

The Ecological Imagination of John Cowper
Powys: Writing, 'Nature', and the Non-human

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore and demonstrate the ecological imagination of John Cowper Powys. Dismissals of Powys as a naïve worshipper of a received, Romantic concept of nature demand to be updated by a contemporary and on-going greening of modernist studies. Powys's fictions are marked by an attentiveness to the non-human that is developed by looking through, and beyond, localised human perspectives; the result is a poetics that seeks to ground the human, materially and experientially, in nature understood as material reality.

Drawing on both the more familiar Wessex novels—*Wolf Solent* (1929) and *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932)—as well as the less discussed discursive writings and *Porius* (1951), this thesis will show how Powys's fictions present complex, polyphonic, and often contradictory fictional worlds in which surprisingly modern insights and epistemologies jostle against, and indeed, cross-fertilise with, more traditional literary forms and devices. In Powys's writing, modernistic experiments with novelistic form and content are variously inflected by a romance-inspired literary consciousness that seeks to transgress the human's localised perspective through overt expenditures of imaginative license. Exploring how Powys's fictions record, and respond to, a variety of forms of what Powys calls 'Nature'—discursive, poetic, material—this thesis will show how Powys's writing shapes, and is shaped by, an ethical sensibility towards non-human forms and forces. Particular attention will be paid, throughout, to his experimentation with scale and perspective, and to the looming and recurring figure of the Earth, through which his later fiction, particularly, seeks to ground not only human life, but a sense of human and non-human community.

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Abbreviation of John Cowper Powys's Writings

A: *Autobiography*

AF: *After My Fashion*

AR: 'Glastonbury: "Author's Review", 1932'

AT: *Atlantis*

CV: *The Complex Vision*

D: *Dostoevsky*

DS: *In Defence of Sensuality*

GR: *A Glastonbury Romance*

ISO: *In Spite Of*

LDR: *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson*

LL: *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to his Brother Llewelyn*

LLW: *The Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson, 1934-1956*

MAC: *Maiden Castle*

MC: *The Meaning of Culture*

OC: *Obstinate Cymric*

OG: *Owen Glendower*

P: *Porius*

PS: *A Philosophy of Solitude*

VR: *Visions and Revisions*

WES: *Weymouth Sands*

WS: *Wolf Solent*

Introduction

I: Imagination and the Ecological Consciousness

On February the fourteenth, 1930, while undertaking preparatory reading for the novel that was to become *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), John Cowper Powys recorded an experience from his morning walk in his diary:

I came to one tree like an oak in its bark and with snow on it where the leaves were distinctly in bud when you saw them against patches of blue in the sky. [...] As I touched this tree and looked at those buds I got for one second the feeling of continuity of human life on the earth and had that unselfish sensation ('twas but for a second), pardi! of sharing it, sharing a stream of life on the earth (human and non-human too) so unconquered and resilient that no evil, no misery, no death could stop its course!¹

Just over two months later, Powys returned to this 'non-human' element as he set pen to paper: 'I have begun my Glastonbury Book. May I be inspired by all the spirits of all the hills and of all stones upon all hill-sides and upon all plains raised up above sea level'.² If such language is immediately suggestive of what Fiona Becket has described as Powys's "'green" credentials',³ it also perhaps indicates how his discursive style—with its mythic, even mystical, turn of phrase and liberal usage of the exclamation mark—may have contributed to the way in which Powys has often been read, or rather, dismissed, as a relatively naïve writer of nature. A picture of a writer opposed to, if not consciously departing from, the 'turmoil' of a largely urban modernism and modernity persists, for example, in one critic's positioning of Powys as a kind of Georgian extraordinaire:

¹ See *The Diary of John Cowper Powys: 1930*, ed. by Frederick Davies (London: Greymitre Books, 1987), p. 45.

² *The Diary of John Cowper Powys: 1930*, pp. 78-79.

³ Fiona Becket, 'James Joyce, Climate Change and the Threat to our "Natural Substance"', in *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce*, ed. by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin (Cork: Cork UP, 2014), pp. 21-37 (p. 30).

The impulse behind the appetite for rural poetry, non-fiction and novels around the turn of the century is not only nostalgia, but also [...] the wider crisis of modernity and modernisms [sic] challenge to Victorian values. As the cry of “Make it new!” followed the disturbance of Darwinism [...] Georgian retreat or the full-blown Nature worship of the novels of John Cooper [sic] Powys seemed an attractive alternative, opposition even, to the turmoil of the times, as pastoral had been before.⁴

To be fair, the word “even” acquires a heavy load here; but aligning Powys with a Georgian ‘discourse of escape into rural reassurance that continues today with *The Archers* and *The Guardian*’s daily Country Diary’ is nevertheless limiting.⁵ A more sympathetic reading might emphasise not only the “green” credentials’ of a writer who ‘develops the “metaphysical” novel out of an imperative to critique the deepest mores and prejudices of his historical moment’,⁶ but also, as critics such as Jed Esty (among others) have recognised, that the relationship between the ‘spiritual ambition and sheer energy of Powys’s prose’ and the writing of his modernist contemporaries is more ambivalent, and indeed, more interesting, than one of ‘alternative[s]’ and ‘opposition[s]’.⁷ Indeed, as contemporary critics have begun to note, there is a much more complex imagination at work in the writings of John Cowper Powys, particularly as those works, as much as those of many of his modernist contemporaries, respond creatively and insightfully to the question that, for J. Scott Bryson, is ‘central [...] for artists and intellectuals in the early part of the twentieth century’, that is: ‘how humans could somehow render their experiences with a more-than-human

⁴ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (Routledge: London, 1999), p. 72.

⁵ Gifford, p. 71.

⁶ Becket, pp. 32-33.

⁷ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 62; see also Jerome McGann, “The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction”: Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys, and the Subjective Correlative’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 13:2 (2006), 309-323.

world'.⁸

This thesis seeks to explore Powys's unique response to that question, which comes not in the form of a straightforward or simple answer, but rather through a series of immensely detailed, and avowedly self-conscious, fictional worlds. There is, as I want to suggest, a burgeoning ecological consciousness at work in Powys's fictions, and this shapes, and is shaped by, a distinctive yet shifting poetics that is discernible in his mature fictions and discursive writings. Powys's fictions seek to see not through, but also beyond, the eyes of the human in ways that are imagined as contextualising its existence within a world encompassing and exceeding it in all directions: temporally, spatially, materially. In doing so, they draw not only upon a variety of epistemological insights associated with modernity, but also upon experimental literary forms and devices that, quite rightly, deserve to be understood as contributing to the broad church of literary modernisms discernible in historical retrospect.

An important characteristic of Powys's writing that I want to describe and locate, throughout, is the equalising, inclusive, and radically open drive that characterises his fictions and impels them towards what Richard Maxwell has described as an 'aesthetics of length'.⁹ There is always an extra perspective to be achieved in Powysian writing, which, as critics have noted, moves not towards finality and closure but towards proliferation and polyphony: indeed, as Charles Lock observes of *A Glastonbury Romance*—the novel in which these formal strategies arguably achieve their high-water mark—concluding events leave the text 'less finalized than dissolved'.¹⁰ For Jeremy Hooker, an early and perceptive reader of Powys, '[t]he Powysian fictional world [...] develops into a multiverse in which not only is every human character a "far-extending continent", but both

⁸ J. Scott Bryson, 'Modernism and Ecological Criticism', in *Modernism*, ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, 2 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), I, pp. 591-604 (p. 591).

⁹ Richard Maxwell, 'Two Canons: On the Meaning of Powys's Relation to Scott and His Turn to Historical Fiction', *Western Humanities Review*, 57:1 (2003), 103-110 (103).

