose just one, the image of a scratched gramophone record, forever repeating a brief cycle in its fractured groove, is particularly telling. In Matty's case, this incident occurs while he is still finding the correct response to his vision, before he himself is free:

"Sometimes she would hear him in the house as his voice got louder and louder, stuck like a scratched gramophone record.

'21 And he said unto them - said unto them - said unto them - said unto them -'" (55)

It is particularly important to see that at just this time his understanding of what is driving him on can only be expressed as "a must without any instructions". Pedigree's fate appears to be the same:

"So Mr. Pedigree kept out of the High Street for a while, going no nearer it than Foundlings, round the corner, where he sometimes hoped to see Edwin Bell, who took care not to be visible. The old man, stuck like a broken gramophone record would stand outside the railings." (85)

Finally, the cycle is broken, the rhythm is disrupted, and not just by death. The closing pages of the novel show that Matty brings with him the power to set Pedigree free. Once more, Golding is adept at re-using images of determinism and turning them into images of freedom. Thus it is with waves - which now become waves of light: "The golden hands of the sun stroked him warmly and he was conscious of sunlight like waves as if someone were stirring it with a paddle." (263) The whole passage is riddled with tell-tale signals; here, the diffident "as if" again makes an appearance, a sure sign that Golding means as exact what he is just describing as being arbitrary or even impossible. From here on, the novel's pattern of colour imagery takes over. Matty has been associated with gold and with sunlight - and in his offering of freedom Golding makes an explicit contrast with Toni's "long *silvery* aria" about the same word. Toni's freedom is cold, compassionless; Matty's is warm and loving, though that love has a purifying fire. Matty's freedom is personal - "they were in a park of mutuality and closeness where the sunlight lay right on the skin." (264) In this environment Matty gives to Pedigree sensations that he has never felt before - peace, joy and certainty. The concentration of the novel's 'positives' here shows Pedigree participating in the visionary impulses that have inspired Matty:

"Mr Pedigree saw that it was the extraordinary lively nature of this gold, this wind, this wonderful light and warmth that kept Windrove moving rhythmically in order to stay in one place."
(264)

The result is that Pedigree is released from the inexorability of the broken gramophone record ("*random* thoughts began to perform themselves in the volume that Mr. Pedigree was accustomed to regard as himself") to recognise and speak out a brief meditation on love, which, coming at this point in the novel, is clearly meant to have an authoritative weight. It concludes with Pedigree's recognition that he needs help, specifically from Matty. This is crucial in understanding the spiritual significance of what comes next, and of the novel as a whole. The decisive appeal has to come from Pedigree himself - it is his moment of choice, which is also his moment of release from the inexorable progress of his own version of "Of course". Immediately the tone of the prose changes for the final apocalyptic visionary passage in which Matty is again a burnt offering:

"For the golden immediacy of the wind altered at its heart and began first to drift upwards, then swirl upwards then rush upwards round Matty. The gold grew fierce and burned. Sebastian watched in terror as the man before him was consumed, melted, vanished like a guy on a bonfire; and the face was no longer two-tone but gold as the fire and everywhere there was a sense of the peacock eyes of great feathers and the smile round the lips was loving and terrible. This being drew Sebastian towards him so that the terror of the golden lips jerked a cry out of him -

'Why? Why?'

The face looming over him seemed to speak or sing but not in human speech.

Freedom ." (265)

The process is not an easy one. We have already seen in the novel how the transformation of Matty's vision was painful; so it is also for Pedigree. It is a necessary purgation. The text here confirms Matty's role, and the result. That this is freedom we should have no doubt - because of the close and detailed reference to colours, fires, waves, and the voice of the spirit which is described in tones similar to that time when Matty met with Sim and Edwin. Matty's role is complete, and Pedigree is set free.¹

¹The novel's postscript is a return to earth after the intensity of what has just passed. It is another confirmation of Golding's belief in the transmission of individual spiritual value. In simple terms, the park keeper represents life 'going on'. His eyes are blind and dead - they are

Sim and Edwin Bell function as two halves of a personality, and so I shall treat them together. The first thing to notice about them is their similarity to Sophy. I have written at length about Golding's contention that humanity has a fragmented consciousness, and illustrated it from the descriptions of Sophy in the novel. Sim is described in the same manner, though his understanding (his individual consciousness) is fragmented in a necessarily individual way. He is dominated by the head, but in a world-weary and cynical fashion. He understands himself too well, and in so doing he illustrates the dilemma of modern faithless humanity, prevented from believing by knowing too much, and therefore existing as a "committee" of internal contradictions. This is a reworking of Sophy's discovery from the jaundiced perspective of old age, only where Sophy's "This" sits inside her head, Sim's driving force is his sexual impulse which refuses to be subordinated in the "committee":

"That was sheer wantonness, not helping the business but hindering Rupert. For fun. The diabolical *thing* down there disporting itself." (194)

Later Golding uses again a description first mentioned in *The Spire* - where Jocelin recognises his sexual drive as "the unruly member"- which fits neatly with this idea of committees. Sim's eventual articulation of his credo is the voice of sadness and despair that Golding has commented on in his essay, 'Thinking as a Hobby':

"Sim at this point began to rehearse his own particular statement. It is all reasonable. It is all, equally unreasonable. I believe it all as much as I believe anything that is out of sight; as I believe in the expanding universe, which is to say as I believe in the Battle of Hastings, as I believe in the life of Jesus, as I believe in - It is a kind of belief which touches nothing in me. It is a kind of second-class believing. My beliefs are me; many and trivial." (200)

the eyes of the mundane insensitive world, and the prose is as a consequence flat and unresponsive. He is part of the world of bland indifference that Golding paints as the backdrop to the main action. His response - or lack of it - is not a contradiction of what has gone before. The worlds coexist.

With despair goes Sim's consciousness of self-deception, the acceptance of the fact that some members of his committee turn a blind eye to the activities of other members. This is the reverse side of the coin of scepticism that stops Sim believing anything. It functions particularly with regard to the Stanhope girls, and on at least one telling occasion Sim contrasts Pedigree's "disgusting appetite" with his own contemplation of "things that were really clean and sweet wonderfully *nubile* ." (213). It occurs again in the less savoury context of Sim's racial views:

"All the same they swarm. With the best will in the world I must say they swarm. They are not what I think, they are what I feel. Nobody knows what I feel, thank God." (218)

He chooses a line of self-deception; and immediately afterwards he greets Mr Stanhope with "his personalised bit of play acting." In all this, the similarities with Sophy's role-playing are acute.

Like Sophy again, his imagination functions on a deceptive level. It plays games with itself, makes excuses for its behaviour. Just as Sophy recognised that right and wrong were matters of pretence which depended on the operation of a social code, so Sim and Edwin both play the game, neither fooled but both applying the conventions to the last, in their excuses made for their wives' reluctance to associate with Pedigree (pp. 224, 242). It runs wild mostly on sexual subjects - witness the melancholy comedy of his misconstruction of the reasoning behind the roped-up chair (pp. 246-7). And one fantasy sequence is explicitly reminiscent of Sophy's daydream of outrage in offering herself to her father:

"I know how the mind can rise from its bed, go forth, down the stairs, past doors, down the path to the stables that are bright and rosy by the light of two small girls. But they were asleep and remained asleep even if their images performed the silly dance, the witless Arabian thing." (225)

In this way, Golding is pointing out threads of continuity that join Sim with Sophy, unifying his conception of human nature.

For all this, Sim feels the need to search, to find something to believe in. The fact that he does it so half-heartedly, with such reservation, is important for what Golding is trying to say, as will be clear if we recall the passage in Matthew, Chapter 7, quoted earlier, which relates finding to seeking. Sim's progress in this final section of the novel is slight, but it is there; it requires the rejection of the checks and balances, the mechanisms that stop him believing actively, before he can go on. An added complexity is Edwin's discovery that in Matty he has found what he was **not** looking for. This is subtle - it suggests that searching is not so much a pursuit of extraneous facts, of systems for their own sake, but that it is rather an attitude of being. Thus, Edwin is ambushed (remember the telling use of that word when Matty gets his name), just because he happens to be in the right place at the right time:

"I am not looking for anything - I found it, there in the park, sitting beside him. He gave it me." (205)

We are back to the theme of meaningful arbitrariness which lies at the heart of the "Matty" section of the novel. The essence of successful searching is the recognition of meaning in the things that **happen** to one, Golding implies; and of course, the wisdom to act on what has been learned.

In the course of the novel's final section, though Matty is not directly concerned with Sim and Edwin, he reveals to them in their meetings a certain amount of spiritual wisdom. Because this is tangential to the novel's main action - Matty, Sophy and the kidnapping - it functions to fill in the gaps in the world-picture Golding is creating to corroborate or throw into relief the main events and the responses of the central protagonists. In this context, the visionary moments that Sim and Edwin experience bear an important relation to those which Matty and Sophy

experience. The process begins with Edwin's first encounter, and Sim's response to Edwin's description of it. Once more, Golding is exploring a kind of parallel reaction. Matty's response to vision was limited by his literalism, and required the throwing away of his literal Word, that is, his Bible. Sim's response is limited by his cynicism, and by the fact that his patternmaking mind wants to organise and therefore limit potential experience. As Edwin says, Sim "is being *literary!*" (198) Time after time in this passage Sim's responses are literary quips or cliches. But Sim's objection - that language is what they have got to communicate with, and that as teacher and bookseller they use it more than most - is valid, and returns us again to Matty's parallel experience. Language is a debased though necessary currency - but it is not the only one. The hiatus in the text (Edwin has two consecutive speeches on p. 200) does not interfere with the main point Golding is making, namely that there is another language, a pure and unflawed one, that perfectly reflects experience rather than distorts it. Golding's problem, of course, is that he has only our shared language of print with which to communicate the experience, so once more we are left with only a gesture towards a vision, not the vision itself:

"'I - well, I spoke *Ursprache.*'

'German?'

'Don't be a - God, how lucky they were, those old philosophers and theologians who spoke Latin! But it forgot. No they weren't. It was a kind of print - one remove from. Sim, I spoke the innocent language of the spirit. The language of paradise It's not the thing, is it? Awfully bad form, isn't it? A bit methodist, isn't it? Back street stuff, isn't it? Just talking with tongues, that's all. Now the moment is gone I can't re-experience it. I can only remember, and what's a memory? Useless clutter!'" (204)

Again, notice how the novel's themes re-emerge. "Remembering changes it", observes Matty; likewise, to Edwin, the experience is a momentary thing, and its preservation in memory involves rendering it as flawed as the preservation of a stuffed animal - lifelike, but lifeless.

The positive changes in Sim are slow to become evident, but when they do they are associated first of all with the stripping away of old conventions. Peace is the prelude to vision. Edwin has spoken about the necessity for silence before, but it is only in the brief pastoral idyll of the Stanhope stables that the experience is complete. Entering it (the collapse of another old bulwark - "Sim had a moment of his usual incredulity at the reality of something that had been so near him and unknown, for so many years") is like entering a new medium:

"Sim found himself likening the whole process at once to the effect of going under water This oblong of garden, unkempt, abandoned and deserted, was nevertheless like a pool of something, a pool, one could only say, of quiet. Balm."
(227)

Sim's reaction is like a response to paradise. The environment is rendered innocent and unfallen (a jet is described with "the noise of its descent wiped away so that it was graceful and innocent as a glider") and Sim's being is likewise restored - "the scents of the garden invaded his being like a new thing." What happens next is important in that it is part of the process of vision, a necessary prelude. Sim discovers that the girls' room is a mess - sweaty, dirty, uncared for. The peaks and troughs of experience are part of the process of stripping away, of freeing Sim from his bonds. Similarly, his reaction to Matty's disfigurements is a part of the relaxation process, and he takes down the guards of scepticism - "so he stood there, relaxed, and now not a little amused." This brings Sim to his first moment of revelation. In it, many of Golding's traditional themes and descriptions are again on show: a concentration on the beauty of the human skin, and a description of it as a binding material (cf. *Pincher Martin*, *The Spire*); a rejection of man-made patterning; an associated characteristic use of the word "convulsion" to describe the experience; a description of Matty, functioning in his role rather than simply as a person, as "the creature"; and finally, the revelation of the

mixedness of vision, and its need to encompass all things:

"He looked into his own palm, pale, crinkled, the volume, as it were, most delicately bound in this rarest or at least most expensive of all binding material - and then he fell through into an awareness of his own hand that stopped time in its revolution. The palm was exquisitely beautiful, it was made of light. It was precious and preciously inscribed with a pureness and delicacy beyond art and grounded somewhere else in absolute health.

In a convulsion unlike anything he had ever known, Sim stared into the gigantic world of his own palm and saw that it was holy.

The little room came back, the strange, but no longer forbidding, creature still stared down, Edwin was moving chairs to the table.

It was true. The place of silence was magical. And dirty."
(231)

The first discovery is in fact only the prelude to the major convulsion which occurs as the men are praying. This revelation is superbly handled in the text in that it contrives to be comic and deeply moving simultaneously. Partly, Sim's wrestling with his itchy nose is a deflation of any 'atmosphere' that would make the writing too intense, but more important than that is the fact that it shows the timeless and the trivial coexisting, so that the link between them is inexplicable. Sim's inspiration to release himself from the torture is interpreted by Edwin as a sign of spiritual combat, which for Sim it certainly was not. Yet the passage leaves open the possibility that until Sim's nose was freed from his distractions, the spirit could not speak through Edwin.

The moment of vision itself is treated more explicitly than anywhere else in Golding's fiction. Particularly noticeable is the way the themes of this and earlier Golding fictions are encompassed and transcended. Edwin's voice, or rather the voice working through Edwin spreads with a characteristic wave motion. It spreads and encompasses everything - another illustration of the breadth and diversity of the true Golding vision. Crucially, it goes beyond pleasure and pain. This is new territory for Golding, whose recognition that pain and pleasure are mixed in vision was

as far as he got in *Free Fall* and *The Spire*. The positive goal - the promise of what is to come - is now the resting point. Stylistically, the passage reaches new peaks of lyricism. It is unusual for Golding, whose visionary moments normally have a kind of hard, factual intensity. This time, the predominant emotion is love, and the main effect of the style is a gentleness and beauty that lives on like an afterglow:

"Edwin spoke above his head. Or not Edwin and not speech. Music. Song. It was a single note, golden, radiant, like no singer that ever was. There was, surely, no mere human breath that could sustain the note that spread as Sim's palm had spread before him, widened, became, or was, precious range after range beyond experience, turning itself into pain and beyond pain, taking pain and pleasure and destroying them, being, becoming. It stopped for a while with promise of what was to come There could be no end but only readjustment so that the world of the spirit could hide itself again, slowly, slowly fading from sight, reluctant as a lover to go and with the ineffable promise that it would love always and if asked would always come again." (232-3.)

We pass from the visionary back to the material world ("the hands had become nothing more than just hands again") but that Sim and Edwin have been touched by the experience is incontrovertible. The final touch of 'authenticity' - the authorial sign - is the cool observation of the shedding of Matty's tear: "A drop of clear water fell from under the brim and lay on the table."

In the chronicle of Sim's progress, Golding has clearly reached a crucial stage. What happens next is very illustrative of the kind of person Golding is trying to portray. For Sim is still prevented by the dead weight of inertia from responding, and yet at the same time he begins to invent patterns to interpret and explain the experience.

When Golding next pursues Sim's case - in the second meeting which never takes place - ambiguity is again the hallmark of Sim's response. In everything, Sim is half wrong. Partly, he cannot let go of the past - hence his obsession for Sophy leads him to a misinterpretation of the roped chair. Partly, too, he is still sceptical - hence he 'sees' the

purposes in events, and then dismisses them as nonsense:

"He tried to imagine some deep, significant spiritual drama, some contrivance, some plot that would include them both and be designed solely for the purpose of rescuing Pedigree from his hell; and then had to admit to himself that the whole affair was about Sim the ageing bookseller or no one." (247)

Sim is trying too hard, wanting to make patterns rather than letting them happen to him. Therefore it seems that the spiritual drama has passed him by. The failure of the kidnap attempt, and the public humiliation that follows it, appear to have destroyed Sim completely. What is actually happening is the final destruction of the patternmaking instinct, the removal from Sim of all the layers of pretence. If this was not followed by the clues of hope then again we would be right in seeing in Golding's novel a structure of despair. But the hope is there, and as the novel finally leaves Sim, the hope is growing.

On his last 'downward' progress, Sim is shown by Golding to sound a note very much like Sophy's. The pervasive force of entropy destroys what existed; the social forms of existence are seen to be hollow rhetoric; there is, it seems, only despair:

"No one will *ever* know what happened. There's too much of it, too many people, a sprawling series of events that break apart under their own weight." (259)

At the very bottom of the curve is the sort of choric comment that might have concluded an earlier Golding novel: "We're all mad, the whole damned race. We're wrapped in illusions, delusions, confusions about the penetrability of partitions, we're all mad and in solitary confinement." (261) But there is communication, there is hope - for Sim at least. Matty has left a legacy:

"There would be news of Matty - almost a meeting with him. Somehow and for no reason that he could find, Sim felt heartened by the idea of Matty's journal - happy almost, for the moment. Before he knew what he was about he found himself staring intently into his own palm" (261)

To the last, Golding does not waste words. This final "Before he knew what

he was about" is very instructive: it is a patternless reflex, and it is a sudden rediscovery of the living force planted in him through his contact with Matty.

IV

"He was shown the seamy side where the connections are."¹

A.S. Byatt's analysis of *Darkness Visible* in *The Literary Review* begins with a retrospective glance at the early Golding:

"In the fifties and into the sixties we read novels which dealt with the numinous in an almost hectically ordered way. They described a spirituality insecurely and ambivalently attached to any traditional beliefs and symbols, and possibly for that reason tended to be more interested in the apocalyptic vision of disintegration and dark than in the rarer moments of beatitude. I think of Durrell, Patrick White, the savagely Nietzschean Murdoch of *Time of the Angels*, and centrally of course, of Golding. These writers offer us something different from the huge, aesthetic structures and comparatively serene epiphanies of Joyce, Mann and Proust. There is more of a fine frenzy in the way they force visions of light and blackness on the reader, more ambivalence about the value or efficacy of art in the world in which they work."²

"A hectic order" characterises superbly Golding's first five novels. True, they develop from a strict authorially-imposed order to a flickering barely-intuited order, but in each of them there is an order there, to be grasped almost like a solid object from the developing narrative. This is because Golding's aesthetic impulse and artistic methods were founded on the concept of fabulation. It is perhaps true that only in the first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, can anything so crudely explicit as a 'meaning' be derived from the exercise without doing violence to the text. Here, Golding has repeatedly stressed (in the essay 'Fable', for example), the whole book was 'given', almost in the manner of a vision, as a warning

¹*Darkness Visible*, p. 48.

²*The Literary Review*, 5/10/79, p. 10.

about the nature of man. The novel is didactic, concentrating its creative energy on preaching its message. However, as Golding has said, there was one point in the novel, where Simon is 'addressed' by the pig's head, in which the fable threatened to get out of control. This, Golding saw, was both a flaw and a point of growth, taking the novel out of the controlling hands of the author. Though it would be overly melodramatic to see in the novels that followed a conflict between order and disorder, rendered fictively, they can be seen as a series of attempts on Golding's part to allow the apocalyptic impulses room to breathe within the mould of the fable. In **The Inheritors** this was done by taking a 'dead' metaphor, that of 'the fall', and dramatising the movement leading up to and beyond it. Thus fleshed out, the complexities and ambiguities inherent in this historical turning point (a small-scale apocalypse, revealing Golding's fascination with endings and new beginnings, and the whole process of change which distinguishes becoming from being) were freed from a preachy didacticism by the ambiguities of the narrative method itself, a technique so thoroughly documented by now as to need no further explanation. In a recent interview Golding maintains that this is his most compassionate novel.¹ The last chapter, taking us inside the minds of the new people, softens the blow of blame (unlike the appearance of the naval commander in **Lord of the Flies**, which intensifies it) by showing us ignorance where we had assumed there was hatred, fear where there seemed to be nothing but aggression. There is, moreover, a rare moment of beatitude, where Tuami realises that the future holds potential and not just grim necessity. Without going into the same detail, the next three novels again explore the tensions between fabulous didacticism and mythic ambiguity, leading to the masterly achievement of **The Spire**, in which reality is distorted through the refracting lens of Jocelin's obsession. What is most evident

¹See **The Literary Review**, November 1981, p. 1.

is that, though these novels are recognisably of a piece, springing from the same fiction-making imagination, they offer a developing vision that in **The Spire** seems to have reached a necessary conclusion.

Darkness Visible is both similar to and radically different from these fictions. The similarities (opposing and interlocking points of view, the muffled brilliance of apocalyptic moments) encouraged insensitive reviewers to dismiss those elements of the novel that failed to fit into this pattern.

It is a later stage in an attempt, which begins unsuccessfully in **Free Fall**, and continues under rather happier conditions in **The Pyramid**, to integrate the exploration of the individual consciousness with a broader (perhaps less 'visionary'; certainly less didactic) discussion of social values. **Darkness Visible** attempts a 'condition of England' analysis. This illustrates another feature of the visionary approach, the polarisation of attitudes, and the attempt to synthesise them into a new wholeness. But, Golding is no panoramic novelist depicting society like Dickens or Fielding; instead his shaping principle is a curious blend of intellectual logic (the visionary novelist's desire to work in abstractions) and a 'poetic' imagination that functions through the (broadly) modernist technique of conveying meaning through symbols and sustained metaphors.

In all this, with the possible exception of **Lord of the Flies**, Golding could not be said to write 'realist' fiction, in the style of the traditional English novel, until we arrive at **The Pyramid**. Here we have the beginnings of the issue that I want to discuss in some detail on the subject of **Darkness Visible**, that is, the question of the 'writtenness' of the fiction. On one level, **The Pyramid** is Golding's version of the traditional English novel as outlined above. And yet, Golding's imagination being what it is, the metaphoric keeps breaking into this

metonymic world (in Jakobson's terms), demanding to be seen as 'meaningful'. Such is the case, on a trivial level, with the obviously symbolic naming of Stilbourne. More subtle examples would be persistent references to music, to mechanisation (particularly the motor car) and to Egyptology. Moreover, it seems that the visionary imagination works best through scenes of intense emotional significance and the 'confrontation' scenes in **The Pyramid** work on precisely the same level as those in his earlier novels. Though the extreme unease of the first reviews given to this novel was, I think, uncalled for (A.S. Byatt, again, provided the best one), it did reflect what was an awkward and slightly unhappy formal fusion.

The main difference between **The Pyramid** and **Darkness Visible** (and it is a great one) is that **Darkness Visible** is a novel of intense and high seriousness. Considering what has been said about Golding's technique, we might expect the greater seriousness of the theme to lead Golding to revert more to the fictional approaches of his first five novels, and to an extent that would be true. But the breadth of imaginative range of this novel, its desire to function as a novel of social commentary, to be 'about' modern England, must lead to greater particularisation. The two modes of writing exist in tension, and I would claim, it is for Golding a particularly creative tension. So, how does Golding handle the issue? A study of the 'writtenness' of the novel should help me to answer this question.

A brief meditation of Sophy's provides a good introduction to this theme, when she talks about "men's need to see":

"Here was Gerry - who would quite calmly suggest she should keep them both by using men and had been serious about it, she was certain - getting worked up by her approach to ridiculous Fido. Brooding on this she found it all rooted in men's need to see. Possible customers were faceless. But Gerry knew Fido."
(169)

Gerry has no objection to men in general. They are an abstraction; they can be conveniently slotted into a pattern of existence, and remain happily there because, lacking the detail of impinging reality, they never actually touch his world. But Fido is particular, he is not faceless, and so he interrupts the pattern. The fictional analogy is clear, and, in a sense, a statement of the obvious: the more particular, the less general. Yet all the time Golding's fiction is rooted in men's need to see. I would suggest that the protagonists of Golding's past fictions have been like the "faceless" customers. They enable man to see, but at the cost of what James called "solidity of specification". They fit into patterns, though to be fair a crucial point that Golding makes again and again is that, at 'visionary' moments, they break out of those patterns. This is a paradox noted long ago by Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes: Golding writes highly patterned novels about the futility of patternmaking. In *Darkness Visible*, Golding wants to write a novel which is at once contingent and arbitrary, yet significant and meaningful. Contingency is difficult to illustrate, since it is precisely what criticism is not designed to comment on. However, I have given some indications of how Golding achieves narrative breadth in this novel. His treatment of 'secondary' characters is fuller and though again this is difficult to illustrate, more 'relaxed'. They seem to be satisfyingly there for their own sake. This applies not just to the central figures discussed above, but to a broad spectrum of 'walk-on' parts: the fire crew in the blitz, Matty's first nurse, Mr and Mrs Sweet, Sophy's father and grandmother, Gerry and Bill, Fido, Mrs Appleby, and so on. But in other ways too Golding keeps a creative balance between intrusive narration, pointing out meanings, and detached observation, allowing the fiction to make its own comments.

One method of distancing himself from the thematic significance of the novel used frequently by Golding is ironic narration. A kind of

relaxed scepticism keeps the intensity of the opening sequence of the novel at bay, as when the captain offers "the kind of first aid for burns which is reversed by the medical profession every year or so." (14-15) Often Golding proceeds by a gentle form of comedy which deflates the too intense moments. So it is with the meaningful monosyllable the shop girl gives to the adoring Matty:

"'Ta.'

The empty shelf was under his elbow. He lowered the roses and they cocked up, hiding her from his view. His feet turned him and he went away. 'Ta' spread, was more than a monosyllable, was at once soft and loud, explosive and of infinite duration. He came partly to himself near the smithy. Brilliantly he asked if there were more flowers to deliver but was not heard for he did not know how faint his voice had become." (44)

Matty's naivety gives Golding many chances to create two effects simultaneously - to make his progress poignant with high seriousness, and at the same time to detach himself from it by a gentle derision. The comic exploitation of linguistic levels, and of the gap between innocence and ignorance, also lies behind this passage in the thoughts of the eleven-year-old Sophy:

"Sophy had to lie for a long time, curled up, frightened and shaking. Indeed she began to feel that going on being weird would be too much and that grown-ups would win after all, because too much weirdness made you sick. But then Uncle Jim appeared from fucking Sydney." (127)

In *Darkness Visible*, stylistic features often function to disrupt fictional truth - to insist on the fictionality of what we are reading. It is not simply a matter of using different 'voices' for the three sections of the novel - we accept the convention of this, the attempt to recreate the subjective existences of the three main protagonists. It is within the section, particularly the 'Matty' section, that the varieties of authorial voice are important. This is particularly noticeable in the bizarre 'fantasy' sequences of the Australian chapters. Passages like the episode of the Hanrahans (pp. 58-60) seem to have come from a modern American

novel where the desperate fracturing of reality, and the peopling of the wreckage with physical grotesques, is more commonplace. Why, though, are they present in this novel? The answer, surely, is that they are there to keep us aware that we are reading a fiction, and therefore to keep us at a distance from the progress of the novel. By emphasising explicitly the writtenness of the novel, disrupting our response to Matty and his search, we not only face up to the arbitrary contingency of Matty's existence, we also recognise that the 'reality' of the novel is made up of a collection of linguistic tricks and sleights of hand.

These stylistic games are part of the novel's thematic exploration of the relationship between words and things. I have already noted that, for literal Matty in particular, words turn out to be slightly less solid than the golfballs he mouths out early in the novel. If Matty discovers, and we discover with him through the process of reading, that words are unstable, and that even the apparently fixed things of life (such as Bibles) turn out to be different, then how much more are we aware that the novel itself is going to be tantalisingly inaccurate as a picture of 'reality'. Mr Hanrahan is obsessed by appearances - as his fanatical watching of his factory, and his room full of distorting mirrors, makes plain. The illustration is obvious: the novel's narrative too is a bent mirror, if indeed it is a mirror at all. In all this Golding is trying to efface the 'meaningful' in his fiction, to disguise it by comedy or to question its very existence by stylistic variation. The relation of words to memory, and of words to literal existence, is called into doubt. Yet for all this, as A.S. Byatt says, the novel is riddled with signs, and signs imply meaning.

Meaning exists first of all in structure, in the ability to read its signs. Even here Golding is careful to be ambiguous. I have said that the final section, "One is One", is a synthesis; it is one unified vision that

makes the fractures whole again. It is also a reference to a song, a song in this case of isolation:

"All is imagination he doth prove.
'Partitions, my majority vote says, remain partitions.' One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so." (225)

For so much of the novel, Golding tantalises us in this way, offering dual interpretations. It is precisely Golding's point about the meaningful arbitrariness of things - if we see things one way there is nothing but chaos and self-contradiction, a novel of committees and partitions; if we see another way there is wholeness, compassion, light. On one level there is darkness, on another all is made visible. The contrast between things 'meaningful' and things occurring arbitrarily is superbly highlighted in the novel's opening section (pp. 9-16), which I will now discuss.

The section has within it a pattern of seemingly contradictory signs, with each apparently 'meaningful' statement balanced out by another which stresses the arbitrary nature of things. The opening page begins in a neutral tone - the area is both empty and mysterious. Barrage balloons are dotted about randomly, and "the bombs came down, mysteriously, out of emptiness." But soon, patternlessness is replaced by "a structure [which] had built itself up in the air." And here we have the first reference to potential significance in that it is described as "a burning bush." The sign is left alone, however, for Golding in the next page concentrates on anonymity, facelessness:

"The men who stood by their wrecked machine at the root of one northern road that ran south into the blaze had about them the anonymity of uniform silence and motionlessness." (10)

Nevertheless, the signs begin to multiply. At this stage, most of them are biblical, for the zone is now described not only as "a burning bush", recalling Exodus, but as "a furnace", which will be seen to signify more when Matty appears, walking around "as one like a son of man" in the furnace in Daniel. Moreover, we are warned that we will need to interpret,

to recognise signs as the musician recognises sounds, so that "his ear was finely educated in the perception and interpretation of bomb noises."

Next, Golding offers a specific illustration of what appeared to have been an arbitrary event, but which obviously signified much to the bookseller, who

"had watched a wall six storeys high fall on him all in one piece and had stood, unable to move and wondering why he was still alive. He found the brick surround of a window on the fourth storey had fitted round him neatly." (11)

However, the checks and balances work to restrain us from over-interpretation. The bookseller would impose an interpretation on existence which is altogether too tidy, taking into account none of the indescribable mess and ugliness of reality:

"the bookseller, who suffered from a romantic view of the classical world, was thinking that the dock area would look like Pompeii; but whereas Pompeii had been blinded by dust here there was if anything too much clarity, too much shameful, inhuman light where the street ended." (11)

We are checked by "the broken business of living."

The appearance of Matty, however, is a contradiction of that broken business, a usurpation of reality. Naturally, though, the process begins with a rehearsal of the patterns that men know - movements in the fire explained by boxes of paper, contracting metal, dying animals. But that this is something completely different we discover by the 'negative' way in which it is approached: "He turned round again to get his back between himself and what he was sure he had not seen." Likewise, the leader of the group is alerted by the fact that his men are too obviously trying not to catch his attention. And with the appearance of Matty, the novel describes a meaningful ritual. Initially, this is a reaching out for significance via the language of myth:

"High above the glare and visible now for the first time between two pillars of lighted smoke was the steely and untouched round of the full moon - the lover's, hunter's, poet's moon; and now - an ancient and severe goddess credited

with a new function and a new title - the bomber's moon. She was Artemis of the bombers, more pitiless than ever before."

(13)

The ritual nature of the proceedings continues - for instance, Matty moves "in the geometrical centre of the road", and he "walked down the very middle of the street with a kind of ritual gait that in an adult world would have been called solemn." As Matty gradually moves forward out of the fire, two features are continually emphasised - the impossibility of what is happening, and the formality with which it is occurring. The purpose of all this is to emphasise the meaningfulness of the event - though we cannot know its precise significance, we do at least see that it is significant.

But then, lest we should endow Matty with too much meaning at this stage, the confused everyday world floods back into the novel:

"Now they were so near that the child was not an impossibility but a scrap of their own human flesh, they became desperate to save and serve him, formed a tight and unprofessional knot round the child, as if to be close was to give him something."

(14)

The tension collapses into the confused babble of the crew. Normality is resumed. But again Golding takes us back into the visionary world, the world of significance and meaning. For in this exploration of ways of seeing, the bookseller is beginning to make the necessary connections. We have been warned that the bookseller's vision is fanciful, capable of distorting reality, but then what we have seen has been manifestly unreal, a physical impossibility. As the bookseller's ability to read signs trembles on the edge of coherence, so the prose similarly describes Matty:

"There was a memory flickering on the edge of his mind and he could not get it further in where it could be examined; and he was also remembering the moment when the child had appeared, seeming to his weak sight to be perhaps not entirely there - to be in a state of, as it were, indecision as to whether he was a human shape or merely a bit of flickering brightness." (15)

Then, the preliminaries over, the text poses a direct question: "Was it the Apocalypse?" What answer can we expect? Knowing Golding's technique by

now, it is an inevitable resounding 'Maybe'! Then, as the novel is in danger of getting too intense, Golding destroys the atmosphere with a quite deliberate bathos: "Nothing could be more apocalyptic than a world so ferociously consumed. But he could not quite remember. Then he was deflected by the sounds of the musician being sick." Nevertheless, as with all the signs Golding plants into this first section, the gradual accumulation of them leads us to make the interpretative act. To make this totally clear Golding concludes the section with the captain's meditation. His thinking back is a way of putting a shape, a pattern, on what has just happened to him. He is not just seeing a physical occurrence, he is 'seeing' a meaning. Revealingly, Golding describes it, as he described Matty's progress, in terms of geometry, with the obvious implication of a mathematical precision in which things are worked out exactly:

"He saw quite clearly in a kind of interior geometry of this and this and that and that how things had been and how they might have been and where he would have been running if he had set off at the very first moment he had realised the child was there and needed help. He would have run straight into the space where now there was nothing but a hole. He would have run into the explosion and he would have disappeared." (16)

After so much apparent arbitrariness, we are offered a vision of the universe as a mechanism - the captain catches a glimpse when "the screen that conceals the workings of things had shuddered and moved." The process has brought Golding from arbitrary reality to meaningful reality. Nevertheless the checks and balances are there in the fiction as they are in human nature: Golding presents us with a deliberate turning away from significance, a ducking out from recognising the facts. The captain chooses to leave the signs alone:

"He thought to himself with the cunning immediacy that was part of his nature that it just didn't do to examine such things too closely and anyway the little chap would have suffered just as much and anyway -" (16)

But the signs, once recognised, will not leave him alone. This embryonic

episode closes with a recognition of meaning asserting itself no matter how hard the captain tries to check it. The authentic Golding voice is audible here, articulating the inarticulate, pointing out patterns in seeming patternlessness:

"He came, silent and filled in an extraordinary way with grief, not for the maimed child but for himself, a maimed creature whose mind had touched for once on the nature of things. His chin was quivering again." (16)

I have studied this opening passage at some length in order to show the detailed way in which Golding reveals meaning through structure in this novel. This is important since Golding is trying to render the close particularity of his created world so carefully that we do not question the 'reality' by seeing in it a too deliberate exercise in meaning. The links in meaning are, as it were, under the surface: not so much the figure in the carpet as the grid on which the whole fabric is woven:

"He was shown the seamy side where the connections are. The whole cloth of what had seemed separate now appeared as the warp and woof from which events and people get their being." (48)

Finally, this novel calls attention to its own writtenness by its references to other literature, references which are 'meaningful' normally by ironic implication of the contrast between the original context and the one used in this novel. So it is when Sophy is described like Kim as "little friend of all the world." Similarly, the ironic contrast between Donne's pursuit of truth on the high hill of his third Satire and Sophy's encouragement to Bill and Gerry is suggested: "So once more the three of them met in the gloomy room and the two men went about it and about." (179) Often the irony is at the character's expense, whereas, if we have deciphered the signs, we see the true significance. Consider this as Sim and Edwin wait for Matty, who never comes:

"Here we are, dreary, and with smiles painted on our faces, waiting for - waiting, waiting, waiting. Like the man said."
(244)

Godot never came, which is the point of Beckett's drama. But for Sim, Matty has come, and in the novel, he is the God-bearing image. In all these things, meaning is revealed through structure, through the writtenness of the fiction, which frequently belies the 'surface' construction of the text.