¹⁰ Charles Lock, 'Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55:3 (1986), 261-281 (272).

the animate and inanimate creations are endowed with individual consciousness'.¹¹ Over the course of this thesis, I will engage with novels that attempt, variously, to inhabit the perspectives of insects (GR, 813, 931; P, 131), to 'visualize the whole course' of a river, 'thinking of its waters together, from start to finish' (WS, 109); and to render 'the language of trees' in the 'gibberish' that it might produce for human ears: '*wuther-quotle-glug*' (GR, 89).

We will of course come to these significant examples in time, but for now, I want to suggest that something of this expansiveness finds expression in the diary passages with which I began. The piling-up of clauses, as Powys invokes '*all the spirits of all the hills and of all the stones upon all hill-sides and upon all plains*', is instructive, for the earlier reference to a 'continuity' of life is hereby instantiated in a syntax founded upon the conjunction, "and", as Powys attributes the quality of 'spirit' both to individual 'stones' and also to the larger materialities of 'hill-sides' and 'plains' (the qualification that these are 'plains raised up above sea level' is contextualised when we recall that Powys chose a flood for the denouement of *A Glastonbury Romance*). The penchant for both an animism approaching, or at least tangential to, the mystical, on the one hand, and for unwieldy, list-like sentences, on the other, might be irredeemably jarring to some contemporary readers, but the point to note is the way in which these characteristic excesses of the Powysian sentence embody the consciously imaginative and, indeed, ethical, openness of Powys's 'continuity of human life' or 'stream of life on the earth (human and non-human too)'. A sense of continuing, and shifting, processes, interactions, and forces in which both human and non-human are inextricably entangled together runs throughout Powys's fictions. This thesis seeks to explore the unique way in which his fictions represent and record such interconnections.

Received notions of human centrality—and received literary forms in which the human's perspective dictates the scales and significances of literary representation—are to be subjected to immense pressure by Powys's fictional

¹¹ Hooker, p. 111.

practice, which interrogates hierarchical human/non-human relations at all levels. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's sense of material ecocriticism, a mode of reading 'demand[ing] an ethics of relation, entanglement, and wonder' quite neatly sums up the position, and expectation, that Powys's fictions afford for the human: for while the category of the "human" is our point of entry into, and our touchstone of correspondence in, these strange fictional worlds, it is also that which is to be most consistently grounded in the material and environmental contexts that exceed and encompass it.¹² Scale and significance, in Powys's writing, are relative and shifting; what persists, however, is the human's 'continuous' existence within a material world that it both shapes and is shaped by, through a vast colloquy of forces, over time.

This is an insight that Powys's fictions disperse through a concentrated attention to place, region, and locality—delimitations that anchor Powys's temporally and spatially sprawling imagination—which contemporary critics are just beginning to unpack. Andrew Radford, for example, locates Powys's writings within a larger collection of 'literary representations of Wessex' including, amongst others, Thomas Hardy and Mary Butts, whose literary works, together, 'can [...] be construed in varying degrees as deliberate acts of "scouring"; not just a sedulous sifting of local annals but also making them afresh'.¹³ Radford emphasises the shared 'fascination with material history, especially that of archaeology', possessed by these writers, in order to show how their literary projects are not just 'a frantic salvaging of the mental and physical heirlooms of [...] ancestors', but 'a restless seeking out of ancestral imprints which offer fructifying possibilities for [...] art'.¹⁴ Sam Wiseman, too, has implicated Powys within a modernist 'reimagining' of place, in light of which Powys's fictions can be understood as developing a 'distinctively imaginative regional form that

¹² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Foreword: Storied Matter', in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. ix-xii (p. x).

¹³ Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁴ Radford, p. 7.

connects him with [the] transgressive character of modernism’ as described by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane: ‘Many if not most of [modernism’s] chief creators crossed frontiers, cultures, languages, and ideologies’.¹⁵ For Wiseman, Powys’s ‘status as a peripatetic outsider on the periphery of modernism is connected to a shifting, nomadic imaginative approach’, that is, Powys’s ‘self-imposed exile from the landscapes of the Wessex novels during their composition cultivates a peculiar combination of the accurate and the fantastical: an “imaginative realism” which suggests the distinctive value of distance and juxtaposition’.¹⁶ Crucially, such readings move beyond earlier appraisals (or dismissals) of Powys’s fictions as an escapist response to (urban) modernity understood in a largely pejorative sense. These critics lay much groundwork for the present thesis which seeks to show how Powys explores and theorises human/non-human relationships—via the prism of various ‘Natures’—not in order to escape from his cultural moment, but rather in the spirit of its various epistemological and literary contexts.¹⁷

Not least amongst these are the challenges to received notions of human centrality still reverberating in the period. As Gillian Beer argues, ‘[s]ince Darwin, humankind could no longer take for granted its own centrality or its own permanence’.¹⁸ Read in this light, Powys’s sense of an archaeological and prehuman past, of place as it extends temporally, as well as spatially, suggests how his fictions’ attention to rural landscapes is not simply an escape from the ‘disturbance of Darwinism’ into ‘full-blown Nature worship’, as Gifford suggests, but rather a means of engaging—albeit not always directly—with the developing contexts in which the “human” was being theorised and understood. Powys writes in a historical moment informed by observations such as that by D.

¹⁵ Sam Wiseman, *The Reimagining of Place in English Modernism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2015), p. 54; Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 13.

¹⁶ Wiseman, p. 9.

¹⁷ Esty, p. 62.

¹⁸ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 19.

H. Lawrence, who observed that ‘whatever the mystery which has brought forth man and the universe, it is a non-human mystery, it has its own great ends, man is not the criterion’.¹⁹ Powys, for his own part, identifies his consciousness of the human’s material position within a universe that exceeds it as a form of ‘continuity’ with a previous literary age, describing, for instance, the ‘theme’ of Thomas Hardy, in *Visions and Revisions* (1915) in terms recalling the diary passage with which we began: ‘the continuity of life is [Hardy’s] theme and the long, piteous “ascent of man”, from those queer fossils in the Portland quarries to what we see today, so palpable, so real’ (VR, 162). Yet Powys also, as we will see, reacts favourably to modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), noting particularly the ‘inspiration [that] seize[d] [Joyce] to become the mythologist and subhuman chronicler of one small spot on the outskirts of a city, a spot bounded horizontally and topographically by that city’s limits, but unbounded, perpendicularly and astronomically, from Zenith to Nadir’ (OC, 21). This attention to ‘subhuman’ and, indeed, ‘super-human’ perspectives, as Powys describes them in *A Glastonbury Romance*, suggests how situating moments of Powys’s writing in the light of his modernist contemporaries allows us to emphasise the radically ‘unbounded’ nature of his fictional imagination, its re-forging of past traditions (literary or otherwise) in the contexts of his discernibly ambivalent relationship with modernity and its epistemological and literary developments. Hardy’s ‘ascent of man’, indeed, looks less assured in both Lawrence’s and Powys’s fiction: that Powys describes it as ‘piteous’ suggests the irony with which his writing leads us to reflect upon teleological narratives of progression or development, historical or otherwise. Indeed, ‘if what is called Evolution simply means *change*’, Powys writes, ‘then we have not the least objection to the word’: ‘[b]oth progress and deterioration are of course purely human values’ (CV, 315).

¹⁹ D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, ed. by David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 478.

II: Versions of 'Nature'

This observation of 'purely human values' marks an important moment in Powys's writing, for as we will see, even as Powys seeks to look through, and beyond, human perspectives, he remains intensely aware of lives, forces, and materialities that refuse to be reduced to their anthropocentric significances. Powys is sceptical, if not overtly hostile, towards epistemologies that would seek to exhaust or even dominate their subject, which value (human) knowledge above the integrity of the non-human other: in *Weymouth Sands* (1934), for instance, vivisection is the 'secret horror behind all modern civilisation' (WES, 376). In the *Autobiography*, Powys remarks upon vivisection as being an act 'completely devoid of natural goodness, of natural pity, and of all natural sensitiveness', a practice of 'obtaining [...] what is often entirely irrelevant knowledge, and simply because vivisection is an *interesting thing in itself*' (A, 640).

This reading of Powys's extension of a tradition glossed by Anne Raine, in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing can be read 'as a continuation of the romantic reaction against Enlightenment rationality and faith in technoscientific progress [...], [a] shared [...] desire to resist the technoscientific objectification and instrumentalization of nature', is not new.²⁰ Radford, for instance, has noted the link between archaeological excavation and vivisection in *Maiden Castle* (1936) as evidence of Powys's ambivalence towards rational modernity; Wiseman, similarly, argues that Powys is 'unequivocally opposed to practices that represent, for him, intrusive and destructive manifestations of a cultural desire to excavate and expose: mining and vivisection'.²¹ If it is tempting, however, to read Powys's development of literary worlds in which the non-human is animised or 'endowed with consciousness', as an imaginative riposte to the reductive instrumental rationality that he associated with modernity ('the[se] persons [...] hate, distrust, and

²⁰ Raine, p. 105.

²¹ Radford, p. 103; Wiseman, p. 69.

despise imagination’) (A, 286), then we need equally to acknowledge and explore the multiple ways in which the epistemological and rational insights of modernity filter into, and inflect, Powys’s writing and, indeed, his *imagination*.

This thesis seeks to do so through careful attention to what Powys calls ‘Nature’, in its almost universally capitalised form. While critics such as Timothy Morton have (rightly) sought to problematise the term’s prevalence in environmentally-minded discussions of literature, it is important to acknowledge its continuing potency within Powys’s historical moment and, indeed, its centrality to the theorising of his ecological imagination.²² Powys does not simply seek to incorporate extra, non-human perspectives, but to trace their on-going implications for the human in the present moment. The central insight of Kate Soper’s monumental *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (1995) is thus to underpin my reading of Powys’s writings throughout the thesis:

To attempt to disentangle [the] various threads of nature discourse is immediately to realize what a vast range of possible topics [one] [...] might be addressing. [...] The natural is both distinguished from the human and the cultural, but also the concept through which we pose questions about the more or less natural or artificial quality of our own behaviour and cultural formations; about the existence and quality of human nature; and about the respective roles of nature and culture in the formation of individuals and their social milieu.²³

Soper’s discussion is useful precisely because it allows us to explore and unpack this variety in all its complexity, foreclosing the critical reaction that might otherwise reduce a vast body of writing to ‘a spirit that seeks to lose—and find—itsself in a continuity of life [...] a Wordsworthian quest [...] that marks Powys as a successor to the Romantic poets, but [...] conducted in modern circumstances

²² See Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²³ Kate Soper, *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 2.

of cultural and psychological breakdown'.²⁴ As this might suggest, my reading of Powys's writing of both 'Nature' and the 'non-human' is to accommodate the theoretical and methodological insights of a nascent greening of modernist studies. Bonnie Kime Scott, for example, has emphasised the importance of describing 'modernist uses of nature', and thereby attending to nature as 'deliberate discourse'.²⁵ Kelly Sultzbach, in a perceptive and insightful study entitled *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (2016), argues persuasively that,

the notion of modernity [...] suffers from a narrative that oversimplifies its "patterns of constant change" and fluctuation by relegating it to a singular movement away from one end of the binary, a Romantic foregrounding of organic nature, toward its opposite, the rise of an urban culture of detached aestheticism.²⁶

Certainly, something of this 'notion' is expressed in Gifford's reading of Powys as a writer of Georgian 'retreat', or in Hooker's sense of a Powysian 'quest'.

Perhaps necessarily, however, Powys's fictional worlds express more of these 'patterns of constant change' than such generalisations allow, not least because he is also the product of 'the broad shift in the study of nature' described by Christina Alt in her influential *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (2006).²⁷ As Alt observes, 'the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw considerable change in the life sciences' in excess of, and 'concurrent' with, the lingering reverberations of post-Darwinian evolutionary theory:

Taxonomic natural history, centred on the collection of specimens and the

²⁴ Hooker, p. 108.

²⁵ See Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 3.

²⁶ Kelly Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 4.

²⁷ Christina Alt, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1.

classification of species, had absorbed the attention of British naturalists for much of the nineteenth century, but in the closing decades of the century the museum-based taxonomic tradition was supplanted by the new biology of the laboratory as the predominant approach to the study of nature. The new biology shifted attention from the classification of endless species to subjects such as morphology and physiology, the study of the structure and functioning of organisms. The focus on cataloguing organic forms was replaced by a desire to understand life processes, and taxonomic natural history came to be viewed as an outmoded practice by the new generation of laboratory biologists.²⁸

Powys, who was born in 1872 and died in 1963, and who did not publish his first novel until 1915, lived through more of this shift than many of his contemporaries, modernist or otherwise. Indeed, his writings, as we will see, express the keen eye for detail of a writer whose *Autobiography* records an intense and nostalgic affection for a childhood that centred, under the instruction of his father, the Reverend Charles Francis Powys, on long country walks and the observation and collection of fossils, butterflies, and eggshells: ‘Littleton collected fossils and butterflies; while it fell to my role to collect birds; eggs, for it was of course unthinkable that a son of my father should collect nothing’ (A, 50).

This valuing of ‘Natures’ that speak of close study and lived contact is another feature that Powysian writing shares with Hardy; indeed, in a preface to the 1960 edition of *Wolf Solent* (1929), Powys describes his meeting with the writer and subsequent admiration of ‘this other Dorset-born noticer of such things [as ‘odd little creases and criss-cross wrinkles in the mud that my father always loved to see [...] minute tokens of the processes he knew so well’].²⁹ It is this sense of material ‘processes’ that I am concerned with throughout, however, particularly since Powys is to trace the ways in which these become entangled with forms of memory—personal and cultural—in which we will see a discernibly modernistic

²⁸ Alt, pp. 1-3.

²⁹ John Cowper Powys, Preface to *Wolf Solent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 11.

interest in subjective experience developing.³⁰ In a suggestive passage, Powys describes a school holiday at Weymouth, in which he was accompanied on his trips to the beach by ‘one of the most beautiful boys in school’:

I had a passion at that time for collecting seaweeds—*there* indeed were colours to ravish anyone; but alas! their gleaming mysteries faded when you took them out of their native pools. But the truth is I have, ever since that time, linked together the scent of salt-water, the swirl of in-rushing waves among jagged rocks, the upheaving swell of a full tide, not only with crimson seaweeds, but with the greenish-black eyes and foam-white skin of this young invader of my native haunts!

(A, 139)

A sense of naturalist collection as inherently disturbing and even damaging is beginning to creep into the writing, here; indeed, we might sense an analogy between the diminishing ‘colour’ of gathered seaweeds and the lingering emotional and sensual complex that ripples out from the ‘native pools’ of the past. Powys’s interest in exploring recognisably modernist themes of subjectivity, memory, and sexuality are suggested, of course, but the specific and related point that I want to note is the interest in natural material as it acquires a palpable, human significance. What Jeremy Hooker describes as Powys’s ‘Ditch Vision’—‘a response to the life of nature [...] that [results] in a relationship between the human and non-human which confirms the value of each’—is at work.³¹ Powys’s description of his father’s idiosyncratic naturalist practice is again suggestive:

Every phenomenon he referred to, whether animate or inanimate, became a sacrosanct thing, a privileged object like those objects in fairy-tales that

³⁰ Woolf, for her own part, recorded a favourable sense of Powys’s writing of country walks expressing ‘the trance like, swimming, flying through the air; the current of sensations & ideas; & the slow, but fresh change of down, of road, of colour: all this churned up into a fine thin sheet of perfect calm happiness’. See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1931-1935*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 246.