V

"... this complex disorder of ancient and modern, this image in little of society at large " 1

In the face of social decay, inflation, industrial collapse and recession, the inherent conservatism of the visionary (that is, a world view in which the past is always 'better') finds more fuel for its arguments, and in many ways, a more sympathetic response from the same society that is being denigrated. Entropy would dominate the spiritual vision of the novel, were it not for the power and example of Matty; it does dominate the social vision, for there is no force of community to check its sway. But Golding's vision is not all made up of malice (there is an instructive contrast with Powys here); instead, there is some compassion and a good deal of humour in Golding's observations. In this context a superbly handled microcosmic analysis of decay is the description of Frankley's which opens Chapter Three. That Frankley's 'means', as well as merely existing, is something we cannot doubt:

"It was into this complex disorder of ancient and modern, this image in little of the society at large, that Matty was projected by the headmaster." (42)

Golding charts the 'progress' of this "image in little" from its Victorian

heyday through to its fossilised present. Fossils are in fact evoked by Golding to define the haphazard developments that propel Frankley's unwillingly into the twentieth century:

"The buildings that at last subsumed under Frankley's management were random and seemingly as confused as coral growths Frankley's held from each age, each generation, each lot of goods, a sediment or remainder." (38)

Progress is not so much a striding forward as an accumulation of the past. This image of layered traces of coral growth is an interesting variation on Golding's more usual depiction of change, which is the palimpsest, an image of continuity in *The Inheritors*, and of the disruption of continuity in a number of Golding's archeological essays. Here the detritus of past ages accumulates irrelevantly: "Poking about in far corners the visitor might come across such items as carriage lamps or a sawyer's frame, destined not for a museum but for the passing stagecoach or sawyer who had refused to turn over to steam." (38) The relics and irrelevancies of this microcosm of society include the shadowy winged-collared retainers, "the most useless and dignified shop assistants in the world." There is pathos as well as comedy in Golding's descriptions, in the inevitable invasion of electric lights and plastics, and in the ghostly and receding presences of the assistants.

Frankley's functions superbly as a microcosm of British industry. But the visionary temperament works always in abstractions, and as A.S. Byatt says in her review, Golding's English rural towns have always been violently microcosmic. Greenfield is no exception. The name itself is an illustration of loss, of the invasion of modernity, its green fields sucked into the suburban whirlpool, as the town is submerged in the London overspill. This invasion is signalled on many levels, some of which are less 'sensitive' than others. The touchiest subject is clearly that of race, for in the chronicle of change the most commonly observed detail is

the proliferation of immigrants. On the surface this is simply a record of change. But thematically, it is difficult to avoid feeling that the innumerable Indian and Pakistani shops, signs and costumes are simply props of alienation serving to engender bitterness and cynicism in the older generation of protagonists, especially Sim. The foreign community remain faceless, their actions those of a caricature simplicity that seems hollow in comparison with Golding's handling of other issues.

The catalogue of loss includes one important detail of particular seriousness - the loss of silence. The silence of Frankley's is comic and absurd, but at least it was there. Now noise invades everywhere, muzak in the supermarkets, Winnie's transistor, the background roar of the juggernauts and aircraft. A lot of the detail is almost physically noticeable. The opening of the final section of the novel sets the tone:

"Next door to Sprawson's, in Goodchild's shop, Sim Goodchild sat at the back and tried to think about First Things. There were no people browsing along his shelves so it should have been easy. But as he told himself, what with the jets souging down every minute to London airport and the monstrous continental trucks doing their best to break down the old bridge, any thought was impossible." (193)

This melancholy observation is repeated elsewhere in the book, describing a world in which incessant noise replaces thought and contemplation just as television renders book-reading redundant. In this world, as in the world of *The Pyramid*, silence is precious, a commodity to be valued.

Typically, it is associated with Matty:

"'I knew that if, *if* we, or he, could find a place with the quality of absolute silence in it - that was why he was in the community centre I think. Searching for silence - disappointed of course.'" (203)

Sim and Edwin, in their brief dialogue of the cynical twentieth-century response to "natural" faith, capture in this one theme the essence of

Golding's vision:

"'As water was then, so something as strange and unexpected and necessary in our mess. Silence. Precious, raw silence.'

¹Darkness Visible, p. 42.

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'Double-glazing. Technology has the answer.'

'Just as it put the wild holiness in a pen and conducted it demurely through a pipe. No. What I meant was random silence, lucky silence, or destined.'" (222)

Notice here how the central theme of meaningful arbitrariness resurfaces in "random silence, lucky silence, or destined." So that we should be in no doubt as to the value of that silence, we not only have the description of Sim's response to it (p. 227, quoted earlier), but, in Edwin's explanation of it, a number of linguistic links which tie it in with the novel's other 'positive' images. Particularly revealing is its association with light as well as peace, and the tell-tale "as if" as a signal of textual meaning:

"A private place farther down into the earth almost holding the sunlight like a cup and the quiet as if someone was there with two hands holding it all - someone who no longer needed to breathe." (223)

If silence is a positive value which is fast disappearing, its replacement, the incessant babble of the media, is an important, if rather obvious, target for Golding's fire. We have already seen how it murders thought and contemplation; elsewhere, particularly in the final chapter, Golding is thoroughly cynical about the products of news reporting. We get a foretaste of that earlier in the novel, when in Australia Matty has his unfortunate experience with the Aborigine. The vet who finds Matty delivers Golding's backhanded rebuke:

"That'll be Harry Bummer. The bleeding sod. I expect he let on he didn't know English didn't he? Moved his head like this, didn't he? He's never been the same since they made that film about him. Tries it on all the tourists." (65)

The apparent good deeds of 'investigative journalism' leave behind a trail of victims. Harry is one; Sim and Edwin are two others. Golding here is poignantly sympathetic. His tirade finds its target:

"Television made everywhere the same. *There's the fellow who was giving evidence* - No escape. The real ruin, the real public condemnation, was not to be good or bad; either of those had a kind of dignity about them; but to be a fool and be seen to have been one -" (255)

Thematically, Golding makes a number of points here. Because television makes everywhere the same (elsewhere he calls it "this extension of space and time") there is as a consequence no community, no separateness of identity which would denote that one place was different from the rest. Moreover, it is as a consequence of the fact that the individual is now visually present in so many places at once that he ceases to retain his individuality and becomes an object. And the object is less than human, and thus a source of derision - hence the barbaric and incompetent spitting at Sim, with people pointing him out and talking about him not even behind his back. The continued re-running of the film clip of Sim scratching his nose is equally important for the way it fits into the novel's theme of the relationship between event and meaning. Having observed through many characters and incidents the maxim that "Remembering changes it", we now have a new angle. In the perpetual recycling of events that the media propagates, the unique nature of every moment is robbed of its special significance. In so doing, its meaning is impoverished. Sim exclaims, "It wasn't like that!", which is true as well as false. It was like that, because the filmed evidence is there. But it wasn't like that, because the bald event has been denuded of its meaningful context and has become an empty gesture, literally an object of derision.

This misuse of information is part of, as well as a cause of, the disintegrating society, of "things breaking apart under their own weight." Golding's portrayal of that society is profoundly unsympathetic, an attitude which increases our sense of alienation, and of the loss of community. It must be said, however, that Golding's method occasionally sounds petulant in the way it treats the individual manifestations of that malaise. Frequent details register for us that Sim is a sorry and insignificant person - his baldness, fatness, his dietary habits: "his stomach rather distended with fish fillet and reconstituted potato,

together with peas out of a tin." (226) This is a too easy target, but there is worse to come, for the greatest sense of collapse, of the decay of traditional values lies in the complete failure of communication between generations. True, Golding does use some 'legitimate' means, which are integrated into the plot (such as Sim's misinterpretation of Sophy's behaviour) but elsewhere youth is given a very melancholy deal. Shop girls are fat, "cretinous" and insolent, and for Golding youth has, collectively, no vision - just an animal blankness punctuated by the vicarious thrill of second-hand excitement:

"Even Sandra looked. She came fatly, clumsily, but all gleaming and alive with excitement - 'My mum wants me not to come but I said as long as Mr Goodchild wants me -'

Sandra wanting to be connected with terror, no matter how far off." (257)

It is in his social vision that Golding comes closest to a philosophy of despair. For his isolated, faceless voices of alienation, there seems to be no future, no hope. The hope lies in individuals, however, and it is to Golding's closer analysis of the individual temperament, as studied in his central protagonists, that I want to turn next.

VI

"We're wrapped in illusions, delusions, confusions about the penetrability of partitions, we're all mad and in solitary confinement."¹

It is the essential continuity of the human condition, as it is revealed across three generations, that is most striking when we come to consider the total span of the novel. I have shown many times how, through repeated patterns of images, or repeated structural motifs in the telling of the story, Golding seeks to implicate all the characters in a unified code of behaviour. Not, of course, that it is a code which all men

¹Darkness Visible, p. 261.

recognise. Indeed (and this is another of Golding's themes) it is very rare for one man to be adept at reading all the signs. Golding himself comments in one of this novel's rare moments when the author takes us into his confidence:

"People find it remarkable when they find how little one man knows about another. Equally, at the very moment when people are most certain that their actions and thoughts are most hidden in darkness, they often find out to their astonishment and grief that they have been performing in the bright light of day and before an audience." (30)

This structural motif implicates all the novel's characters - Pedigree and his obsession for the little men, Sim and his obsession for Sophy, Sophy and her blindness to the rapport between Toni and Gerry, and even Matty and his self-deceiving image - "I was a great talker." (94)

Golding's fundamental point about the human condition, that is, its 'fallen' fragmented nature, I have illustrated so thoroughly in passing that only a brief summing up is necessary. His basic contention is that man is no longer (for whatever reason) a whole being, but that his response to life is broken up. Sim's partitions and committees are simply the most obvious illustration of a thematic pattern into which all Golding's personae fit. The main target for Golding's criticism is the head's control over the body. Golding, in common with other visionary writers, is in this basically anti-intellectual, or at least anti-rationalist. He has written at great length on the theme that the suppression of other (basically 'intuitive') responses, and the exaltation of reason - characterised in much of his non-fiction as the clash between 'Egyptian' and 'Greek' temperaments - leads not only to self-ignorance but to an inability to respond positively to the environment and to one's fellow human beings. Hence, we get the catalogue of weaknesses that Golding's characters exemplify - fear, aggression through insecurity, loss of community, and so forth.

So, in this novel, fragmentation, though it has many and varied forms, dominates all the characters except Matty, though even here he is initially trapped - "everything was inscrutable except inside of the man's head where his purpose was." It is through Sophy that Golding analyses the human malaise in most thorough detail. She lives in her head, distant from the rest of her body (p. 105), dominated by This, which is her centre (p. 124), a being existing in darkness at the mouth of a dark tunnel (pp. 112, 141, etc.). From this initial hypothesis, a number of consequences follows. One is the collapse of orthodox morality, or even of simple human sympathy. Sophy sees the arbitrary nature of right and wrong; she treats all those around her as objects to be used and devoured. But it is the, as it were, 'internal' consequences that are most revealing. This comes across in Sophy's revulsion and loathing for the physical processes of her own body. The tone of hatred, for example, with which Golding locates essence and excrement, in the episode after Sophy's first sexual adventure, is very characteristic.

Sophy's hatred is based on the fact that her body is in many ways beyond her control. Again, Golding explores this with a greater thoroughness in this novel than ever before. In the confrontation scene with her father, the body tells its own message no matter what she can do to stop it, and then, when she tries to exploit her body's messages for her own head-controlled ends, it revolts on her again, leaving her "failed in outrage." (188).

However, through all those who populate Golding's world have these common characteristics, Golding demonstrates by a flexible range of responses, that there is not simply one damned and predetermined track down which all his characters are condemned to travel. It is here, as I have noted elsewhere in passing, that Golding's vision has become much more complex and satisfying. Now, because his characters are not

laboratory cases, assessed in isolation (as Pincher, Jocelin and even Sammy are), the potential for change, for personal interaction and influence, is greater. This also shows that Golding's vision is not naive or narrowly determinist, a conclusion which might have been drawn from some of Golding's earlier fictions. Basically, in this novel, Golding's characters exemplify three responses to their conditions. There are those who are trapped, those who choose their way, and those who seek for it.

The trapped ones are those seemingly without hope, those who are bound and led. Pedigree, for instance, is trapped by his rhythm, his graph of inevitability that appears to render him helpless. Pedigree is trapped by his body, which runs his world, as inexorably as his feet lead him helplessly to the park. For his "condition" Golding has a great fund of sympathy, revealed not only in the tirade on love and wasted opportunity which Pedigree delivers to Sim and Edwin, but in the compassionate tone adopted to describe his action. We recognise Pedigree's passivity in the face of his body's drive, his desire to break free, and the genial delight when little steps of progress are made, in, for example, his conversation with his feet (pp. 262-3).

There are other, more subtle traps, which envelop Golding's characters. The most poignant, because it is the most inevitable, is old age. It is not unreasonable to assume that Golding's own age is behind his interest in time running out, impelling his characters with a sense of urgency as the novel itself is impelled by a sense of entropy. Once more the distinguishing characteristic is a kind of rueful pathos in the face of an apparently inevitable decay. For Sim, this verges on despair as every detail of his life and being forces him to face up to a sense of loss - his physical state, his ailing and crumbling family (sorrowing wife, emigrated daughter, mentally-handicapped son), his desperate obsession with Sophy and Toni - and incomprehension in the face of life:

"Two old men. Got to remember that. Only a few more years Only it can't, *can't* amount to no more than this, can it? and never, never a dive into what must be the deep.'" (198-9)

The older characters in this novel all at some time let out a cry for help, a cry which expresses not only the distance between them and the world they see around them, but also the helpless frustration of that predicament. Only occasionally in the sorrowingly reflective narration does Golding stoop to a cheaper sarcasm in telling their story. Mostly the details, though comic, and in a sense a confession of helplessness, are, like this one, sympathetic:

"Edwin stirred on the corner of the desk, stood up and stared away at Metaphysics.

'I taught the other day for a whole period with my flies open.'" (199)

True, there are wellings up of blackness, of things in the present fouled up by the wreckage of the past. In *The Pyramid* Olly's father had a curious and spontaneous outburst against sex. In *Darkness Visible* Sophy's father is Olly's father but ten years older, more set in his ways, with still more stored up bitterness.

Stanhope has made life into his chess game, a cosy routine with its standard patterns, its codes of behaviour. The ugliness, the untidiness of messy contingent life breaking into that routine is treated with the utmost venom, despite the fact that Stanhope and Olly's father are obviously lonely men, left isolated, trapped in their worlds. It is a doleful reminder of the solitary confinement that, Golding shows, man often finds himself in, from which he may be unwilling, as well as unable, to escape.

Unwillingness to escape implies the action of choice as well as force of circumstance, and towards those who choose their fate Golding is less generous in his treatment. Obviously the main focus of Golding's attention is Sophy, though Toni too comes into this category. I have already shown

how Golding isolates Sophy's moment of choice, making it the crucial decision around which her action resolves. Choice, however, is not only Sophy's. Toni chooses too - chooses the extinction of all human impulse, of all feeling, and especially of all weirdness. Toni is thus a vacuum into which the empty words of political theory are poured, expanding to fill up the available volume, making the perfect terrorist. And, in a sense, there are links here between Sophy, Toni and Sim, and even Edwin. They all choose words, and in Golding's exploration of the relationship between language and action this is particularly significant. With Toni's choice, Golding has no sympathy whatever: "Here was Toni in Africa, broadcasting, beautiful and remote, the long aria in that silvery voice about freedom and justice -." (261) The absurdity - the action and the words in brutal contradiction - is, as I have noted, confirmed by Matty's "golden" song of freedom to Pedigree at the end of the novel. But the abuse of language in the pursuit of truth is a running theme. Even Matty finds it difficult to let go - in his case, of his Bible - in order to see further. But Sim in particular uses language to erect fences between himself and the truth, to deflect reality into the safe (indeed, bureaucratic) channels of his committee. Language deliberately applied as a system of self-defence is impenetrable, rendering experience nonsensical:

"Treat it as science, that'll make it feel better. I'm going to describe that memory as exactly as - I said seven words. I said a small sentence and I saw it as a luminous and holy shape before me. Oh, I forgot, we're being scientific aren't we? Luminous would pass. Holy? Right then - the *affect* was one commonly associated in religious phraseology with the word 'Holy'. Well. The light was not of this world. Now laugh."
(204)

There are no words to explain what Edwin is trying to say. For Sim, this is a refuge, part of a deliberate choice to stay within the boundaries of his different classes of belief. But for Golding the ultimate proof of

vision is the desire to let go of the restraints of convention, and to seek after revelation.

There is a distinction, not particularly subtle in its workings, between choosing and seeking, in Golding's ethical world. The boundaries of the two are made specific by man's attitude to two related goals. One is the nature of the self, that is, the motivation behind the action. For both seeking and choosing are decisive actions, and indeed in this sense one can **choose** to seek - Matty certainly does. The crucial difference is in motivation, in seeking to serve self-interest or to pursue the at times inarticulate goal of vision. Matty's reiterated question is proof enough that he seeks, but the changing form of the question shows that he struggles to grasp the correct point of contact with what he is seeking for. The important thing is his attitude, for once that is right, the goal takes care of itself. This brings me to the second, related parameter, a point glimpsed briefly by Edwin, namely, that the seeker often finds what he is not looking for. This sounds like a deliberately contrived paradox, but I believe what Golding is trying to communicate is the fact that it is in the nature of vision, no matter when or to whom it occurs, to surprise, disrupt or contradict any rigid pattern which the seeker after that vision might attempt to impose as a preconception. There are no preconceived ideas, but only a responsive attitude of being. In Matty, Golding shows this process pursued to its triumphant conclusion; in Sim and Edwin we see occasional glimpses of what might happen, and in Pedigree's case, what does; and in Sophy we see vision thwarted by conscious choice on her part.

Finally, I want to concentrate briefly on two dominant ideas which relate to the practice of seeking before going on, in my final section, to analyse the nature of vision itself. These ideas are, firstly, the importance of ritual (and its relationship to meaning) and, secondly, the importance of rebirth (and its relationship to motivation). Now, ritual,

by its very nature, requires interpretation in order to be 'converted' into meaning. Ritual is the making of signs. What I want to stress first is the importance Golding attaches to those signs for the maker. This is unusual, since it seems more obvious that signs should be for those who see them, if they are for anything at all. Consider the value of Matty's private signs, and how they are used:

"In one very private experience, he had seized a spike and stuck it clumsily into the back of the hand that held the broom. He had watched, a little paler perhaps, the blood turn into a long streak with a drop at the end - and all this because the soundless voice had screamed at him again The two compulsions seemed to twist him inside, to lift him up against his own wishes and leave him with no defences and no remedy but simply to endure." (44-5)

This is from very early on in the novel, before Matty really begins to discover a potential for vision within him, or to respond by searching for it. The important word, I think, is 'compulsion'. The sign brings with it at this stage no remedial value. It is simply necessary to perform it. However, look now at another experience, from Matty's time in Australia. Ritual is now not something to be endured; it is beginning to attain meaning, albeit inarticulate:

"*Must* drove him to things he could not explain but only accept as a bit of easing when to do nothing was intolerable. Such was the placing of stones in a pattern, the making of gestures over them. Such was the slow trickling of dust from the hand and the pouring of good water into a hole." (55)

Ritual is now a positive gesture, and it functions where words are impotent. In the novel, Matty's signs move beyond articulate explanation from this point onwards. That, I believe, is what lies behind the curious baptismal rite in the Australian forest pool. There is for Matty no way of explaining, at any rate not in a comprehensible way:

"Great and terrible things are afoot. I thought that only me and Ezekiel had been given the way of showing things to those people who can see (as with matchboxes, thorns, shards, and marrying a wicked woman, etc.) because it. I cannot say what I mean." (235)

Golding suggests too that ritual is a discipline. It is a creative form, or code, of behaviour. But it has to be a living code. Golding's objection to institutional religion, in this novel (and elsewhere), is that the code has become empty. Hence we see not only the 'dead' church in Greenfield, but the hollow formalities in other churches, where "there is no dread anywhere and no light." (88) There is no point to ritual if it is lifeless, for it has no meaning. But Golding gives us at least one example of creative ritual in action, in the meeting between Sim, Edwin and Matty in the stables. In that creative ritual, meaning is expressed, vision encountered and, in Sim at least, something is reborn.

Rebirth is the final key area that I wish to discuss within this general theme of seeking. Again, we look to Matty in particular, though also to Sim, for confirmation of Golding's meaning. In Matty's case it is described, metaphorically and literally, in terms of a kind of baptism. Matty's first experience is described as "a feeling of waters rising"; then, in the darkness of the Australian forest he undergoes a ritual immersion in the presence of light. In Sim's case, as we have seen, the entry into the 'timeless' idyll of the stable gardens is also seen in terms of going under water.

VII

*"There could be no end but only a readjustment so that the world of the spirit could hide itself again, slowly, slowly fading from sight, reluctant as a lover to go and with the ineffable promise that it would love always and if asked would always come again."*¹

In **Darkness Visible**, as in Golding's other novels, there are certain moments of vision, that is, of extreme intensity of perception, that are stamped with a definitive style which marks them out from the ordinary run

¹Darkness Visible, p. 233.

of Golding's prose. In any assessment of what this novel is trying to communicate, these passages need to be given special consideration, for they reveal the author's 'secret signature'. In his earlier fiction these passages occur at strategic moments - in the final chapter of *Pincher Martin*, in the prison cell in *Free Fall*, on Jocelin's deathbed in *The Spire*, and before Bounce's tombstone in *The Pyramid*, for example - at which points they serve to focus the novel's preoccupations into a single image, or process of related images.

Darkness Visible differs from Golding's other novels in that it contains more of these passages, and, because they occur to a number of the novel's protagonists, the moments can be built into a more rounded and composite picture of Golding's vision. Aspects of that vision I have, inevitably, already touched on in the course of this essay. In summary, I want simply to pull some of the threads together. The first, and most obvious, thing to be said is that Golding's fiction proclaims the belief that there are numerous levels of existence, and that man has within him the faculty to perceive those levels, and indeed to communicate within them. Not all his characters are equally gifted. Some, particularly those whose lives are fully absorbed into the stultifying routine of 'modern' life, are utterly dead to vision, their sensitivity so dormant as to be almost non-existent. Others are confronted with layers of vision by force of circumstance. Such is the case with the group leader of the fire-fighting party at the beginning of the novel, who is confronted with the fact that "the screen that conceals the workings of things had shuddered and moved." At other times, the routine of life is, as it were, invaded by this new perception almost like a kind of random eruption, as when Matty gets his name. This invasion of vision is temporary and fortunate.

The relationship between worlds, between this material existence and what for convenience we might call a spiritual realm (or realms) is

probably best shown by analysing the visionary moments that occur to Matty, Sophy and Sim. Here we have a considerable extension to Golding's normal approach, for Sophy's vision is a negative vision, an inversion of Matty's, and the novel is as much about this clash and resolution of spiritual forces as it is about the lives and environment of the physical combatants. Taking Sophy's vision first, it reveals many of those themes central to Golding's earlier novels, but raised to an intense peak, in that Golding has never before shown someone so thoroughly in the grip of the forces of collapse and decay. Recalling what I quoted near the beginning of this chapter about Golding's view that the second law of thermodynamics is the Satan of modern cosmology, entropy is the collapsing ground on which Sophy's faith rests. We can pinpoint particular moments in the novel which reveal the tenets of that faith. The central one is that it is an extension of the forces currently at work in the earth and in creation. The notions of "Of course" and of "More" are recognitions of what is happening around her put into words. Clearly, there are forces which uphold existence against the onrush of this decay. Golding sees these as being of two types: the 'positive' spiritual forces, represented in this novel by Matty's elders and their influence working through Matty, and the binding forces of social cohesion, which at least attempt to arrest the collapse of order. Sophy is blind to the first (the closest she comes to it is a failure to respond when the elders "called her before us but she did not come"), and in her discovery of "What is what", she chooses to ignore the second. Instead, her vision is of communion with darkness, symbolised in the black sun which she sees (or becomes part of?) in the final moments of her last orgasmic fantasy. It provides her with a creed: "The way to simplicity is through outrage. Simplicity is "being a part" of the running down, helping entropy on its way.

Sophy's transcendent experiences are a losing of herself in "the hiss

and crackle and roar, the inchoate unorchestra of the lightless spaces." The experiences are described, as I have shown, in a collapsing language, which illustrates literally the disintegration of things into nothingness:

"The long, long convulsions, the unknotting, the throbbing and disentangling of space and time on, on, on into nothingness -"
(167)

The appearance of key words (such as, in this case, "convulsions") indicates that Golding is describing the interface between worlds. Sophy, like Matty and Sim, undergoes a process of being taken out of herself, and of perceiving in a new way. This can best be defined in the short passage where, in the middle of her discussions with Bill and Gerry, she tunes in, or rather tunes out, her transistor. Firstly, she is responding to something outside her, something completely other, not only physically but in another dimension. And this response causes a confusion, an invasion of her everyday world, a collapse of her physical environment:

"Inside a radio and out there in infinite space that included the world there was audible mystery and confusion, infinite confusion." (172)

There follows a disintegration of all things physical (and indeed human, in the collapse of language) as Sophy "moved the control, destroying the voices, passed through music, a talk, a quiz, a burst of laughter, some foreign languages, loud, then faint. And she moved the control back and found the point between all the stations." Through the collapse comes the moment of vision and here again two ideas dominate Sophy's perceptions, as, in a different form, they do Matty's and Sim's. One is based on the simple light and darkness imagery of the novel. The other idea is that of penetrating, of going **through** or **between** something in order to arrive at the moment of perception. This Sophy does, and is rewarded by a moment of communication, hearing "the voice of the darkness", giving her knowledge as to how to proceed:

"Immediately there came the voice of the darkness between the stars, between the galaxies, the toneless voice of the great skein unravelling and lying slack; and she knew why the whole thing would be simple, a tiny part of the last slackness."
(173)

The end for her, in which "there was now nothing visible but darkness" is the end of 'negative' vision in this particular battle, even though the warfare goes on - and the novel is deliberately open-ended at this point.

Matty's vision provides a very definite extension of the glimpses perceived in Golding's earlier novels. If we think of what had been hitherto the most visionary moments of his most articulate explorations of the clash and resolution of modes of seeing, that is, in *Free Fall* and *The Spire*, then it is a remarkably forthright statement of vision that Golding gives us in *Darkness Visible*. In *Free Fall* we have two worlds which brush silently and coldly against each other for an instant and then sheer away. At that moment of interaction Sammy sees the two overlaid for an instant - the instant in which he is released from the prison cell - but the double vision cannot be sustained. We never get beyond a glimpse, and we certainly never see how the spiritual mode works constructively within the physical one. In *The Spire*, we see the two modes mixed, but only at the moment of Jocelin's death. This is one important breakthrough, however, in that it shows that true vision is a disrupter of patterns, a transcendent perception that shatters the limited vision Jocelin has had up to this point. Note that it is not a rejection of Jocelin's original view. It is a statement of the fact that Jocelin's vision is true, but it is not the truth. The truth is that mixed and newly reunified mode that Jocelin glimpses in his three final visions as language collapses and his life ends.

In Matty's progress, Golding reveals that vision is a dynamic and constructive thing. It is not a momentary perception glimpsed from the

corner of the eye. It is guiding and purposive - it answers Matty's question: "What am I for?", and guides him through each step on his journey. It operates on different levels, for Matty sometimes sees, sometimes feels, sometimes works through signs and sometimes through direct communication. Crucially, vision always moves on. It is not a static mode, a set of responses or rules. Indeed it requires the setting free from such limitations as Matty's clinging to his Bible. Again, as with Jocelin, it is not a question of Matty being wrong in his Bible-based vision. It is simply a limitation which, now that in any case he knows most of the Bible by heart, needs to be removed in order for him to see more fully.

I noted earlier that the steps Matty takes are similar to Sophy's. An analysis of Matty's first 'experience' bears this out, and will also help me to define in a little more detail the nature of vision as Golding perceives it. First, vision is connected with something outside Matty. It is an invasion of his being from forces beyond him. True, he has to be receptive in the first place, but in the long paragraph on page 47 Matty's wanderings around town are described in sufficient detail for us to be aware that when he reaches the window of the bookshop and finds the glass ball, contact has been made and the visionary process can begin. Secondly, we see that vision is not expressible in words:

"Matty looked at the glass ball with a touch of approval since it did not try to say anything and was not, like the huge books, a whole store of frozen speech." (47)

As Sophy strains to get beyond the language spilling out of her transistor, Matty likewise gets **through** the limitations of words, piercing one mode to get at the next:

"It might be possible to go down into silence, sink down through all noises and all words, the knives and swords such as *it's all your fault* and *ta* with piercing sweetness, down, down into silence -." (47)

At this point the differences between visions become more pronounced, reflecting the thematic and symbolic oppositions of the novel. Sophy's journey **through** was in order to arrive at darkness, noise, chaos; Matty's goal is defined in terms of light, stillness, flowing or rising water. The sun in the glass ball is not black, but shines "brighter and brighter and purer and purer." The contrast is more and more thoroughly delineated. The **process** Matty and Sophy have undergone has been similar, but the goals are diametrically opposed:

"It began to blaze as when clouds move aside He was aware too of a sense of rightness and truth and silence. But this was what he later described to himself as a feeling of waters rising." (47-8).

Matty, like Sophy, arrives at the point where contact has been made, the point where he comes to rest in this new mode of existence. At that point, communication is made. In this first experience, the communication is wordless; elsewhere, in his conversations with the elders, communication is more extensively verbal. In both cases, what we are seeing is the spiritual mode of activity functioning to affect the physical one. Here, vision is purposive - it functions to reveal "the nature of things" - "He was shown the seamy side where the connections are". It is also fleeting, in that Matty has the greatest difficulty remembering what happened, since that would involve ordering the experience. What is required is not remembering but response. The final act in this episode shows Matty choosing a response - not, note, as Sophy chooses but "as an awareness that suffered", something of which he is incapable of being proud - and vision moving on. It is a completed process, sealed "in the grooves of an ancient epitaph" with the necessary tears.

In the visions of Sophy and Matty discussed so far, the perceptions given to them have been relatively 'pure', that is, at extremes of darkness and light. But I said earlier, commenting on **The Spire**, that

Golding's understanding of true vision was not of the either/or type, but a mixed mode in which all things came together simultaneously and made sense instead of lying in opposition. It is Sammy's double vision; it is the knowledge Simon gets in the forest and on the mountain top; it is Jocelin's inarticulate exclamation, "It's like the appletree!" That is to say, true vision is seeing the old fallen world transfigured by the spirit, seeing that creation continuously upheld against the forces of entropy. In all this the contingent and crumbling physical world remains just that. This is what Sim sees, as it were, through a glass darkly; this is what Matty sees face to face.

Sim's vision is important for the new dimension it adds to what has already been shown elsewhere; it affects him as Sammy's vision affects him in *Free Fall*, taking the dusty material world and shooting it through with light. Once more the process is like the others in this novel. He begins in contemplation, a contemplation that shows Golding treating physical things in his revitalised and transcendent way: Sim's hand is "most delicately bound in this rarest or at least most expensive of binding material":

"It was made of light. It was precious and preciousy inscribed with a sureness and delicacy beyond art and grounded somewhere else in absolute health." (231)

Once more, too, words (and indeed all art and artifice) are irrelevant. Moreover, Sim too passes through this realm into the place of new vision, a passage not merely physical but also temporal: "and then he fell through into an awareness of his own hand that stopped time in its revolution." This transformation is confirmed by Golding's characteristic description: "In a *convulsion* unlike anything he had every known" The remarkable point is not that Sim now sees nothing but this new vision, but that he sees it *simultaneously* with the old way: "It was true. The place of silence was magical. And dirty." Magical and dirty - the implications of

this, reverberating through the novel, are immense. Magical implies the breaking through of the new realm into everyday existence, a disruption of the norm. But it is dirty too - it is a place of broken dreams (especially for Sim), of the ugly reality confronting idealism. It is both at once, and not a choice of one or the other. Sim takes back his hand "in all its beauty, its revelation." It is still his hand, but charged now with a kind of miraculous electricity.

All this is the prelude to the experience itself, which is described by Golding in terms which offer the fullest analysis yet of the process and experience of vision. We begin this time in simultaneously grasped worlds - rendered comic by Sim's itchy nose - which demand reconciliation:

"It was provoking to have two such disparate scales, the one of inches, the other, universal more or less." (232)

Then, "inspired" (a brilliantly ambiguous choice of word) Sim lays his nose on the table, and immediately Edwin begins speaking in tongues. Note the obvious 'colour-coding' ("it was a single note, golden, radiant") which signals the novel's 'positive' voice in action, and note too that the incident is described as coming from "not Edwin and not speech." Then, the experience itself is described. It is once more a passage through, beyond the surface; and it combines oppositions (pleasure and pain replacing magical and dirty) into a new unity. Indeed, it takes one in particular of Golding's old oppositions - that of being and becoming - and renders it irrelevant:

"The note spread as Sim's palm had spread before him, widened, became, or was, precious range after range beyond experience, turning itself into pain and beyond pain, taking pain and pleasure and destroying them, being, becoming. It stopped for a while with a promise of what was to come." (233)

Time and space are telescoped into one visionary moment of apocalyptic unity. Clearly this mode cannot last, but it is more than a glimpse of what is to come, it is a promise. Moreover, it is not a cold and random

collision, as was the case in **Free Fall**; it is passionate and positive in its affirmation of visionary unity:

"There was, there could be no end but only a readjustment so that the world of the spirit could hide itself again, slowly, slowly fading from sight, reluctant as a lover to go and with the ineffable promise that it would love always and if asked would always come again." (233)

"Ask and it shall be given unto you" - Matthew Septimus is the vehicle of that promise in this novel, and not only to Sim. But Sim is particularly important in Golding's plan in that it is on him that the future of this vision rests at the end of the novel, it is in him that the seed planted here can come to fruition. Again, Golding is tentative. Sim is blind to so much (note Matty's mystified comment "How do the two gentlemen live when I am not there I ask myself"), but there is hope, however faint. As a positive utterance at the end of a novel, this is the most articulate assessment Golding has yet given.

I have saved until the end Golding's description of Matty's last two visions. Like Jocelin's perceptions, they are particularly important because they offer the last glimpse of the two men before their deaths. The most important difference is the nature of those deaths, for Jocelin dies with an inarticulate glimpse of vision, and the old world (exemplified in Father Adam's action) goes on as before. Matty's death is the fulfilment of a promise, fully articulated beforehand (in his journal), and it is an active communication of vision, both in word and in deed.

The concluding movement begins with Matty's own reaction to the mixed nature of things, in both his wet dream and his reaction to the Beethoven symphony, which I discussed earlier. There is little that needs to be noted here, except those details which are a particular confirmation of the nature of vision as I have explained it. We should observe Matty's comments "about everything rejoicing as it might be with Hallelujahs and

that" and his remarkably apt image (in the context of the mixed nature of true vision), "It is like going over from black-and-white to colour." The experience he then has (in Keatsian terms, "it was not a vision or a dream it was an opening") is the most intense invasion of one realm by another that the novel has yet described. The hallmarks of Golding's visionary voice are all there (the presence of the sun, the language of transcendence - "*beyond* joy and *beyond* dancing" - and so on):

"What good is not directly breathed into the world by the holy spirit must come down by and through the nature of men. I saw them, small, wizened, some of them with faces like mine, some crippled, some broken. Behind each was a spirit like the rising of the sun. It was a sight beyond joy and beyond dancing. Then a voice said to me it is the music that frays and breaks the string." (237-8)

The two worlds interlock, and the purpose of the spiritual realm (goodness coming down) is enacted in the physical one ("by and through the nature of men"). About Matty's sight of the spiritual life of each man little need be said except that the course of the novel affirms it. More instructive for our understanding of the way spiritual purpose functions in the physical realm is the final sentence, "It is the music that frays and breaks the string." Just as, when playing an instrument, the player must inevitably wear the instrument out in the execution of his art, so it is a necessary product of the making of spiritual communication that the physical vehicle of that communication should be broken in the making of it. This, clearly, is a preparation for Matty's final act, his sacrifice. The string will be broken, but the music will have been made.