³¹ Jeremy Hooker, ‘Ditch Vision’, *The Powys Review*, 9 (1999), 14-29

travellers carried to work magic with. I think it materially increased his appreciation of any landscape he was traversing when he could gravely refer to “Purbeck Marble”

(A, 51)

This sense of natural material acquiring a ‘sacrosanct’ power is, as we will see, dispersed throughout Powys’s fictions, which engage and explore the various processes through which human minds and cultures come to inhabit and even colonise the material landscapes of Dorset, Wales, and beyond. In many ways, then, Powys’s responsiveness to the “natural” world is to remain quintessentially Victorian—at least read in the light of his approach to naturalist science—and discernibly Romantic—in its emphasis on epiphanic personal experiences of such materialities as rocks, trees, plants.

Yet, as Jeffrey McCarthy argues, ‘the modernists inhabit a world made up of minds, but also a world of things—some human, most not’, and much the same might be said of both Powys and his characters.³² Accompanying these ‘profoundly and emotionally humanized’ forms of ‘Nature’ (MC, 49) is Powys’s repeated invocation of ‘great creative Nature’, a phrase that signals the intrusion of organic and telluric materialities irreducible to their human significances (A, 104). In *Owen Glendower* (1941), for instance, it is ‘great creative Nature’ that has ‘caused to spring up an exceptionally early meadow-orchis’, a ‘spike of soft petals, whose colour was lost in the falling night’ (OG, 52).³³ In *Maiden Castle*, a similarly organic force is described in terms of ‘the lavish and wasteful fertility of Nature’ though, suggestively, this ‘fertility’ is also invoked in specifically gendered contexts:

³² Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 10.

³³ As W.J. Keith notes, the phrase is ‘a favourite expression of JCP’s possibly derived from Perdita’s “great creating nature” in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*’. As Keith notes, it occurs in *A Glastonbury Romance* (177, 299, 782); *Weymouth Sands* (171); *Owen Glendower* (52, 498), and *The Inmates* (146, 150). See W.J. Keith, *John Cowper Powys: Autobiography, A Reader’s Companion* (2008) <<http://www.powyslannion.net/Powys/Keith/Acompanion.pdf>> [Accessed, 03/09/2017].

The sight of certain scattered windrows by the road-side, composed of tiny fruit-seed wings, that had been shaken down from the elm-tops by the pressure of the budding leaves, minute gauzy life-sails, as it were, each with its own germinal centre, air-perambulators of innumerable vegetation-Lovies voyaging through space, started our friend's thoughts off now on a different track. Something about the lavish and wasteful fertility of Nature on this grey spring day stirred up in the girl's senses [...] an unexpected fount of natural feminine sensuality. At that moment Wizzie found herself longing for embraces of a passionate lover.

(MAC, 317)

A binary distinction between human and non-human life is troubled, here, in a writing that is equally sensitive to organic processes that transgress species boundaries and discomfortingly problematic in its assumption of an essential 'natural feminine sensuality'. In *A Glastonbury Romance*, we find an inversion of this 'natural feminine sensuality' as the pregnant Nell Zoyland responds with anxiety, even horror, to the 'long inescapable doom that had been prepared, millions of years ago [...] for Females in General [...] the raw, heavy, monstrous, impersonal mire of brutal creation' (GR, 461). 'Nature', in this instance, is no benign organic force with which the human is pleurably and sensually entangled, but an 'impersonal' embodiment of Hardy-esque fatalism, a system of processes which are only compounded by 'that great starting army of men, men, men [...] with hard sharp knees, men with brains like printing presses, between whom she had to run the gauntlet . . . and to take her place [...] in a regimented State' (GR, 466). As we will see, particularly in *Porius* (1951), Powys's writings strike tangents across a modernism for which 'accepted forms of nature discourse relied on reductive or anthropocentric habits of thought that were inadequate to convey the world's "multifarious otherness" and often complicit with the instrumental domination of nature or the naturalization of sexist, racist, or heteronormative accounts of human nature'; yet they also record their fascination with overtly humanised significances and, indeed, lapse into problematic invocations of the supposedly 'natural'.³⁴ These contested 'Natures' are a

³⁴ Raine, p. 103.

fundamental aspect of Powys's ecological imagination: they speak of a writing that seeks to express the human's inescapable entanglement with non-human forms and forces, even if we might not always be comfortable with the ways in which this is framed.

This tension between a contemporary desire for discursive clarity, as far as the term "nature" is concerned, and the sometimes contradictory manifestations of Powysian 'Nature', however, is precisely why it is important that contemporary critics turn their gaze to Powys's writing, for as Sultzbach suggests, 'it is the complexity of [...] human ideals and human failings that most provocatively reveal how we as a species continue to grapple with our scientific and emotional understandings of the more-than-human-world'.³⁵ This is to be a crucial insight for our reading of Powys, for we seek to explore how his writing's emotional *and* rational grappling towards a 'continuity of human life on the earth' and a 'stream of life (human and non-human too)' is expressed in a productive messiness, through various, and often contradictory, engagements with what he calls 'Nature' and the 'non-human'. A central claim, then, is that Powys is not, or not *only*, to be read as a figure who 'worshipped nature, and sought to inspire others to do likewise',³⁶ but primarily as a *writer* for whom the strangeness and complexity of human/non-human relations is diffused across shifting, and not always reconcilable, positions regarding an interrelated nature/culture dyad. As I will suggest, Powys is thus a crucial component of any greening of literary modernisms, not least because his immense *oeuvre* complicates the limiting and synoptic historicising found, for instance, in McCarthy's claim that 'green modernists have not turned their backs on nature', but have 'instead, repudiated capital R Romantic nature': 'In brief, green modernists replace inherited versions of romantic literary nature with attention to the material world'.³⁷ When Powys observes that there is '*much more resemblance between old and new than either*

³⁵ Kelly Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 6.

³⁶ Robert H. Mighall, 'The Reluctant Aesthete: John Cowper Powys and the 'Nineties Context', *The Powys Journal*, vol. 2 (1992), 28-48 (46).

³⁷ McCarthy, p. 20.

the old-fashioned pedant or the modernistic fanatic would [...] dream as possible' (MC, 40), he is announcing his commitment to a form of writing in which both received and radically disruptive versions of 'Nature' will have their place, to an imagination that seeks to explore the human's psychological and cultural colonising of various landscapes and environments that nevertheless encompass and exceed it.

Wiseman, to be sure, begins to situate Powys's interest in the category of 'place' within its larger, ethical horizons, acknowledging the points of contact between modernist approaches to this concept and what Timothy Morton describes as 'the mesh', a '[word] [...] to describe interdependence [...] shorter in particular than "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things"'.³⁸ As Wiseman notes, 'the authors in [his] study develop the modernist principle of multiplicity to marginalise the human, explore the characteristics and experience of nonhuman life, and suggest continuities between these'.³⁹ Taking the opportunity to develop a full length study of Powys's writings, this thesis will consider many of these insights, developing them, moreover, by attending to both the discursive writings and to the late historical novel, *Porius*, in order to show how reading beyond the Wessex novels is vital if we are to develop a fuller understanding of Powys's ecological poetics. As the discursive writings and *Porius* help to show, it is not simply a principle of 'interconnection' that constitutes Powys's ecological imagination,⁴⁰ but a much fuller, varied, and often contradictory attention to a variety of 'Natures'—some discursive, some poetic, some materially actual, most conflating or eliding these distinctions—through which he interrogates the condition and quality of the human's entanglement within, and awareness of, material reality. *Porius*, in particular, helps to problematise claims that Powys 'retreated throughout our mid-century', as we will see: his *oeuvre*, accordingly, demands to be read not as a call for Georgian escape, but for a sensitive and imaginative exploration of the human's shifting, yet

³⁸ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 28.