The final pages of Matty's journal sustain their visionary intensity with an eloquence unknown in Golding's work hitherto. Golding's style obviously owes a great deal to the early chapters of the Book of Revelation, but it is fused into the novel's system of signs and images to make a coherent conclusion to Golding's exploration of vision. Most obviously, the passage offers an answer to the novel's hitherto unanswered

question, "What am I for?":

"That is what you are to be for. You are to be a burnt offering."

It is revealing that what would physically be regarded as a horrifying death is calmly accepted by Matty as the next and necessary step. It is the final sign that he is ready and the result is a literal communion of physical and spiritual worlds. There is no way in which we can assess the accuracy of the red elder's prophecy that "that child shall bring the spiritual language into the world and nation shall speak it unto nation." But several signs attest to its validity. One is the accuracy of everything else the elders reveal to Matty, which the novel confirms. Another is Matty's response:

"When I heard this, my head lowered before them I had such joy for men that the tears fell out of my eyes on the table."
(239)

I have remarked several times how tears function in Golding's work to mark moments of visionary intensity, and in this novel they are confirmatory signs. The "opening", the final revelation of the perfection to Matty, is inevitably indescribable, and Golding wisely does not try. It is not only beyond joy and beyond dancing, it is beyond words. But the vision, the awe at looking at the white spirit, is such that the string frays at least, and Matty faints.

There remains merely the final working out of vision in the physical world of the novel. Though the action seems bizarre and arbitrary (which is precisely the point) it is a fulfilment of vision and an accurate realisation of the red elder's promise. More than that, Golding confirms, we cannot possibly know. Matty achieves his first wish, to heal his spiritual face and to save Pedigree, and his living and dying example arrests in this instance the forces of entropy. All the rest is potential. For Sim and Edwin, for Sophy, for the park-keeper, life goes on. But this

is, surely, not a philosophy of despair and tiredness, as most early reviewers misguidedly saw it. It is a philosophy of compassion, of potential growth, or spiritual vision invading this physical world, and transfiguring it by example. It is a philosophy of the world irradiated by light, of darkness made visible.

Chapter Seven

Golding: **The Later Novels**

"It was the dream singing which wasn't singing; and since singing starts just where words leave off, where are you? Face to face with the indescribable, inexplicable, the isness, which was where you came in." 1

It can, I think, be safely asserted that on the basis of Golding's first five novels no one, not even Golding himself, would have guessed that his next five would have turned out as they did. Of the later group, only **Darkness Visible** seems to have emerged from the same source as the early novels, in that it strives to be taken as a 'weighty' novel, a 'serious' analysis of the human condition, drawing similar portentous phrases from its early reviewers. I hope that the preceding chapter has shown how well I think Golding has succeeded with that novel in achieving his aims. In this chapter, I want to turn to the other novels in this second batch, with the exception of **The Scorpion God**, and to examine the ways in which Golding has developed or adapted his fictional technique to fit the newer, more 'tentative' vision which I discussed in Chapter Five.²

This chapter, then, is concerned with **The Pyramid** (1967), **Rites of Passage** (1980) and **The Paper Men** (1984). Now, for a man who has maintained

¹**The Paper Men**, p. 176.

²I omit **The Scorpion God** from my discussion for two reasons. First, it is not, strictly speaking, a 'novel', but rather it is a collection of three novellas. One of these dates back to the mid-1950s, and is a story version of Golding's play **The Brass Butterfly**. 'The Scorpion God' itself is a substantial short story, analogous to **The Inheritors** but told with a dry, ironic humour. 'Clonk Clonk' is less substantial, an outlet for Golding's anthropological speculations but with none of the depth of **The Inheritors**. Though the same piecemeal construction could be found to be true of **The Pyramid**, the latter is welded together most obviously by the character of Olly, but also, subtly, by the interrelation of themes and images. My second reason for ignoring **The Scorpion God** is that it seems to have less to say on the central concerns of this thesis than the other novels. My neglect does not, however, imply any lack of worth: it is a valid part of the Golding canon.

that it is pointless to write the same novel twice, Golding has worried away at his themes with a compulsion that might uncharitably be regarded as the straining of a limited imagination, but it could also, rather more fairly I think, be seen as a persistent effort, akin to Beckett's though obviously working in a different mode, to name the unnameable. The superficial differences in setting do not conceal in his novels the reiterated, insistent question. The often noted structural device on which his novels hinge (the sudden change in point of view, leading Blake Morrison in his *New Statesman* review to coin the critical neologism, a 'Golding'¹) supports this contention. In each of his novels there is a sense of struggle to find the resolution of a problem, and recently, ever more tentatively, simply to discover the terms in which the problem can be expressed, let alone resolved.

It is possible to contend that a relationship of inverse proportion exists between the tentative and the visionary, and that, since the visionary is Golding's true metier, his recent novels betray a faltering authorial voice. This line of argument is very persuasive, and has been used by reviewers bewailing each of Golding's published works from *The Pyramid* onwards.² The conclusion, put forward by Gabriel Josipovici, in a recent *Times Literary Supplement* review,³ seems to be that Golding's earlier novels were the expression of a struggle to come to terms with baffled astonishment; the recent work is merely a display, however adept, of authorial virtuosity. I wish to argue in general terms that this

¹*New Statesman*, 17/10/80, p. 24.

²In this context, the remarks of John Wain on *The Pyramid* (*The Observer*, 4/6/67), Malcolm Bradbury on *The Scorpion God* (*New Statesman*, 29/10/71), Paul Ableman (*Spectator*, 13/10/79) and virtually everyone else on *Darkness Visible*, Robert Taubman on *Rites of Passage* (*London Review of Books*, 6/11/80) and Anthony Burgess on *The Paper Men* (*The Observer*, 5/2/84) are both typical and cumulative.

³*Times Literary Supplement*, 23/7/82.

conclusion is as inaccurate for the three novels being considered in this chapter as it is for **Darkness Visible**.

However, I should perhaps add that these three novels do not seem to me to be of equal value, and I would hesitate to say that any of them other than **Rites of Passage** rates as highly, on whatever scale one chooses to use, as the early fiction. **The Pyramid** is, though, a fine and underrated novel. It is possible, now that Golding's comic talents are more easily acknowledged, that the book can be reassessed. Certainly it caused its early reviewers much trouble, and only A.S. Byatt took the novel seriously enough to ask why it was such a departure from expectations.¹ **Rites of Passage** is, I think, a masterpiece, with a deceptive surface charm that slowly reveals that beneath there is a searching exploration of questions, quite as profound as those that underpin, say, **Pincher Martin** or **The Spire**. **The Paper Men** is, I must confess, of rather dubious value in the Golding oeuvre. It is certainly slight, apparently casually written and in many ways even trivial. But it has its relevance to the theme of vision, not just in the literal visions, which Barclay experiences. Moreover, even this novel, I think, does not deserve Josipovici's strictures.

Consider three changes. First, there is the change in the nature of that astonishment that prompts the initial impulse to write. To quote again a passage from **A Moving Target**, Golding has written:

"I herewith deliver an interim report and announce that it is possible to live astonished for a long time; and it looks increasingly possible that you can die that way too."

But, astonished by what? Well, there is enough evidence to show that the astonishment has changed over the years, from the blank of unknowing that produced **Lord of the Flies**, to the perplexity generated by his latest visit to Egypt: "I had added unutterable complication to a simplistic

¹New Statesman, 2/6/67.

picture." He moves from astonishment at man to astonishment at his inability to express his astonishment at men. His first three novels, despite the pain involved in giving birth to them, were confident, perhaps naively so. But even before the publication of *Free Fall*, Golding was becoming aware of the frail tidiness of his expositions, the sins of omission incurred in their production. Bafflement has simply been discovered at a new and more fundamental level.

Consider secondly a change in the social and historical perspective. The motivation behind the novels Golding wrote in the 1950s was essentially a grappling with the horrors of war. But, however heartfelt, that is not in itself nourishment enough to sustain a novelist for ever. This is in a sense an obvious statement about change in human life. It is unusual to find a person whose thoughts, beliefs and ideas are not subject to change, complication, reversal; it is unreasonable to expect that this should not be reflected in the novels a man writes. Golding's non-fiction is full of awkward recognitions of change, and the need to come to terms with them. The most important is probably Golding's recognition of social forces influencing individual human decisions, and his consequent treatment of man less "sub specie aeterinitatis", more as a social animal encumbered by responsibility, as a pragmatist. This sounds less 'visionary' and in a naive sense of the term it is. Nevertheless, it is a necessary part of the struggle to come to terms with intractable issues, and in this Golding does not flinch from his vision, despite what Josipovici would have us believe about authorial self-indulgence.

For it is ultimately necessary to consider a change in the nature of novel writing. Undeniably, Golding's novels exhibit that modernist tendency to be self-aware. The question to be answered is this: is that 'knowingness' at the service of the author or his material? Josipovici's review implies the former: "the early novels use every skill at the

artist's command dredged up under the pressure of a violent reality." Undeniably too, that reality has become much less violent, though much more complex, for Golding in recent years, for the reasons outlined above. However, inherent in Josipovici's argument is the implication that this 'pressure' produced taut, compressed novels, whereas the later ones have relied upon authorial trickery. And this is misleading, for the early novels are riddled with artifice and trickery - Oldsey and Weintraub's book, for example, could not have been written otherwise. Could it not be that the later novels, instead of substituting self-serving artifice in place of visionary artifice, strive to put shades of vision over what before was crude black and white? The vision is still there, and it is still urgent. Golding may well die astonished. But astonishment is not ignorance and it is not naivety. Over a quarter of a century separates **Lord of the Flies** from **Rites of Passage**. The compulsion to understand unites them; the difference lies in what Golding has learned as a man and as a novelist over the intervening years. Put crudely, his vision has moved on.

I

"It was no good putting the real, live Rick L. Tucker in a book. He had this in common with most of the human race - he was quite spectacularly unbelievable."¹

The above quotation should serve as a warning against looking too closely to identify the 'real' people behind the characters in Golding's novels. He is in no sense an 'autobiographical' novelist like Powys, whose novels are full of self-portraits. But there are 'fragments' of Golding that find their way into his novels, and frequently the central

¹The Paper Men, p. 78.

protagonist is given a biographical background which is a distortion of Golding's own. This is true of Pincher Martin, of Sammy Mountjoy in **Free Fall**, and of those curious 'twins' Sim and Edwin in **Darkness Visible**. In these novels, the same could be said of Oliver in **The Pyramid** and Wilf Barclay in **The Paper Men**.

Clues as to the autobiographical qualities of **The Pyramid** can be found in that novel's similarities to the autobiographical fragments which close **The Hot Gates**. In large measure they stem from the equation of Stilbourne with Marlborough, and the suffocating social pressures of both environments. Then there is Olly's family: his father, a withdrawn, but seemingly deeply wise man, possesses many of the attributes Golding found in his own father; Olly's mother, while being more of a caricature figure, has the social sensitivity, the "radar" and the Cornish 'feyness' of Golding's mother. Chiefly, however, there is Olly himself. His career and enthusiasms mirror Golding's own, in the arts/science dichotomy, the spell at Oxford in the thirties but most of all in the social sensibility he shows, which will be discussed later. Of course this doesn't make Olly into Golding, any more than Pincher Martin was, but it offers us a touchstone in our assessment of Olly as a character, and of his views, at those points at which he appears as a mouthpiece for Golding's own opinions and attitudes.

The Paper Men is another question altogether. In that novel Golding seems to have found one of his starting points, at least, in his anger and frustration at the behaviour of critics towards him. It is, in a manner of speaking, a novelist's revenge on his parasite. But it is also a game. Where Sammy Mountjoy possessed some qualities, even opinions, that made him seem to be mouthing words and phrases that Golding himself was using at the time,² Wilfred Barclay is provided with such a precise set of

memories, beliefs, fragments of biography that Golding seems to be inviting the unwary critic to make the inevitable connection. Of course, it will not do: Wilf "has been a real bastard" (47); Golding, for all his reticence, seems to have struck all interviewers as being courteous and polite. The trail of clues becomes part of an elaborate game between Golding and his critic.³ However, on another level, as I will go on to show later, this identification adds weight to Barclay's opinions about literature and notably about moments of vision themselves, when the thoughts Golding supplies for him echo so precisely Golding's own expressions elsewhere.

²The most illuminating evidence for equating Sammy with Golding comes not from the published novel itself, but from a fragment, published in *Two Cities* (Summer 1960, pp. 27-9), which Golding deleted from the final version of the text. This passage deals with a memory of Sammy's early schooldays, of fights and of an exhausting game of postman's knock. With one or two minor modifications (notably concerning Sammy's return to Mrs Pascoe at the rectory rather than to the warmth of Golding's own home) the piece was repeated almost verbatim in *The Hot Gates*, pp. 160-4.

³Bearing in mind that it is only a game, it is possible to see the following shades of Golding in Barclay, past and present: he does "odd jobs", fights in the war, and then produces *Coldharbour*, a "one off" first novel which "wrote itself", and which is Barclay's best-seller and the source of his popular reputation, much like *Lord of the Flies*; he keeps a journal obsessively, even if it only contains one or two lines per day; he lectures in the USA for two years, as did Golding; he has, to put it mildly, a scorn for critics, especially American academics and (even more particularly) structuralists, all of which is very familiar from Golding's non-fiction; he has an early American lecture recorded secretly by a student, in a way that Golding has often recounted; he is appalled by the explosion of literary ephemera and fantasies about burning all his papers and manuscripts, as Golding does in 'It's a long way to Oxyrhynchus'; he lures Tucker with promises of the original MS version of his second novel *All We Like Sheep*, "which differs so radically from the published version", as does Golding's second novel, *The Inheritors*; while biding his time 'between novels' he produces some shorter fiction and travel articles, much as Golding has done; his work is analysed by Tucker, in order to write *Wilfred Barclay, A Source Book*, which, with the alteration of a name, would be the title of William Nelson's 1963 book on Golding; though he seems not to have read Golding's previous novel, he is much concerned with "rites of passage"; finally, having been often accused by his critics of being a derivative novelist, he decides to consciously draw the next novel he writes, *The Birds of Prey*, from fragments of ideas from his earlier books. For *The Birds of Prey*, one might uncharitably ask, should one read *The Paper Men*? There are, of course, a number of 'anti-clues', as it were, wittily placed by Golding to ward off the knowledgeable from too close an identification, such as the confession that "I've only read Homer in translations", precisely the opposite of Golding's knowledge of and attitude towards ancient Greek literature!

II

"... the not too ample volume of man's knowledge of Man" ¹

In the tentativeness generated by astonishment, Golding's view of men in these novels regularly reflects the caution of the above quotation. His characters, in the three novels under study, particularly those figures who surround the central protagonist, seem less explicable, less 'tidy', less the projection of a single attitude or point of view, than did comparable figures in the earlier novels. The simple pairings and oppositions of characters that impinge on Sammy Mountjoy in *Free Fall*, for example, give way to the more obscurely motivated (and seemingly more 'real') Evie and Bounce in *The Pyramid*, Colley or Anderson or Summers in *Rites of Passage*. What emerges most strongly from these novels, I think, is Golding's caution in trying to 'explain' man's nature. This is linked, I am sure, with the relaxation of tone in these novels. The bleak austerity of the first five novels, which produced Golding's reputation for pessimism in regard to human nature, has given way to an exploration of humour, love and compassion as well as shame, fear and selfishness.

Some early reviews of *The Pyramid* failed to see these developments, regarding the book, in extreme cases, as bitterly misanthropic.² And it is true that a sourness of tone does occasionally seem to dominate certain descriptions in all these novels, though it should be remembered that the

¹*Rites of Passage*, p. 278.

²One of the most extraordinary examples of this approach was John Wain's review in *The Observer* (4/6/67) who saw nothing of the book's humour, charity and compassion. His concluding remark, given this novel's charm and general deftness of touch, is beyond my comprehension: "We have Golding as a social chronicler, writing about everyday life with no overtones. No overtones; but plenty of undertones. Disgust, contempt, an utterly withering east wind blowing through every paragraph Humanity *is* here, in its pettiness, its vanity, its hot-faced importunate selfishness I never read a book that took more effort to finish."

Wilf Barclay who describes Mary Lou as having on "her dumb, flat face an exact expression of that mind as interesting as a piece of string" makes few claims on our sympathy and approval, having at that stage glimpsed divine justice but not yet mercy; moreover, Talbot's vindictive and patronising description of Colley early in that novel comes long before he is brought to realise his wrong-headed arrogance, so it is a distortion (to say the least) when Robert Taubman quotes from this description in his review of the novel in order to 'prove' that Colley is "set up only to be knocked down" and that we should therefore "distrust this story for the manipulation it practises."¹

In the end, man remains irrational and complex in motivation. It is not simply Mr Prettiman, demonstrating "how really irrational a rationalist philosopher can be,"² for all Golding's characters in these novels seem to have their quirks of behaviour, their illogical and inexplicable tendencies. It is true that frequently his characters' more eccentric traits seem 'planted', as it were, and Golding himself has remarked on the deliberate choices he has made in this way: Summers, in *Rites of Passage*, for example,

"started by being much more saintly, in the first version, but I came to think that was ridiculous: I therefore reduced him to someone who could be insulted and who could find that his social standing was a thing of great personal moment to him."

Likewise Anderson might initially seem to be an 'attitude', "a thing from which other characters bounce", rather than a rounded personality. But, Golding disingenuously suggests, "I confused it by making him really a rather lovable character in terms of his attitude towards plants."³ In the other novels similar features can be noted: consider Barclay's interest in stained glass and Tucker's sensitivity in listening to the sounds of

¹See *The Paper Men* (p. 133) and *Rites of Passage* (pp. 66-7). Taubman's review comes in the *London Review of Books*, 6-19 November 1980, p. 10.

²*Rites of Passage*, p. 73.

³Quarto, November 1980, p. 9.

nature, for example. It is perhaps an overstatement of Barclay's to say that he "knew nothing about people or not enough", but it is indicative of Golding's deliberate caution.¹

Indeed imperception, a character's inability to grasp the motivations or actions of others, is one of Golding's main points of exploration in these novels. There is, for example, the painful inappropriateness of Barclay's revelation to Liz that "I knew that the way I was going, towards death, was the way everybody goes, that it was - healthy and right and consonant"² immediately after she has revealed that she is dying of cancer. In *Rites of Passage* one can set Talbot's disdainful first description of Colley against Colley on Talbot, "a member of the aristocracy, with all the consideration and nobility of bearing that such birth implies."³ Olly, in *The Pyramid*, often seems deliberately obtuse, allowing us as readers to see the 'reality' behind his imperception. His response to seeing Evie's weals and bruises is "some kind of a laugh, a laugh of sheer incredulity," leading to "a gap, a nothingness where it was not just that the rules were unknown but that they were non-existent." (90) But the more startling imperception is that he attributes these beatings solely to Captain Wilmot, failing to grasp the meaning of either Evie's desire to be hurt when she hears her father's cries in the village or her final 'revelation' in the pub.⁴ Such failures to grasp meanings and connections lend weight to the moments like the novel's concluding lines, when Olly at last does see clearly. One of the most notable changes

¹*The Paper Men*, p. 76. Of course, it is necessary to be very wary when attributing any character's view to their author, especially Barclay's. Indeed, Golding has gone out of his way to establish the essential ordinariness of Barclay's mind, particularly in the opening chapters of that novel. Still, the obtuseness is genuine, I think.

²*The Paper Men*, pp. 172-3.

³See *Rites of Passage*, pp. 66-7, 194.

⁴*The Pyramid*, pp. 109-11. Similarly, one might consider his reaction to being shown Evelyn's 'ballerina' photographs (pp. 148-9) or his response to Bounce's sudden change of dress (pp. 183-4).

Golding made to the final section of **The Pyramid** between its publication in **Esquire** (December 1966) and its appearance as the concluding third of this novel (May 1967) concerns the last page. In the earlier version Henry Williams remains alien, impassive, 'other'; Olly's indignation and grief are the concluding emotions. In the final text Henry and Olly are indissolubly linked, Olly recognising his culpability too: "I would never pay more than a reasonable price I looked him in the eye, and saw my own face." (217)

What Henry and Olly share is a tendency to treat people as objects. In extreme cases this extends as far as the prime Golding sin of exploitation; usually in these novels, though, it simply means failing to respond to, or recognise, the individuality of others. Such insensitivity is displayed almost casually in, for example, the thoughtless word order of Barclay's "It was a pity about Kestrel and Emmy,"¹ or in Talbot's amused anticipation in planning to manipulate Zenobia and Colley into the roles of Beatrice and Benedict.² The issue is handled with greater subtlety, however, in **The Pyramid**, where Olly's fascination with inert gases and his teasing manipulation of them indicate clearly his attitude without Golding needing to be more specific. Similarly, the whole anguished first section of the novel is passed over, in the final part, with an innocuous reference to that "restless summer", leaving us to make the necessary interpretation.³

On more extreme levels, this grasping selfishness is at times reminiscent of Golding's earlier, more uncompromisingly drawn protagonists. Such is the case with the worms and lobsters imagery of

¹The Paper Men, p. 102.

²Rites of Passage, p. 94.

³See **The Pyramid**, pp.104, 198.

The Paper Men, or in Wilf's description of himself as "eyes and appetite."¹ Beneath this predatory acquisitiveness there is the motivating force of fear ("But they'll see me!" cries Olly, when he is told to enter from the front because he can't get his halberd up the back passage, a reference which takes us back, with its explicit sexual symbolism, to Olly's behaviour with Evie on the escarpment²) and raw, animal behaviour, perhaps best exemplified in the description of Wilf's 'fall', a passage which briefly calls to mind the intensity of Golding's writing in **Pincher Martin**.³ At its furthest extreme, this leads to the brute savagery of Captain Wilmot, revealed in the agonised description of his lurching movement into and out of his wheelchair.

Thus far, Golding's anatomy of the human condition in these novels might seem to be developing along predictable lines, given the preoccupations of the early fiction. Indeed the previous paragraph, focusing as it does on the sexual root of aggression, is familiar from novels like **Pincher Martin** and **Free Fall**, and in this sense the painful ambiguity of 'Love Beats Everything', the motto that dominates the first section of **The Pyramid**, is merely an explicit pointer to what is very evident in the fiction. The same might be said of the emphasis placed in these novels on the connection between adolescence and suffering, whether it concerns Olly ("Eighteen is a good time for suffering") or Wilf. And indeed this suffering seems primarily sexual in motivation. Predictably this is associated with evil:

"I would get Evie to a place where I might wreak my wicked will. I understood it to be wicked. Well, I was wicked. I swore a great oath of implacability and felt better."⁴

This is relatively light in tone, but the first full act of sexual

¹See **The Paper Men**, pp. 114, 27.

²See **The Pyramid**, pp. 152, 96.

³**The Paper Men**, pp. 86-7.

⁴**The Pyramid**, p. 56.

intercourse, as opposed to Olly's "perilous onanism", is characterised as "dark, agonising and wicked" - sex is seen as something fearful, hated, death-associated ("I got away from her quickly and lay with my face in dead leaves") and leading to a mutual disgust.¹ Notably too sex is a fundamental cause of the shame which Golding explores in these novels as in his earlier ones. The obvious example is Colley, who literally kills himself to die of shame, but Olly's response after his intercourse with Evie is similarly embarrassed.

However, in the midst of all this depravity and corruption, Golding is also intent in these novels to explore more positive aspects of human nature, sources of idealism and morality. Foremost among these are love and devotion to art. Inevitably, perhaps, Golding examines the subjects 'negatively', as it were, looking at ways in which such ideals are easily corrupted or distorted, but this gives added emphasis to those moments when the novels display the qualities in true and positive light. The epigraph to **The Pyramid** focuses on love, and the need for it to be the cement binding human relationships; the novel primarily explores love frustrated or corrupted: Evie's incestuous relationship with her father, Evelyn's homosexuality and transvestitism, Bounce's passionate need to be needed. In the midst of this, Olly, for so long blind to the requirements of others, reaches out in adulthood to his own daughter,

"and a great surge of love came over me, protection, compassion, and the fierce determination that she should never know such lost solemnity but be a fulfilled woman." (212)

Similarly, a devotion to art, and particularly music, is projected in the novel as an ideal worth pursuing, as a means of enriching (and even changing) human nature. Music, with its imagery of harmony, its mixture of

¹The **Pyramid**, pp. 79-80. The gut reaction of Olly's father carries particular force on this topic: "suddenly, for all his professed but indifferent agnosticism the voice of generations of chapel burst out of him. ' - this man what d'you me call him - these books - cinema - papers - this sex - it's *wrong, wrong, wrong* !'" (**The Pyramid**, p. 100).

formal precision and emotional sensitivity, is especially useful to Golding. Once more the novel primarily analyses instances of discord, music abused and trivialised - in the hollow repetition of "Heaven is Music", in the glib affirmation that Olly, along with Bounce's other students, is "devoted to Miss Dawlish", in the trite and wittily parodied sub-Ivor Novello musical 'King of Hearts', in the failure to 'connect' through music that Olly sees to be characteristic of his relationship with Evie. Yet again, fleetingly, there is the discovery of "the emotional confirmations and enlargements of music, not as a supposition, but as a fact of experience." (188)

It is no doubt true that both those aspects of the human condition - compassionate love and artistic creativity - only flicker intermittently in the fictional world of *The Pyramid*. However, Golding does seem to recognise - or at least he seems more willing to depict in his fiction - that it is possible for man to acquire the power to live compassionately, to be good even while recognising that the human condition does not suggest man's inherent goodness. Such is the case with Summers in *Rites of Passage*, a Christian and one of Golding's few characters to be recognisably a "good man."¹

Through the character of Summers Golding proposes the possibility of living, broadly speaking, in harmony with one's fellow creatures and at peace with oneself. However, for the main run of his characters, and especially for his principal protagonists, this kind of glimpsed understanding comes through traumatic flashes of raw experience, or in other words moments of vision, which I will consider in more detail in the

¹He has remarkably few forebears in the Golding canon. There is Simon in *Lord of the Flies*, who is, however, little more than a child. There is Nathaniel in *Pincher Martin*, but he is rather a bloodless mystic, at least when he is seen through Pincher's predatory eyes. Summers, by contrast, is seemingly a 'normal' human being, with the self-awareness of adulthood, the recognition of his own imperfections, but, apparently, the faith to conquer them.

final section of this chapter. For the rest of the time life seems to consist, Golding suggests, of a confused mixture of half-grasped truths mingled with plain misunderstandings, moments of generosity coexisting with outbursts of selfishness and deviousness. To conclude this analysis of man, I wish to look at one character - Talbot in *Rites of Passage* - of whose depiction Golding has said "it did seem to be a valid picture of the way a person develops."¹

Talbot begins in the self-confident certainties that rank and upbringing have taught him. He is "a good enough fellow at bottom," (4) casually assuming the authority to dictate to those, like Wheeler, who are, he supposes, at his disposal. He is scornful of the merits of philosophy, and religion at this stage suggests the comfortable subservience of the established church to fixed social proprieties, or, at the other extreme, the laughable eccentricities of "enthusiasm" or behaviour "smug and self-righteous as a convocation of Methodists." (12) At all events, religion is an aspect of life subject to the good taste, discrimination and wit of the educated and civilised mind which Talbot assumes he possesses.

There are initial fluctuations in the smooth progress of the voyage which Talbot sees in prospect - his weakness on becoming seasick delivers a blow to his self-image - but these are not significant enough to deflect Talbot from his chosen role. He exhibits a natural tendency to judge people primarily on the basis of rank ("He is one Mr Cumbershum, holding the King's Commission and therefore to be accounted a gentleman" (20)) and on their recognition of his own social standing. On receiving the first invitation to meet Summers Talbot's initial reaction - "It is not the captain, of course - but the next best thing. Come! We are beginning to move in society!" (45) - typifies this cast of mind.

¹Quarto, November 1980, p. 9.

It is here, however, that Talbot begins to exhibit an insensitivity to social nuance that allows us, as readers, to see 'through' him to the 'reality' beyond. He is comprehensively taken in by Deverel ("He is an ornament to the service" (53)) and witheringly scornful of Colley. There are, however, signs of a developing self-knowledge. He recognises with disgust his tendency to manipulate others - such as the urge to implicate Colley in order to escape the clutches of Zenobia - but there are more serious lessons revealed as Colley's behaviour begins to impinge on Talbot. His mentor, initially, is Summers, from whom Talbot learns of the responsibilities that privilege brings. It is notable here how sensitively Golding handles this, in the hinted conversations of Summers and Talbot, the mingled anger, humiliation and recognition of truthfulness that Talbot discovers. Though in a sense the immediate consequence of this process is a typical moment of vision - "It was then that I perceived without seeing - I knew, but had no real means of knowing," (156) writes Talbot, on realising why Colley's letter seems to have disappeared - the lessons, the revelations, continue to be muffled and imprecise, even after Talbot's reading of that letter. Thus, despite understanding so much of what Colley must have been feeling, and why, he still wonders "What women are there at *that* end of the ship for him?" (185), assuming that the essence of Colley's disgrace is social (*that* end of the ship rather than *this*) when in fact it is sexual (men rather than women). Likewise, he ultimately comes to see through Deverel but remains blind to the fact that he himself is being discussed so condescendingly by Prettiman and Miss Granham.

The 'revelation' in the last two pages of the novel is, for us as readers, unnecessary (as, it might be argued, was the last line of **Pincher Martin**). But the realisation, with its inarticulate hesitancy ("I do not know how to write this") is essential to Talbot himself, as an indication of how far, in terms of an understanding of human nature, he has come. And

it is here, in this wholly consistent exploration of "the not too ample volume of man's knowledge of Man," that Golding pauses, as it were, in mid-voyage. What is ultimately most impressive about Golding's analysis of the human condition in these novels is its inarticulate honesty and, within broad guidelines, its compassionate tentativeness. The visionary imagination has, here as elsewhere, been tempered, mellowed and matured in subtlety and range.

III

"I asked, reasonably enough, what society consisted in other than human beings only to find that the man did not understand me." ¹

Talbot's opinion, quoted above, is perhaps as good a measure as any of his naivete in the world of Golding's mature fiction, for as the recent novels have developed in range and subtlety of social perspective, so society has come to be seen as far more than simply "human beings" alone, as though each individual could thereby be entirely responsible for his relationships with others. These novels, especially *The Pyramid* and *Rites of Passage*, are fully concerned with ranks, hierarchies, social pressures and values. In this context, the sense of place assumes a more explicitly social importance, and for this reason I wish to combine, in this section, comments on place and society, in order to reveal the complex and subtle distinctions that Golding evokes.

However, it does seem that some things never change, and in these novels, as elsewhere in Golding's work, there is at best a disappointment, at worst a misanthropic bitterness, about the way man treats his environment. This cannot be reduced to a simple 'new means worse' formula,

¹*Rites of Passage*, p.274.

as though all environmental changes were necessarily steps backward, but the thought that Golding gives to Olly, returning to Stilbourne after many years away, is characteristic: concrete and tarmac have devoured vast stretches of the landscape, in the midst of which, overlooked, "there was the Old Bridge, humpbacked and grey and uneconomic like so much beauty."¹ The logical consequence is that places are divested of their particularity, resulting in the ubiquitous round metal tables in anonymous cafes and motels that punctuate Barclay's random journeyings.² For Barclay no place really impinges on his consciousness except the churches in Sicily and Rome, in which he has his visionary experiences.

Of the principal characters in these novels, however, Barclay is the least rooted in a particular place. In *The Pyramid* Golding is much more concerned with the interaction of place and society in creating an atmosphere of oppressive sterility, almost a prison. Golding's intention can be seen, however unsubtly, in the mythic name of Stilbourne which he gives to the village, and in his distinction between Olly's sense of life's corruption with Evie up on the hill and his view of "Stilbourne, that framed picture hanging on some wall or other." (92) Olly's outburst to Evelyn de Tracy in the pub defines Stilbourne's constricting power all the more impressively for the way Golding catches Olly's adolescent inarticulacy:

"Everything's - *wrong*. Everything. There's no truth and there's no honesty. My God! Life can't - I mean just out there, you have only to look up at the sky - but Stilbourne accepts it as a *roof*. As a - and the way we hide our bodies and the things we don't say, and the things we daren't mention, the people we don't meet - and that *stuff* they call music - It's a lie! Don't they understand? It's a lie, a lie! It's - obscene!" (147)

Golding makes great play in this novel with parodies and allusions to

¹*The Pyramid*, p. 158. Compare Olly's reactions here with Barclay's in similar circumstances in *The Paper Men*: "So down I drove on the new motor road which rendered the landscape or what I could see of it quite unrecognisable." (p. 168)

²See *The Paper Men*, p. 97, for example.

Trollope's fiction, and in this sense the locality in this fiction might be regarded as Barsetshire revisited, though significantly there is no spire, which had conspicuously dominated the landscape of Golding's previous novel. Instead, as Olly is about to make love to Evie with the eyes of Stilbourne on his back, "there was a blue distance where Barchester and its spire might be." (98) In the absence of any kind of spiritual focus the sexual and social hypocrisies of claustrophobic village life affect all its inhabitants, Olly included. It is present, for example, in Olly's response to Robert's motorcycle injuries:

"I felt properly shocked, of course; on the other hand I felt a little of Stilbourne's excitement and appetite at the news of someone else's misfortune."¹

The motivating force that maintains Stilbourne's schadenfreude is a rigidly-denoted and hierarchic social system. In **The Pyramid** this is something of which all characters are aware, and Golding emphasises the fact by rather heavy-handedly drawing attention to Olly's behaviour and reactions.² Occasionally, this rises in sensitivity, as when Olly, as a result of getting to know Evie, 'saw' Chandler's Close for the first time, rather than simply blotting it out of his consciousness, and "I realised suddenly that it was what the papers called a slum." (53) Elsewhere, Golding reminds us that **The Pyramid** is essentially a comic novel: witness the absurd debate over Olly's rank in 'King of Hearts', and his mother's "radar" which can detect social nuances from behind net curtains. However, beneath the comic surface is Golding's intense realisation of the bitterly destructive forces of class snobbery, which deny to each of the social

¹**The Pyramid**, p. 63. There are other examples, of which the most obvious, perhaps, is Mrs Dance's acute observation of "the tiny smear of lipstick at the corner of Dr Jones's mouth." Since she had "two Stilbourne eyes in her head and a Stilbourne tongue in her mouth," the consequences are inevitable (p. 101). Finally, there is "the Stilbourne tide" washing over Olly when Evie claims he raped her, with its inevitable public humiliation (pp. 109-10).

²See, for example, pp. 13, 14, 16, 23-4, 30-1, 43, 59.

groups the right to the privileges enjoyed by the group immediately above them, even if this is only the dubious privilege of participating in the Stilbourne Operatic Society.

The Pyramid sets out quite obviously to be a 'social' novel, rooted in village life of the 1930s. With **Rites of Passage** Golding's social analysis moves back into more familiar territory, in the sense that once more he evokes a 'closed' world, giving the reader the impression of place as 'laboratory', a testing ground for exploring individual behaviour and social relationships, after the fashion not just of **Lord of the Flies** but also **The Inheritors** and **The Spire**. However the density of the cross-references and analogies at work in this novel reveals a much more skilful and subtle analysis of social behaviour. At various stages, the vessel taking Talbot and his fellow travellers to Australia becomes a working model of a complete society, an ark, a theatre, even a whole world in little. It is from the manipulation of these various levels of analogy, explored from a variety of points of view, that the novel's complexity derives.