³⁹ Wiseman, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Wiseman, p. 7.

fundamentally grounded, contexts.⁴¹

III: Romance and Literary Experiment

As this might suggest, this project is concerned with reclaiming a Powysian *oeuvre* that is both more self-conscious, and more insightful, than has often been suggested. To do so, however, requires not only that we pay attention to the developing environmental contexts in which his experimentation with literary form and content might be read, but also to the literary ecologies of his historical moment. My cue for this comes from Jed Esty, who argues that,

if modernist writing begins to converge—or seems in historical retrospect to converge—with varieties of literary traditionalism in the 1930s, we should not simply mourn the death of cosmopolitan variety but rather consider the mixed and often creative results of new literary and cultural relationships then forming in England.⁴²

One source of such creativity is Powys's use and development of romance. In his correspondence with Louis Wilkinson, Powys speaks of his novels as 'long romances' (LLW, 160): 'My world is entirely and absolutely the World of Books, including Nursery Rhymes & Mother Goose and Grimm & all the Romancers from Scott to Dickens & Balzac and Conrad' (LLW, 293). To Dorothy Richardson, similarly, Powys describes himself as 'a person who for the first 25 years (counting from 5 say) lived entirely in romantic books' (LDR, 26). It is with something of this in mind, I take it, that Hooker describes Powys as 'both a traditional storyteller and a sophisticated modernist [...] concerned with tradition, and with the relation between the present and the past', for Powys's fictions, as we will see, blend modernistic insights into subjective and

⁴¹ Vernon Young, 'The Immense Inane', *The American Scholar*, 55:1 (1986), 248-258 (255).

⁴² Esty, p. 62.

psychological states with the unrestrained imaginativeness that we might associate with romance.⁴³

To pursue this creativity, however, we need to acknowledge the difficulties surrounding the term, “romance”. As Ian Duncan observes, romance is ‘notoriously intractable to critical taxonomies’.⁴⁴ This is a point implied in Gillian Beer’s earlier study of *The Romance* (1970):

There is no single characteristic which distinguishes the romance from other literary kinds [...]. We can think rather of a cluster of properties: the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all characters must comply.⁴⁵

This ‘cluster of properties’ will prove helpful. Indeed, for readers familiar with Powys’s writing, some of these qualities will stand out as directly applicable to his fictions, though others—most notably the ‘happy ending’—will not. Much of this, as we will see, is down to the fact that Powys does not simply write romance, but revise and develop it. As we will see in our discussion of *Wolf Solent*, for example, a romance-inspired ‘strongly enforced code of conduct’ is ironised and blended with forms of realist complexity so that there is a discernible trajectory in which Wolf’s ‘sense of a supernatural struggle [...] with the Good and the Evil so sharply opposed’ gradually ‘vanish[es] from his mind. To the very core of life, things were more involved, more complicated than that!’ (WS, 631). Here, however, I want to note, particularly, romance’s ‘complex and

⁴³ Jeremy Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 96.

⁴⁴ Ian Duncan, ‘Realism / romance, Romantic / Victorian’, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013) <<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/2013-n64-ravon01452/1025675ar/>> [accessed 19/02/2017].

⁴⁵ Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 10.

prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax’, and to bring this into proximity with the way in which Powys’s ‘texts’, as Wiseman argues, work to ‘delineate place at least as much as narrative’.⁴⁶ For there are links, as this might suggest, between Powys’s engagement with, and development of, traditional literary forms, and his ethical sensibility towards a more-than-human world. Indeed, when Powys writes that his intention in *A Glastonbury Romance* is to ‘[make] the spot [Glastonbury] itself the real hero or heroine of the tale’ (AR, 7), we sense how his ecological imagination is to be facilitated, even permitted, by his experimentation with romance form and discourse (‘hero’, ‘heroine’) which this thesis will trace.

As this suggests, we need to expand readings in which Powys is aligned with a mode of ‘modern romance’ that functions simply as ‘one of the last redoubts of the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition, sheltering the old cults of strangeness and excess from the now regnant realisms of poetry and the novel’.⁴⁷ This observation of Chris Baldick’s comes from a discussion which seeks to bring clarity to the ‘oversights and distortions’ involved in a ‘partition’ of modernism and realism ‘by remarking that the opposite of realism is not modernism; it is, as it has been for centuries, romance, or fantasy, or fable’.⁴⁸ Certainly, where Powys, in *The Meaning of Culture*, observes ‘[t]he blunt, brutal, downright realism, so popular at the moment’ (MC, 41) and calls for writers to reclaim ‘romance and sentiment’ understood as literary devices, a similar understanding of these terms is discernible (MC, 44). As Ian Duncan argues persuasively, however:

The romance-realism opposition is incoherent [...]. Realism foregrounds its mimetic function, while romance foregrounds its fictionality or rhetoricity; we can grasp realism as a repertoire of techniques (descriptive metonymy, free indirect discourse, and so on), while romance eludes that sort of technical or

⁴⁶ Wiseman, p. 10.

⁴⁷ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, x: 1910-1940, The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 233.

⁴⁸ Baldick, p. 212.

topical accounting. (Attempts thus to define it, e. g. as structured around a quest, leave out more instances than they include.) Romance has a different categorical consistency, one that inheres in the relation between work and reader [...].⁴⁹

For Duncan, accordingly, romance ‘plays its indispensable role as realism’s excess, at once the transcendental surplus (“the literary absolute”) and material residue (books, the machinery of production, meditation and possession) of the mimetic act’.⁵⁰ Or, as Beer puts it, ‘The romance requires of us the wholehearted involvement which a child feels in a story told’.⁵¹

It is this ‘consistency’ of romance, its conjuring not only of that ‘world of books’ that Powys felt his conscious absorption into, but this childish involvement, that is to become crucial for this project for it helps us to establish something of his vexed relationship with the literary experiments of a comparatively “high” modernism. Wiseman notes how Powys’s ‘evident antipathy towards the form of metropolitan modernity that he associates with the US [...] has its analogue in his scepticism concerning the value of certain high modernist traits’, arguing that ‘Powys’ ambivalence towards certain facets of modernist literary experimentation stems, in part, from a sense that these tend to wilfully complicate the reader’s ability to engage with the textual world’.⁵² That this ‘ability to engage with the textual world’ recalls the relationship between reader and writer established by romance is not incidental. Indeed, in a letter to Dorothy Richardson, Powys evaluates Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) in terms of his own ‘bookish’ principles:

What does anyone really want—any bookish person—in a story? *Characters* that are real and solid and exciting; humorous and tragic, but above all *thick* and *real*. An absorbing *narrative*—not necessarily a *plot* but something in the way

⁴⁹ Duncan, ‘Realism / romance...’, [n.p].

⁵⁰ Duncan, ‘Realism / romance...’, [n.p].

⁵¹ Beer, *The Romance*, p. 8.

⁵² Wiseman, p. 50.

events happen that *corresponds* to the old childish thrill of *hearing a story*.

(LDR, 58)

For Powys, *The Waves* has problematically abandoned this ‘childish thrill’: ‘Well now—apply this [evaluation] to *Waves*. [...] *nil*’ (LDR, 58). This is an important point, for it suggests precisely how romance comes to function in Powys’s self-positioning as a writer. As McGann notes, Powys’s refrain of ‘How little of an artist I am’ (LLW, 194) runs throughout the discursive writing and correspondence: ‘I am anyway no artist’, he states to his brother, Llewelyn (LL, II: 126).⁵³ Readers such as Morine Krissdóttir have responded by emphasising the kind of ‘artfully artless work[s]’ that Powys thus produces, but moving beyond such inversions we might acknowledge the ways in which Powys comes to associate “art”, in a largely pejorative sense, with the facets of modernist experimentation described by Wiseman.⁵⁴ Romance, in this scheme, comes to signify a form of literary experimentation that, for Powys, is to be distinguished from ‘artistic’ virtuosity. In *100 Best Books*, for instance, Powys describes Walter Scott’s ‘large, easy, leisurely manner of [...] writing’ characterised by ‘its digressiveness, its nonchalant carelessness, its *indifference to artistic quality*’.⁵⁵ ‘Digressiveness’ and ‘carelessness’ are, as we will see, to be found throughout Powys’s fictions, as formal extensions of the attempt to ‘delineate place as much as narrative’. The main point, however, is Powys’s sense that Scott’s ‘indifference to artistic quality’ has ‘in some sort of way numbed and atrophied the interest in his work of those who have been caught up and waylaid by the modern spirit’.⁵⁶ Romance, in Powys’s understanding, becomes a form of literary practice that, if still experimental, is less radically disruptive of this ‘childish’ relationship between reader and writer.

This is not to suggest that Powys’s writing is childish in any straightforwardly pejorative sense. As we will see, the beguiling simplicity of the individual

⁵³ McGann, p. 314.

⁵⁴ Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory: The Life of John Cowper Powys* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), p. 11.

⁵⁵ John Cowper Powys, *100 Best Books* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1916), p. 42.

⁵⁶ Powys, *100 Best Books*, p. 42.

incidents taking place within the complex and overlapping polyphony of his fictional worlds requires an acute attentiveness on the part of the reader, as recognisably modernist multivalence corrodes rigid codes of conduct and binary moralistic systems. It does, however, recall us to the fact that Powys's experimentation with romance is not simply a question of 'isolat[ing] [...] certain moral or spiritual ideals and [...] put[ting] these to the test', as Chris Baldick suggests, but also, crucially, a question of literary *form*.⁵⁷ Indeed, as Jerome McGann has argued, it is possible to read Powys's 'fictions [as] staged performances of the act of writing'.⁵⁸ Such observations demand reappraisal not only of the 'metaphysical claptrap' for which Powys's novels have sometimes been indicted, but of their deployments of overtly poeticised figures and supernatural and fantastic incident and perspective, too.⁵⁹

The consciousness of 'story' that Powys is to bring not only to his fictions, but to his theorising of the relationships between human and non-human forms, then, is to be central throughout. A further rationale behind my selection of primary texts, in this light, is that their engagement with romance, however direct, inflects their responses to a more-than-human world. A consistent strategy for reading that I employ is to approach Powys's texts' attention to 'Nature' and the ecological through their specific reformulations of romance, though as we will see, the results of such writing, like the 'Natures' themselves, are mixed, with some instances proving more comfortable to the contemporary ecocritic than others. This is to be expected. As Scott observes, 'anachronism' is 'one of the first problems to consider' in any ecocritical treatment of modernist writing.⁶⁰ The point, then, is that exploring the way in which Powys's sense of romance inflects his writing allows us to acknowledge the relevance of his output both in his own historical and cultural moment, and to ours.

⁵⁷ Baldick, p. 218.

⁵⁸ McGann, p. 321.

⁵⁹ Esty, p. 62.

⁶⁰ Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Virginia Woolf and Critical Uses of Ecofeminism', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 82 (2012), 45-46 (45).

IV: Chapter Overview

My first chapter begins, then, with an interrogation of the largely neglected discursive writings, particularly *The Meaning of Culture*, but also selected passages from *The Complex Vision* and the *Autobiography*. There, we see Powys developing the idiosyncratic ‘philosophy of life’ that, at least as the *Autobiography* suggests, is to become the central preoccupation of the fictions: ‘[m]y writings—novels and all—are simply so much propaganda, as effective as I can make it, for my philosophy of life [...] the prophecy and poetry of an organism that feels itself in possession of certain magical secrets that it enjoys communicating’ (A, 641-642). As we will see, these ‘magical secrets’ pertain, specifically, to rural and poeticised versions of ‘Nature’ which Powys is to position against the perceived dislocations of modern, urban life, instructing his readers to ‘discount shamelessly and unblushing a writer’s ethical propaganda and concentrate your attention upon what he reveals to you of the life-motions of the earth’ (MC, 192). As this might suggest, however, Powys’s reductive opposition of urban and rural spheres is, in these texts, already beginning to overspill its bounds by reaching out to the larger figure of the ‘earth’; and indeed, I want to emphasise those moments at which Powys’s roving discursive style alights, particularly, on the insights that modern art and modern culture might, in fact, have to offer in this regard. Reading against the grain of David Goodway’s appraisal of Powys’s ‘life-technique’, this chapter suggests that the most instructive moments of Powys’s ‘philosophy’ are, in fact, those at which he is concerned with the question of *writing*.⁶¹ Concentrating particularly upon Powys’s call for writers to reclaim ‘romance and sentiment’, and his ensuing comparison of two aesthetic principles—one based upon landscapes in which an ‘animism or vitalization of the inanimate is most marked’, and one in which a ‘non-human, non-historical, chemic-cosmogonic character’ is instead emphasised

⁶¹ David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, 2nd edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 97.

(MC, 50)—I will argue, particularly, that the poles of Powys's often conflicted response to 'Nature' are present even in those texts which most explicitly discuss a 'casual cult of enjoying Nature' (MC, 150). Indeed, the latter portion of the chapter turns to the mythopoetic form of writing that, even there, begins to ground the human, significantly, within material realities that go beyond any simplistic concept of an inherited Romantic 'Nature'. This discussion will allow us, too, to examine some of the specific literary manoeuvres that constitute Powys's ecological imagination, and to begin comparing and contrasting them with those we might find in the works of his key modernist contemporaries.

The Meaning of Culture's 1929 publication date nestles between the publications of *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*, texts which add nuance to many of its more oppositional claims. This intermediate discursive text is to prove a crucial point of departure, not only because it will allow us to pursue how Powys was often more subtle as a writer of novels than in his function as a 'peripatetic philosopher' (A, 286), but also in its suggestion that his complex and often ambivalent responses to modernism, modernity, and 'Nature' cannot be comfortably reconciled with a singular distinguishable trajectory.

With this in mind, we turn, in Chapter Two, to *Wolf Solent*, a text in which the 'Wordsworthian quest' described by Jeremy Hooker does, at first glance, take centre stage. Here, however, in contrast with 'philosophy of life' we find in *The Meaning of Culture*, Powys is already to be found dramatising and indeed problematising this 'quest' through a creative, if sometimes unwieldy, blend of modernist irony and romance-inspired sentiment as he develops his own version of the 'Henry James rule of "straining" the whole thing through one character's consciousness' (A, 544). Wolf understands his own return from urban metropolis to rural periphery as the journey of a 'returning native-born' (WS, 38). Throughout, however, Powys signals his intention to scrutinise, rather than simply valorise, forms of identity and belonging which seek to "root" themselves in a decidedly English soil. As *Wolf Solent* shows, Powys's fascination with cultural and imaginative attachments to the land is palpable, and my discussion

will in this light engage with many of the findings observed by Radford and Wiseman, who emphasise the ways in which Powys's interest in forms of regional belonging needs to be distinguished from 'an essentialism of place, or the need for a "counter-myth of rootedness"', since it is 'instead characterised by a fluidity and playfulness that stems, in part, from [his] appreciation of the imaginative distance and juxtapositions afforded by the dynamics of cosmopolitan modernity'.⁶² This sense of 'playfulness', and Powys's conscious invocation of a decidedly *literary* heritage in which overblown and sensational writing might be permitted as a form of 'onanistic' pleasure (LDR, 26) suggests the various framing devices and uses of aesthetic distance that set *Wolf Solent* apart from a form of propaganda for a single philosophy. Indeed, the result, as we will see, is a writing that both indulges and ironises the discernibly Romantic and romanticised 'Natures' and nostalgic yearning for rural regeneration found in Powys's discursive texts, even as it develops a mythopoetic form of writing to express Wolf's sense of wonder and curiosity for a landscape that exceeds him in every direction.