The basic analogy between ship and society is explored from the novel's early stages, in the discussion on government between Talbot and Deverel, for example. Talbot's patrician perspective is complimented by Colley's rather more humble description of "the shape of the little society in which we must live together for I know not how many months."¹ Of course, Talbot's perceptions are coloured by his natural assumption of gentlemanly superiority. It is through the gradual erosion of some at least of this arrogance, coming via his contact with Summers, that Golding develops his analysis of the relationship between duty and privilege. Their first exchanges are characterised by Talbot's casual condescension: in his surprise that Summers could ever have been "a common sailor" and

¹Rites of Passage, pp. 52,188.

his patronising commendation "on imitating to perfection the manners and speech of a somewhat higher station in life than the one you was born to." (51) However, it is to Summers that Golding gives the key lines in their exchanges on society and the class system. One comment in particular carries clear authorial emphasis: "Perfect translation from one language into another is impossible. Class is the British language." (125) Yet the progress of the novel goes some way to alleviating the bleak lesson of Summers' teaching. At the end of the novel, the hierarchies are still in place - Anderson is still despotic ruler of his 'kingdom', Rogers can still exploit abuses of rank to defeat the inquiry into Colley's death - but there are glimpses of wisdom that will slowly lead towards "a generous and democratic freedom," (211) in the bearing of Summers himself, or in Talbot's discovery of the workings of "justice", that "large and schoolbook word" (139) that Summers alludes to.

In all this, then, *Rites of Passage* suggests a formally stratified social system (indeed, the built-up pressure of such a system is released in equally formalised ways, in the conventional 'misrule' of the "crossing the line" rituals) in which the individual's freedom to manoeuvre, and hence the degree of autonomy and responsibility he holds, is severely curtailed.

There are specific exceptions - again, consistent with Golding's views on the individual's 'ethical' progress, and hence his effect on those around him - and these characters are the sources of hope in Golding's world, those who have been granted a glimpsed understanding of vision themselves, and who are then able to provoke it in others. Others, like Colley, are victims, crushed by Anderson not just because he "cannot abide a parson," for what, it becomes clear, are obvious personal reasons, but also because he could not dominate Talbot. For all their lightness of touch, these novels reveal Golding's social vision to be a sobering one.

IV

*"There were things, mantic moments, certainties, if you like, whole episodes that had blazed, hurt, been suffered for ..."*¹

Into the mouth of Wilfred Barclay Golding puts many opinions and expressions that reveal a novelist of banal observation and a second-rate mind. Yet in his comments on the nature of creativity and on the value of art and literature Barclay can sound uncannily like his maker. These contradictions are, in one sense, typical not just of that novel, but of all three texts being discussed here. For though one might not wish to label any or all of them, with the Faber blurb-writer's wide-eyed enthusiasm, as "ferociously powerful, unpredictable, unclassifiable," these novels are, nonetheless, profoundly different not just from each other but from the rest of the Golding canon. Hence any conclusions that might be drawn, on the value and function of the arts in general and literature in particular, on the basis of the manner and matter of these three works, must be seen as tentative and limited in application.

Formally the novels bear little resemblance to each other. **The Paper Men** on first reading seems structurally rather haphazard, and even though certain patterning devices suggest themselves - the parallel shootings which open and close the novel, for example, the varieties of 'fall' or the recurrent dreams - the novel does not exhibit the close-worked tautness traditionally associated with Golding's work. It may be that we should see in this novel the subversion of the canons of Greek tragedy - the tragic rendered absurd, in fact, since Barclay comments frequently on his personal nemesis, the spirit of farce. **The Pyramid** is also perplexing in formal terms. In part, no doubt, this is due to the novel's curious

¹**The Paper Men**, pp. 24-5.

genesis, since it began life, in Golding's words, as "a long short" - that is, the story of Bounce. However, there are deeper confusions, since, on a number of occasions Golding has claimed that the novel is written "in sonata form."¹ I cannot find, nor have I read, any convincing explanation of the novel's structure to support this claim. It is possible to regard the novel as having two main 'themes', love and music, and to show how the two are interwoven, but this in itself does not suggest the precision implied in the term 'sonata form'. Some critics, striving after this musical analogy, suggest that the central episode is a kind of 'scherzo' in which the novel's otherwise serious issues are dealt with jokingly.² In the end such explanations have the vagueness of an unsatisfactory metaphor. The unity of *The Pyramid*, I feel, is to be found elsewhere, in recurrent patterns of imagery and the repetition of key words and phrases.

With *Rites of Passage* Golding returned to a more conventional formal technique, the overlapping and interlocking of two points of view. This is typical of Golding's earlier fiction - of *Lord of the Flies*, *The Inheritors* and *Pincher Martin* for example - though here we have not the sudden change of perspective at the end, but a second substantial 'version' of events to set alongside and illuminate the first. This clearly caused Golding some trouble:

"One thing I worried about is that, when you start to read Colley's letter to his sister, there's a sort of points-change and a feeling that you've been over it all before."³

This, no doubt, explains why Colley is seen, in his smiling drunken trance, taking the first few sheets of his letter to "the necessary

¹See, for example, his comment to John Haffenden: "Most of my novels fulfil the Aristotelian canons of tragedy - except for *The Pyramid* which is in sonata form." (*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 11)

²For example, see David Skilton, '*The Pyramid* and Comic Social Fiction' (in eds. Biles and Evans, *William Golding: Some Critical Considerations*, pp. 176-87).

³*Quarto*, November 1980, p. 9.

offices", though Talbot is unaware at the time of the significance of what he is seeing.

If *Rites of Passage* is structurally typical of Golding's fiction in general, it is also true that in both that novel and *The Pyramid* he employs recurring metaphors and patterns of imagery in a typically visionary fashion, such that they carry a great deal of the novel's meaning, illuminating contrasts, parallel responses, ironic distortions and so on. In *The Pyramid* cars, items of clothing, and references to love and sex can be seen in this light.¹ Taking one such thread to analyse in detail, the use Golding makes of music demonstrates impressively the range of allusion that is possible. On a simple level the central characters are 'placed' by Golding's description of their musical tastes and abilities. For Olly music is a familiar landscape in which he moves at ease: "In my mind's eye, I saw where she put down each thick finger. It was like reading very large print." (196) Bounce, despite the panache with which she plays a Chopin Impromptu, reveals the limitations of her cultural vision and seemingly of her emotional being by her violent response to the advent of the gramophone, by her "diatribe about the Stravinsky she had never heard," and by the suffocating narrowness of her taste:

"St Paul, the Messiah, the Elijah, some Stanford, and Stainer's Crucifixion Heller, Kummer, Matthay's Relaxation Exercises, with Hymns Ancient and Modern on Sundays." (188)

More subtly, Olly's father endures the banality of 'King of Hearts'

¹I do not intend to write at length about such details. Avril Henry's article, 'William Golding: *The Pyramid*' (*Southern Review*, 1968, pp. 5-31) analyses, for example, connections between vehicles and sexuality, discussing Wilmot's invalid carriage, Bobby's motorbike and Bounce's car. Similar discussion could be made on the subject of clothing: Golding deliberately contrasts Robert's "trousers", lost in the sexual fracas with Evie, and Olly's "pants", being cosily darned by his mother (p. 55) - a disparity which subtly underlines the difference in sexuality and maturity of outlook of the two characters. Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of Avril Henry's article is its speculation about the connection between the novel's structure and wavelengths, frequencies and proportions of 'crystals' used in early models of wireless. This, surely, is pushing a simple metaphor beyond the limits of interpretation.

(smouldering with "furious contempt", in de Tracey's words) but this suppressed violence bursts out in remarks like, "What I enjoy is a good grind!" (140) Superficially this is an expression of his love for the music of the baroque era, but, given the sexual connotation, it hints at the sort of sexual repression that spills over in his outburst to Olly about the 'wrongness' of sex. Indeed, this impression of a life lived under constant pressure is marvellously brought out by Golding in the discussion Olly's family have about pianos, in which his father observes that "Iron frames give you a steady tension. Ours is an iron frame." (83)

Evie, likewise, is initially 'defined', at least in Olly's eyes, by the seeming banality of her musical tastes, in the comments she makes about the Savoy Orpheans. However, Golding allows us to see the general imperceptiveness of Olly here (in his inability to grasp what others - his father and Dr Ewan - really feel about his piano playing), with the clear implication that this reaction to Evie is not only wrong musically, but is also an integral part of his failure to relate properly to Evie as an individual in her own right. This is partly grasped by Olly in their next meeting when Evie is revealed to have a good singing voice and a memory for Tudor madrigals. Nevertheless the whole of the first part of *The Pyramid* demonstrates painfully Olly's insensitivity to Evie's needs: it is only at the end of this section, when Evie obtains a sort of revenge on Olly (and the Stilbourne values which at that time he embodied) by humiliating him in the pub, that Olly at last begins to realise the extremity of the gulf between them, and his own fault in allowing it to endure:

"It was as if this object of frustration and desire had suddenly acquired the attributes of a person rather than a thing; as if I might - as if *we* might - have made something, music, perhaps, to take the place of the necessary, the inevitable battle." (111)

This quotation is one of a number which occur at climactic points in the novel when Olly comes to understand something of significance about himself or others. In each case the association with music is explicitly made. There is, for example, the explosion of pent-up sexual frustration that is worked out in Olly's crashing blow delivered to the walnut panel of the piano, and the more gently ironic (if rather cliched) "I went home and faced the music," (74) after his lust has been temporarily satisfied. Again, his moment of revelation, when he finally grasps the fact that his calf-love, Imogen, is "a stupid, insensitive, vain woman" occurs directly as a result of a musical event - listening to her sing the romantic duet from 'King of Hearts':

"She had walked indifferently into a country to which I had access, of which indeed, I was native. In that landscape where notes of music, and all sounds were visible, coloured things, she trod with ignorant, ungainly feet. It was not just that she could not sing. It was that she was indifferent to the fact that she could not sing; and yet had gone, consenting to this public exhibition. She was so out of tune that the line of the song that should have been as spiky as a range of mountains was worn down like a line of chalk hills." (154)

Finally there is Olly's relationship with Bounce, again defined in explicitly musical terms. On the eve of his departure for Oxford, which coincides with the removal of Henry Williams and family from Bounce's house, Olly goes reluctantly to bid her goodbye. His glimpsed understanding of her emotional life at this point, listening to the sounds coming from her study before he enters, comes via "a kind of ear-test", and Olly 'sees' what is happening behind the closed door as clearly as he saw the notes in the chord Bounce played for him:

"a rook had no business to be down there on the left, on the rug before the dull, red eye of the fire. Nor could it add to its faint cawing those curious, strangled sounds as from an incompetently handled instrument The ear test provided the picture I could see as clearly as if no panelling divided us. She was down there in the dark on the left, huddled before the dim fire beneath the glowering bust; trying to learn unsuccessfully without a teacher, how to sob her heart out." (199)

The musical analogy used here occurs one more time in the novel, as Olly stands, as an adult, before Bounce's tomb. Once more Golding underlines the revelatory nature of Olly's insight, confirming for us the importance of the event for Olly, by the musical figure:

"This was a kind of psychic ear-test before which nothing survived but revulsion and horror, childishness and atavism, as if unnameable things were rising round me and blackening the sun. I heard my own voice - as if it could make its own bid for honesty - crying aloud. 'I never liked you! Never!'" (213)

In a similar way, *Rites of Passage* is densely patterned, so that a cumulative and complex meaning can be derived from the intricacies of recurring references to particular images, such as comments on the stage.¹ Here Golding exploits subtle variations in the basic metaphor to comment on the essentially 'theatrical' behaviour of the 'performances' of some of the characters, the 'dramatic' nature of the 'rites' with which the novel is concerned, and so on.

Much of the detail of this particular cluster of images is derived from literary references and analogies - to Shakespeare, Racine, Coleridge, for example - which Golding employs. Such allusions in each of these novels help to clarify and define 'resonances' set up between the original literary material and Golding's use of the quotation. In *The Pyramid*, as David Skilton demonstrates, there are regular references to Trollope's 'Barsetshire' which set the parameters for Golding's novel: thus Griselda Grantley becomes Imogen Grantley, de Courcy becomes de Tracy, Harding of Plumstead Episcopi metamorphoses into Harvey of Bumstead Episcopi!² In *The Paper Men* there is an essentially comic literariness at work, undermining Tucker's absurd reverence for "the Burden" Wilf must feel, is being "part of the Great Pageant of English literature".³ But

¹References, which I do not intend to explore in any detail, occur on pp. 39, 67-8, 70, 85-6, 88, 93-4, 99, 109-10, 166, 269, etc.

²See eds. Biles and Evans, *William Golding: Some Critical Considerations*, p. 184.

³*The Paper Men*, pp. 15, 44.

there are complexities - listening to the stream, Tucker quotes not from Wordsworth's 'Two Voices', but from J.K. Stephen's parody. Is it possible that Golding is making subtle comment here about the relation between writer and critic?

There are other, weightier allusions at work in this novel also, which come into play when Wilf senses that he is, as it were, being hounded from heaven, pursued by "old nobodaddy". In this predicament, as Wilf notes, "There was nothing to be done. *Please* see the joke." But though Godot never comes, Wilf's divine revelation does: and there is a further irony in that while looking for "something philosophically, or rather theologically, *witty* ," in order to revenge himself on Tucker, Golding makes Wilf say, apropos the arranged meeting at the hotel in the Weisswald, "I'll be there Thursday."¹ Is this because Wilf wants to play 'the man who was Thursday'? The irony is that Wilf's theological joke backfires, while Halliday's ("Holy day? God?" asks Anthony Burgess astutely²), standing on top of his church and pursuing Wilf to the end, does not.

This kind of manipulation of detail loaded with explicit literary connotation throws into question the implied 'reality' of the fictional world being evoked, since the sense of artifice is so self-conscious. In other ways, too, Golding makes the reader aware of the 'writtenness' of the fiction, drawing attention to the fact that the relationship between art and 'reality' is neither simple nor direct.³ Talbot regularly refers

¹These allusions to Blake, Beckett and Chesterton occur on pp. 126, 128, 131.

²In 'A Gesture of Humility', *The Observer*, 5/2/84

³In drawing attention to this deliberate questioning of the novels' 'reality-effect' I am not particularly concerned here with, say, a modish fascination with the instability of the text. But in any case there is nothing in these novels to compare, for example, with the deliberate fluctuations in Matty's surname in *Darkness Visible* (see Chapter 6). In *The Paper Men*, unless there are subtleties beyond my understanding, Wilf's references to Tucker as "Jake" (pp. 79, 113) seem more likely to be the consequence of careless proof reading.

to the danger of 'inventing' when treating his lordship to a description of the ship's human cargo.¹ Indeed, in the very divergence of Talbot's and Colley's versions of events, Golding draws attention to the fact that neither of them can lay claim to being entirely the 'truth' - and if they cannot then certainly the captain's log with its report that Colley died of "a low fever", supposedly the most factual account of all, bears even less resemblance to events.

In **The Paper Men** Golding stresses even further the tenuousness of the link between what is written and the 'truth', if there is any, behind it. Admittedly the narrative warns us that **Horses at the Spring** is one of Barclay's more superficial creations, in the making of which he was not especially involved, but even here Golding appears to stress that the 'reason' behind writing a book can never be fully known:

"**Horses at the Spring** had what might be mistaken for True Love in it and people wouldn't wear that though I couldn't very well tell them that it was there to put off Halliday." (106)

It seems that in this novel especially Golding is concerned to deny a reductive approach to literary criticism, in which "The question to be asked when reading one book is, what other books does it come from?" (25)

In other words, there will always be unguessed at motivations, deceptions, even downright lies, that go to make up a work of art. This will be especially true of the potboilers that Barclay continued to produce, or, in another medium, the 'versions' of battle scenes painted by Brocklebank in **Rites of Passage**. The latter's defence of the distinction between art and actuality (involving, in his case, the strategic deployment of smoke in naval encounters), despite the evidently farcical nature of Brocklebank's condition and arguments, raises serious issues, and provides yet another cautionary example of the obscure connection between a work of art and the reasons for its making or its finished form.

¹See, for example, pp. 55, 67.

Talbot, on the strength of his experiences and his difficulty in doing justice to them in his journal, concludes (with the neatness of an authorially composed definition): "Life is a formless business, Summers. Literature is much amiss in forcing a form on it!" (265)

And yet each of these three novels offers a denial of that truism. This denial exists not merely at the workaday level of novel 'carpentry', to give the illusion of a 'reality-effect' but more particularly in moments of intensity, visionary moments in fact, when, as Golding has said elsewhere, the 'real' world is shoved to one side and it is the author's job to bring to birth a new and mysterious creation. The ridiculous Brocklebank, for all his vanity, knows, and is sobered by the knowledge, that no comparison is possible between his stature as an artist and that of Rembrandt. There are hints in these novels of the awesome power of vision, that would enable the writer or artist to see into the heart of things.

As I noted earlier, it is **The Paper Men** that reveals most directly Golding's intentions. Words are frail and inadequate things, "clipped like gold coins, adulterated and struck with a worn stamp," (60) yet they are all Wilf has for transcribing "this dancing awareness, this glitter of the mind from which I constructed my implausible but amusing stories." (69) This is Wilf in a moment of self-deprecation but there are more intense creative moments, like those described in the quotation that heads this section, in which the burning pain of bringing glimpsed understanding to birth is recognised. At such points, as Wilf notes in tones indistinguishable from the Golding of **A Moving Target**, it is necessary "to invent, to dive, suffer, endure that obscurely necessary anguish." (25) At such points one observes the 'trigger' words, as it were, a 'gap', a 'nothingness', a 'convulsion', which vouchsafe the experience being described. If this is where words run out, it is to such points,

paradoxically, that Golding's views on the function of art and literature, as discussed and practised even in these novels, lead us.

V

*"With lack of sleep and too much understanding I grow a little crazy, I think, like all men at sea who live too close to each other and too close thereby to all that is monstrous under the sun and moon."*¹

The sobering conclusion to *Rites of Passage* seems perhaps over-solemn in the light of Talbot's self-assured tone for most of the narrative, but, in its contemplative quietness, it sounds out Golding's world-view on an appropriate warning note. For, on the basis of what has been revealed of Golding's view of man, his understanding of society and his analysis of the function of art, as they are demonstrated in these three novels, one finds much of the universal pessimism Golding attests to, yet also, hidden within the folds of the narrative, as it were, enough of the simultaneous cosmic optimism to alleviate the gloom. However, it does have to be looked for, and, in accordance with what is known of Golding's opinions, it is localised in effect, though nonetheless powerful for that, since it is the only counterbalance to the process of entropy, a slow winding-down into despair.