The third chapter turns to *A Glastonbury Romance*, in which Powys's technique of "straining" his novels through a single perspective is substituted for an outrageously and self-consciously polyphonic and multivocal form animated by one character's inclination to 'find meanings everywhere' (GR, 107). For Jed Esty, Powys's claim that 'a great modern novel consists of and ought to consist of just everything' finds him 'adapt[ing] the heroic and encyclopedic modernist ambitions presented by Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922]'; as I want to suggest, however, the playfully litotic phrasing of "just everything" indicates the quixotic spirit in which Powys's 'adaptation' is conceived (D, 184).⁶³ For Esty, Joyce 'multiplies social spaces and styles, using the differentiated languages of the modern city', while Powys 'remains within a circumscribed pocket of English provincial life'.⁶⁴ Yet, as we will see, the bursting of such circumscribed categories as the

⁶² Wiseman, p. 45.

⁶³ Esty, p. 64.

⁶⁴ Esty, p. 65.

‘English provincial’ novel is one of Powys’s central preoccupations. While we have already seen Powys’s observation that *Ulysses* is ‘unbounded, perpendicularly and astronomically, from Zenith to Nadir’, we will in this chapter see how Powys’s ‘Author’s Review’ of *A Glastonbury Romance* demands that the writer represent the town by ‘describing it and analysing it under the moods of the weather and under various chemical and spiritual influences in regard to its flora and fauna and geological strata [...] to its whole being *from zenith to nadir*, and from circumference to centre’ (AR, 7).

As this might suggest, *A Glastonbury Romance* is accordingly the novel in which Powys’s ecological imagination functions at its most playful and transgressive, incorporating a variety of human and non-human perspectives, forms, and forces alike as it seeks to decentre the human not only ethically, but compositionally, through a consciously romance-inspired form of writing in which ‘the spot itself [is] the real hero or heroine of the tale’ (AR, 7). Blended more or less comfortably with the fantastic imaginative license of fable and romance, however, is language drawn from discourses of natural history and the life sciences, and indeed, in this chapter we will see how this attempt to include all possible perspectives on the human results in a productively messy use of language and form inspired to excessiveness at all levels.

Finally, in Chapter Four, we turn to the somewhat more sombre *Porius*. As an example of Powys’s more-or-less “historical” novels, the text offers a crucially inverted perspective from that found in the preceding Wessex novels. For here, Powys substitutes his imaginative attention to Dorset’s palimpsestic landscapes for a forward-looking perspective, grounded in the violent Welsh region of Edeyrnion, 499 AD, and foreshadowing the struggles of the Second World War and beyond. As we will see, the text is equally interested in the composition of the land, and particularly, in the cultural relationships that bind the various warring peoples of this historical moment to the forests and valleys of this Welsh region. In contrast with the earlier novels, however, these forms of attachment are increasingly problematised, as Powys links human order and significance

with reactionary and exclusionary politics anticipating the rise of fascism that occurred during this novel's composition. *Porius*, as we will see, is in one sense Powys's most ardently political novel, though it seeks, ultimately, not to valorise its romance-inspired conflicts, but to see through the fractious cultural differences of this moment to a communal materiality that links all peoples through their cohabitation not of a region, but of the Earth itself. To this end, a kind of cosmopolitan plurality is discerned in the surprisingly chaotic and heterogeneous forms of 'Nature' that *Porius* presents to its reader, a point that will further problematise readings of Powys as a naïve worshipper of an inherited Romantic 'Nature'. Closing with this late work in place of the Wessex novels that followed *A Glastonbury Romance*—namely *Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle*—will accordingly allow us to take stock of the larger materialities in which Powys frequently grounds the human, and which necessitate a reading beyond his earlier texts' grounding in Dorset and its environs.

As I have been suggesting, then, Powys's fictions seek to look beyond the human, albeit through their use of literature as a human medium facilitating a kind of ecological awareness that locates this category in its wider contexts. This is something of a creative paradox, since it is the human imagination, in Powys's writing, that is crucial to pushing back against not only anthropocentric thinking, but anthropocentric *writing*, as we will see from the diverse body of work to which we now turn, beginning with the discursive writings.

Chapter One: Locating the Place of the Discursive Writings in a Powysian Ecopoetics

Though this thesis is primarily interested in his fictional works Powys was not, of course, only a novelist. In his lifetime he published poetry, essays, a series of “philosophical” works, and a number of books on literature and reading. Even so, for a project that seeks to trace Powys’s sophisticated and insightful response to what he calls ‘Nature’—and what we call the more-than-human world—the discursive writings might seem an odd point of departure. For in texts such as *The Meaning of Culture* (1929), *In Defence of Sensuality* (1930), *A Philosophy of Solitude* (1933) and *The Art of Happiness* (1935), we find forms of ‘Nature’ that most readily anticipate the ‘magical [...] sensations’ he described in a letter written during 1931:

The most magical powers, values, sensations of [the] secrets of life are still to be found in Nature; and can be enjoyed by the weak as much as the strong. The fresh-water springs of a mystical personal life are entirely beyond the power of the passing fashions of thought to destroy [...] No rational fashions of the passing hour have the least importance when it is a question of the individual consciousness adapting itself to Nature, finding its own work, its own beauty, its own truth [...].¹ (ISO, 68)

Such writing perhaps suggests why many studies of Powys have neglected the discursive texts outright, or quoted from them only selectively, for the emphasis on ‘magical’ and ‘mystical’ ‘secrets’ and ‘powers’, while present in the fiction, is there surrounded and often ironised by a more sophisticated and insightful textual world. Still, some critics such as David Goodway have discerned worth in Powys’s idiosyncratic personal “philosophy” as it relates to ‘Nature’, arguing that ‘it is astounding that it has been so little valued and to all intents ignored’, even while ‘there are obvious problems, most glaringly that it was developed by a bookish solitary, who enjoyed contemplating Nature on long walks, for other bookish

¹ Quoted in David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, 2nd edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 121-122.

solitaries who also enjoy contemplating Nature whilst walking'.² My enclosing of “philosophy” in quotation marks perhaps suggests a lingering sense of Colin Wilson’s reflection upon Powys’s writing as the product of a ‘sentimental third-rater’ with a ‘third-rate mind’, even as this thesis sets out to challenge precisely this kind of generalising dismissal.³ Yet, when we acknowledge that Powys, in *The Meaning of Culture*, is to argue precisely that writing should reclaim ‘those elements, at present slighted, of romance and sentiment’ (MC, 44), I think it is fair to suggest that we might recognise both the shortcomings of Powys’s discursive texts—at least as far as rigorous or academic “philosophy” is concerned—and the productive insights regarding *writing* that we might find there. My sense is that merely bracketing Powys’s sense of a ‘magical [...] Nature’ does a disservice to the overall texture of his writings, even if such reflections upon a notably green and rural materiality, to be encountered on ‘long walks’, might sit uncomfortably with those readings of ‘modernist uses of nature’ that emphasise the term’s incorporation into writing as ‘deliberate discourse’.⁴

Before approaching the discursive texts’ responses to ‘Nature’, however, I want to establish something of Powys’s vexed relationship with the proponents of a rather “high” and largely urban modernism celebrated for its intellectual insight and difficulty. It is important, here, to acknowledge that the discursive style of Powys’s ‘peripatetic philosophy’—at least as it is found within the two texts with which I am chiefly concerned, *The Meaning of Culture* and the earlier work, *The Complex Vision* (1920)—is hardly academically rigorous, with Powys ranging between topics and ideas, eliding central terms such as “culture” as he does so. Frank Gloversmith’s early attempt to read *The Meaning of Culture* against the cultural commentary of T. S. Eliot, Clive Bell, and R. H. Tawney thus runs into difficulties, as David Goodway argues, precisely because the ‘misleading title’ masks what is, ultimately, an

² Goodway, p. 121.