This coexistence of optimistic and pessimistic tendencies suggests that one would find, in these novels as in Golding's others, various layers or levels of 'reality'. Wilf, in the contentment and freedom bequeathed to him by his dream experiences, provides a good illustration. On a brief visit to London he is aware of the complete unreality of life around him: "I had my dream and the solid pavement was insubstantial beside it."²

¹*Rites of Passage*, p. 278.

²*The Paper Men*, p. 176.

This fragmentation within the perceiver is explored in many forms in these novels. In **The Paper Men**, Wilf, telling his story, writes "Now I have to tell you about that island because it's the first half. I'll write the second half later." (118) This allusion - to his two main experiences of vision, a vision of judgment in the Sicilian cathedral, followed by a vision of mercy (after a fashion) in Rome - is essentially about two ways of seeing, indeed of experiencing 'reality'. **The Pyramid** contains similar examples, though given Olly's 'earth-bound' limitations, they are perhaps not so striking. Avril Henry's article¹ explores the mechanical/natural dichotomy in that novel. The book is also characterised by an arts/science division, focused primarily on the differing ways of 'seeing' associated with chemistry and music. There is the "large print" landscape of musical language, but it exists alongside "Physics and Chemistry the real, the serious thing." In this context Olly is only too painfully aware of his "sense of rank indecency at wanting to play the piano seriously." (192)

Golding is much concerned, too, to suggest and analyse an awareness of a spiritual 'reality' coexisting alongside the material world. In **The Pyramid**, as I have already noted, this is suggested by its absence, by the fact that Evie is "strictly secular, by the very title Golding chose for the prior publication of the 'Bounce' section, '*Inside a Pyramid*'. We seem to be being offered a similar 'negative' definition of reality in **The Paper Men**, given Wilf's initial insistence on his urgent need **not** to believe in the miraculous.² In **Rites of Passage** Talbot's bluff self-assurance seems to be tending in the same direction, as though in the face of sheer material reality all other experiences, or perceptions of those experiences, would cease to matter:

¹See 'William Golding: *The Pyramid*' (Southern Review, 1968, especially pp. 15-21).

²See **The Paper Men**, pp. 9, 20, for example.

"Though the water stung my face it put me in a good humour. Philosophy and religion - what are they when the wind blows and the water gets up in lungs?" (16)

Yet a distinction needs to be made here between the labelling of an experience and the experience itself. Barclay, in **The Paper Men**, for all his garrulous volubility, struggles to fit that experience into the language available to him, and recognises his failure: "I have nothing to speak with but with metaphor." (161) For the overriding experience of his dream there is no adequate explanation on any one level of describable reality:

"I had the dream explained to me in scientific, psychiatric, religious, and *isness* terms (that last from the shirtmaker) all of which are mutually exclusive or so it seemed. Mostly I brooded on the isness. Why this harping on isness? you'll ask. Are you up the wall? you'll say. Isn't quote reality unquote good enough for you? Well the answer lies in the genius of the language. This wasn't reality which is a philosophical concept but quote isness unquote a word from the seamy side of speech for the involuntary act of awareness. I've invented it myself because the dream didn't happen to a philosopher but to me. Religious, scientific, psychiatric, philosophical, all straight up the spout!" (163)

The issue here is the same one Golding has confronted elsewhere, notably in **Free Fall** - that is, struggling to reconcile the complex nature of what life is like to the various 'systems' or world-views that seek to describe it. The conclusion, here, as elsewhere, is that existence is too multifarious to be tied down by nomenclature, the pursuit of which is a folly as great as, say, Pincher Martin's delusion that by naming parts of his rocky hell he is taming it.

Yet the tension thus created in Golding's fiction - the patternmaker's plea against the foolishness of making patterns - is as perceptible in these novels as it is in Golding's earlier fiction. The novels struggle to come to terms with the process of change - over time in **The Pyramid**, over place in **The Paper Men** - and apparent chaos. Golding is careful, however, to depict that chaos as only apparent, and to construct

his fictions to suggest a co-existent order if the appropriate interpretation of events is made. Significantly, when Talbot, in *Rites of Passage*, asserts that "Life is a formless business," Summers responds, "Not so, sir, for there are both death and birth aboard." (265) Indeed the surname of the woman who has given birth, Roundabout, is wittily chosen to endorse this sense of continuity, balance and closure to set against the apparently random and chaotic - in this case the sudden and unexplained disappearance of Wheeler.

All this would seem to suggest that Golding is moving towards an equivocal and uncommitted delineation of the nature of existence. But in fact this position is in one sense no different to the stance Golding took in *The Spire*, where he strove to make available a whole spectrum of interpretations of Jocelin's behaviour, while personally endorsing the validity of Jocelin's vision - the evidence for which can be found in the central visionary experiences that Jocelin has. Though the manner of Golding's delivery has changed, and though, as I have argued in this chapter, a greater tentativeness can be seen as characteristic of these later fictions, nevertheless a similar faithfulness to the visionary working within the framework of the tangential or coincidental is present in these works.

Formlessness taken alone, Golding suggests, leads inevitably to despair. Wilf addresses the issue with his usual casual garrulity, but there is more than an echo of Eliot's 'East Coker' in his assertion that "It's no good relying on experience. Problems get worse with age, not better." ¹ From such a perspective life is absurd, a process governed by

¹*The Paper Men*, p. 134.

causality, as Wilf realises, this thing coming out of that, but under the aegis of the spirit of farce.¹ In **The Pyramid** Olly, less self-assured than Wilf, finds the same contemplation producing shame:

"I was consumed with humiliation, resentment and a sort of stage fright, to think how we were all known, all food for each other, all clothed and ashamed in our clothing." (205)

Olly's sense of being trapped here is echoed elsewhere in this novel - in Evie's outburst about being "damned", in Olly's observation (of Stilbourne society) that "we were our own tragedy and did not know we needed catharsis" (114) - and this comes to be equated with living in a kind of hell, being trapped in a closed universe.

Occasionally in these novels Golding's imagery suggests this in what is perhaps an unsubtle fashion - one thinks of the maimed blackbird, "making do", which appears when Olly has discovered Evie's corrupted and beaten body, or the trapped bird fluttering helplessly in Bounce's deserted music room, a rather obvious image of the frustration and waste of Bounce's natural talents² - but for the most part, as is the case with the extended sex/music analogy of **The Pyramid**, it is done with some sensitivity.

Formlessness, however, is countered in these fictions by a variety of means. Golding makes great play - sometimes with, sometimes without ironic intent - with the notion of rites of passage, experiences or rituals suggesting or leading to a change of status or relationship for the participant. This ritualist sensibility is perceived as a means of imposing order on experience. The bitter comedy of the rite in **The Paper Men** changes permanently the relationship between Wilf and Tucker, henceforth his dog.³ It is **Rites of Passage**, however, that explores rites

¹The fifth chapter of **The Paper Men**, dealing with Wilf's memories up to the point that Tucker proposes to be his biographer, provides useful evidence here.

²**The Pyramid**, pp. 91, 214.

³See **The Paper Men**, pp. 146-53.

most thoroughly. Admittedly Talbot's aristocratic, essentially eighteenth-century outlook perceives levels, hierarchies and structures in most circumstances, but even taking this into consideration, the novel is still a detailed analysis of "a complete collection of all the ceremonies that accompany the forked creature from the cradle to the grave." (270) The rites and rituals involved in changing course, shooting the sun, shooting an albatross, crossing the equator, death, birth and marriage are objects of fascination to Talbot, and, it would seem, to Golding. There are, however, checks and restraints that hold us back from a naive acceptance of Talbot's interpretation of codes and signs. One is the naive and enthusaistic 'Romanticism' of Colley's narrative. Another, more certain touchstone is the opinion of Summers, reminding Talbot that "the uniform does not make the man." (154)

If ritualism provides a means of maintaining a sense of cohesion and order, it is nevertheless perceived as an inadequate way of doing any more than, as it were, keeping the chaotic at bay. A more positive force is the individual example and experience of the artist or saint figure. In the non-fiction such a role was regarded as a means of combating entropy and sustaining vision. So it is here, though the saints and artists in these novels are more ambiguously motivated, less clearly defined and less explicitly aware of their own vision than were the corresponding protagonists in Golding's early novels, or even in *Darkness Visible*. *The Pyramid* is deeply ambiguous: Evelyn de Tracy evidently demonstrates the artist's function in helping Olly to 'see' (in this case, to articulate the sense of inhibition which constricts Stilbourne society, and to see through his infatuation with Imogen) but is demonstrably a caricature figure, and, it is implied, in artistic terms, a fake. *The Paper Men* is so deeply shot through with cynical world-weariness that sanctity, to say nothing of true artistry, seems virtually invisible. Wilf finds his own

redemption (if such it is): unlike Matty's say, or Jocelin's, Wilf's attempts to put vision into practice are almost entirely frustrated. It is to Summers (and, more ambiguously, to Colley) in *Rites of Passage* that one turns to see enacted what Golding has written about the impact of saints. It is Summers who is so constant to his vision that he is able to aver that "the Christian *cannot* despair", whose compassion for Colley leads him to dare to contradict Anderson, who teaches Talbot justice and responsibility, and whose tact at the end of the novel is demonstrated in deflecting accusations about Colley's "vice" towards the belief that he chewed tobacco! To achieve all this, and at the same time to avoid the naivety of Simon or the strained holier-than-thou nature of Nat Walterson or the extreme 'otherness' of Matty (who is, on many counts, a special case) - such things suggest that Summers is Golding's most sensitively realised 'saint' to date. He, like Golding's other saint-figures, is instrumental in prompting visionary revelation in the central protagonist.

VI

*"I knew in one destroying instant that all my adult life I had believed in God and this knowledge was a vision of God."*¹

The actual experience of the visionary moment in the novels presently under consideration is, with the exception of the treatment of the two main visions which Wilf Barclay receives, muffled, uncertain and 'secular'. Neither *The Pyramid* nor *Rites of Passage* contains the hints of 'divine' revelation such as those proposed in, say, *Darkness Visible* or *The Spire*. However, the experience of vision remains the significant and culminating feature of these narratives: in *The Pyramid* vision comes in traumatic flashes of raw, uncomprehended experience; in *Rites of Passage*

¹*The Paper Men*, p. 123.

Talbot experiences several minor glimpses of understanding, leading to one final revelatory insight.

The first point to be made about vision in these works is that Golding is aware that it can be faked. Barclay's receptiveness to hypnotic suggestion, seeing "on the back of my hand, my own initials, flaming like scars, inflamed like burns," or his rather painful experience with the aphrodisiac¹ - these things are illustrations of deception, or auto-suggestion. Golding is careful to distinguish these from flashes of genuine vision - but they are warnings to test isolated moments of description against the movement of the narrative as a whole and for the vocabulary in which they are described. For the visionary moments, here as elsewhere, have identifiable and recurring figures of expression and a particular rhythm and tone.

The initial characteristic of a moment of vision is its unexpectedness. Talbot, while describing something else entirely, notes that "comprehension is not to be come at gradually It comes, when it comes, at a bound,"² but the comment is apt. In such a moment, the individual's conventional way of seeing undergoes a revolution. In such a context Golding frequently employs the word 'convulsion' to denote the authenticity of the experience, and such moments are 'gaps' in the individual's perception, moments of 'nothingness'. Talbot, in *Rites of Passage*, experiences one such instant, when he grasps something of the true nature of Colley's "humiliation": "This was a kind of convulsion of the understanding. I do not know that I thought anything at all for minutes together." (251)

In *The Pyramid* a similar example can be found when Olly first discovers the evidence for Evie's beatings. He glimpses the raised welts

¹The Paper Men, pp. 20-21, 48-9.

²Rites of Passage, p. 16.

on her buttocks and thighs, having flicked down her knickers, but "with one electric convulsion she got them up again". Again the vocabulary is familiar. Olly sees nothing but "the revelation," and "I cannot tell how long I stared at her without seeing her." He laughs, first out of incredulity and then out of incompetence to deal with this revelation, since "I or someone had come to a gap, a nothingness where it was not just that the rules were unknown but that they were non-existent." (89-90)

Olly is helpless here. He has neither the maturity, nor, indeed, the vocabulary, to deal with the insight afforded him. *The Pyramid* contains a series of such occurrences; they mark steps in Olly's gaining of wisdom, though at each instance Olly is at a loss.¹ Likewise Talbot, when he finally 'sees', is equally defeated: "I do not know how to write this." The 'vision' is a sudden revelation of all the hints and clues that Talbot has been too naive or preoccupied to respond to thus far, but then "It seemed as if certain sentences, phrases, situations were brought successively before me." From these the truth strikes home: "not Rogers but Colley committed the *fellatio* that the poor fool was to die of when he remembered it."²

The touchstone of vision, again as was the case in Golding's earlier fiction, is the shedding of tears. Olly before his father, trapped in the realisation that his intercourse with Evie has been observed, or Tucker experiencing his moment of vision during Wilf's carefully manipulated 'rite', or, finally, Wilf himself in his two visions - in all these cases it is as though weeping is 'proof' of the new level of understanding that revelation has brought.

As I have observed, the visions in *Rites of Passage* and *The Pyramid* are essentially 'secular'. Though they may bring some understanding about

¹See, for example, pp. 81, 110-11, 148, 154, 199, 213.

²*Rites of Passage*, pp. 276-7.

the nature of the universe - as Olly comes thereby to see that "we cannot even think, without leaving a mark somewhere on the cosmos"¹ - they are primarily about the nature of man, or relationships between men. However, Wilf's visions in *The Paper Men*, with which I wish to conclude, are far more universal in scope, being more closely related to the visions afforded to Jocelin or Pincher or, especially, Matty. For they are visions of the nature of God, as Golding perceives this, and of man's relationship to God.

The first is essentially destructive, a vision of judgment and intolerance but, as yet, no freedom.² The event is suitably prepared for - the falling piece of mosaic is, as it were, a shot across the bows - and the tone is set by Wilf's response to the cathedral's atmosphere: "a complete absence of gentle Jesus meek and mild." The vision itself is prompted by a silver statue, that may have been either Christ or Pluto. Whatever the case, Wilf is transfixed "in one destroying instant." It is "a vision of God":

"Surrounded, swamped, confounded, all but destroyed, adrift in the universal intolerance, mouth open, screaming, bepissed and beshitten, I knew my maker and I fell down."

The vision is one of "intolerance" and it seems to place Wilf among "the predestinate damned." Wilf is "in hell". However, the vision is not an end in itself but part of a process that takes Wilf onward to the next vision (though even here, as with the multiple explanations of Jocelin's behaviour, Golding is careful to provide other interpretations - such as a "leedle estrook" - to account for Wilf's experience), driven by the tightening steel string of divine intolerance across his chest.

¹The Pyramid, p. 89.

²Subsequent quotations come from *The Paper Men*, pp. 122-4.

Hounded thus, Wilf realises that the knowledge he has gained is, in its way, "freedom," though "there is freedom and freedom,"¹ and freedom of Matty's kind is still awaiting him. The second vision supplies this.² In Rome, still retreating from Halliday, or God (the two being, by this time, synonymous) Wilf 'sees' him standing on top of his church. The terror that this induces pushes Wilf into "some mode of being that wasn't quite being awake You could say that I dreamed." Like Matty, echoing Keats' wondering "was it a vision or a waking dream?" it is both within and yet beyond 'reality'. The 'dream' is the antithesis of the first vision, an evocation of harmony, dance, peace and concord. It is a vision of light ("a kind of radiance as if the sun were everywhere") and balance enriched by individual human experience ("this harmonious shape was now embellished and interrupted everywhere by the people and the flowers and the glitter of the jewels"). The people "held hands and moved and the movement was music." Wilf is led by Halliday/God to "a dark calm sea" populated with creatures which 'sang' beyond words.

Immediately Golding offers a guarantee of the vision's significance: "I woke up not singing but crying." The tears confirm the validity of the experience, the strain of the steel band and the intolerance are gone, since "I knew where I was going myself, or rather the direction in which I was facing and that there was no more need to run."

The 'explanation', as Golding goes on to observe, is beyond category explanation - scientific, religious or whatever. Even here, there is no 'system' of belief supporting the vision. But the experience itself - universally pessimistic, cosmically optimistic - is ultimately perceivable in terms harmonious, musical, ordered, beyond the limited framework of sexuality, time, love or fear. This is the climax of Wilf's

¹The Paper Men, p. 128.

²The Paper Men, pp. 160-1.

(and the novel's) narrative. He has indeed "gone all indifferent" (177). For him, as for Pedigree in *Darkness Visible*, the last vision of freedom is a blessed, if painful, release.

Bibliography

Note

It is perhaps inevitable that during the course of academic research critical texts will be published or tracked down just too late to contribute to the final product. This difficulty is exacerbated when the subject of half the study has, of late, been in full creative flood. I have adapted the thesis to take into consideration all Golding's published work up to and including **An Egyptian Journal** (1985). However, secondary critical material is neither as widely publicised nor so easily available, and I would like to draw attention to two publications which I have not been able to use. These are the Summer 1982 edition of **Twentieth-Century Literature**, an issue devoted entirely to Golding's work, and Don Crompton's **A View from the Spire** (1985). As regards Powys' work, I would have liked to make use of Richard Perceval Graves' corporate biography of **The Brothers Powys** (1983).

This bibliography has four main divisions. In the first I have listed publications by Powys and Golding in the editions used in this thesis. In neither case have I attempted a complete bibliographical checklist, which is easily available in published sources elsewhere. The second and third sections list published criticism of the work of Powys and Golding respectively. Again it seemed an unnecessary duplication to reproduce a complete critical survey. Consequently the two sections begin by citing recent published bibliographies, after which I have added material either published after these lists appeared or omitted from them. Finally I list a miscellaneous selection of texts which have been of use in the production of this thesis but which do not fall into any of the preceding sections.

Section A: Publications of John Cowper Powys and William Golding, in the editions used in this thesis.

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All or Nothing (London - Macdonald - 1960)

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