³ Colin Wilson, *Eagle and Earwig* (London: John Baker, 1965), p. 115.

⁴ Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 3.

exposition of the idiosyncratic ‘philosophy of life’ for which Powys’s novels—at least as he sees it in the *Autobiography*—are ‘so much propaganda’ (A, 641-642).⁵

Something of this is sensed by the text’s contemporary reviewer in *The Criterion*, Bonamy Dobrée, who dismisses Powys’s writing as ‘the exercise of some faculty (certainly not the intelligence)’; T. S. Eliot, in a private response to Dobrée’s review, sums up his own opinion on this garrulous writer with a characteristically measured evaluation: ‘none too strong’.⁶ Powys, for his own part, records his distaste for Eliot’s ‘contemptible snobbishness’ in the diaries.⁷ So too, the *Autobiography*’s description of Powys’s popular University Extension lectures records a palpable sense of being caught between two cultures to which he did not quite belong, one, largely working class, and one, a literary intelligentsia for whom he did just not cut it ‘intellectually’: ‘Although you may call me a humbug’, Powys writes, ‘these labourers do not’ (A, 185).

Powys’s discursive writings, as we will see, nestle somewhat uncomfortably in this cultural gap. In one sense, it is a quite conscious decision, on Powys’s part, that the term “philosophy” is not quite appropriate as a description of these works. In *The Meaning of Culture*, for instance, Powys argues that ‘to philosophize is not to *read* philosophy; it is to *feel* philosophy’ (MC, 12-13), instructing his readers to neglect ‘the newer, more logical terms, coined by clever modern thinkers, so puzzlingly obscure except to the initiated, and of necessity so abstract and thin’ and instead cultivate ‘the art of self-culture [...] a deeper awareness, borne in upon us [...] by some sharp emotional shock’ (MC, 8). It is worth noting, here, that *The Meaning of Culture* was a ‘bestseller’, as Powys’s biographer, Morine Krissdóttir notes. Goodway

⁵ David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, 2nd edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 103.

⁶ Bonamy Dobrée, Review of *The Meaning of Culture*, in *The Criterion: 1922-1939*, x: *October 1930—July 1931*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 178-179 (p. 178); *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, v: *1930-1931*, ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 275.

⁷ *The Diary of John Cowper Powys for 1929*, ed. by Anthony Head (London: Cecil Woolf, 1998), p. 81.

goes into more detail: ‘The outstanding bestseller was *The Meaning of Culture* which in the USA went through fifteen impressions, no less than eleven in 1929—it had been published only in the September—before being reissued in 1939 in a Tenth Anniversary Edition, of which there were to be six impressions’.⁸ This conscious shift away from the language of ‘clever modern thinkers’ certainly found Powys an audience, as it had for the hugely popular University Extension lectures through which he made his living in America.

However, it is not the case that Powys had repudiated modernist writing itself, as is suggested in *The Meaning of Culture*, where he denies his reader the ‘right’ to ‘denounce [James Joyce] as an enemy of all decency’:

It will indeed only be a certain type of cultured person—the type who is driven by a strange demonic urge to wallow savagely in the rank ooze of the great river-bed of modern life; in its slang, its psychological catchwords, its mechanical toys, its circus-maniacs, its furious altercations between Atheism and Catholicism, its brutal eroticism—who will be able to snatch from Joyce’s ferocious philology, from his excrement-obsession, from his sublime scavenging, the oil which is required for the feeding of the sacred flame. (MC, 32)

Defences of other writers including ‘[Ernest] Hemingway, the Sitwells, Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot, Dr. Williams, E. E. Cummings, Dos Passos, Joyce, [and] Wyndham Lewis’ (MC, 40) show Powys’s eagerness not only to establish his own literary credentials, but to dissolve the difficulty of these writers’ works into a form of commentary amenable to those ‘without the least notion of the technical subtleties of writing’ (MC, 59). This is hardly the measured and consciously intellectual mode of writing evidenced by Eliot and the later New Critics, though it suggests both Powys’s intense interest in modernist cultural productions and the kind of ‘literary appreciation’, as opposed to literary *criticism*—as Goodway distinguishes—through which he is to derive his “philosophical” principles.⁹

⁸ See Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory: The Life of John Cowper Powys* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), pp. 239-340; Goodway, p. 103.

⁹ Goodway, p. 96.

Something of this is further suggested in the *Autobiography*, where Powys describes his University Extension lecturing on chosen literary subjects in terms that emphasise his performance as a ‘circus’ presided over by his manager, G. Arnold Shaw: ‘Our attitude to the art of lecturing was identical. We both regarded it as a public entertainment’; ‘We were both more than a little anti-human, more than a little malicious to the solemnities and respectabilities of the academic and even of the pseudo-academic world’; ‘Our grand advertisement always was: “If our circus is not *enthraling*—to the Devil with it!”’ (A, 448). Hence his capitalisation of the term, “charlatan”:

I had no sooner begun my life of peripatetic philosophizing than the cry “Charlatan! Charlatan!” went up. [...] [I]nstead of trying to ward off this pleasant appellation, I accept it and glory in it! I am indeed, with regard to “charlatanism”, what Nietzsche became in regard to morality. The persons who use this term against me are exactly the type of persons who all the way down history have been the enemies of everything I value most in life. They hate, distrust, and despise imagination.

(A, 286)

Powys invokes his faculty of the ‘imagination’ to qualify the ‘clown-element’ and ‘comic-actor element’ that infuses his lecturing and, frequently, his writing (A, 287). The rigid distinction between the ‘pedantry’ of those who oppose such ‘peripatetic philosophizing’ and the ‘imaginative’ quality of Powys’s performances is wilfully reductive, of course (A, 286-287). The point, however, is that Powys often protests too much, ‘glory[ing]’ in his supposed distinction from a body of writers with whom his textual practice, as we will see, is nevertheless intrinsically linked. Indeed, as McGann notes, Powys ‘tells the story as a kind of magical event brought about by “the intervention of the gods”’.¹⁰

Such language perhaps goes some way to explaining Ezra Pound’s desire to have Powys’s contributions to the modernist periodical, *The Little Review*, halted—‘your dear Powys is a wind-bag lacking both balance and ballast’, and ‘not reliable

¹⁰ McGann, p. 315.

intellectually’, as Pound wrote to Margaret Anderson, the *Review*’s editor.¹¹ We need to note, however, that such consciously inflated language increasingly became a badge of honour for Powys, who came to embrace his own ‘ferocious’ approach to writing as a characteristic distinguishing him from the ‘certain smart, clever, cynical common sense [...] applied to matters of literary taste’ that, as he saw it, characterised a literary culture of ‘clever moderns’ (MC, 124, 22). Where McGann describes Powys as a writer possessing a ‘vision of his work of an antithesis of high modernism, an effort to escape or dismantle the art that made high modernism and its world possible’, it is this “vision” that we need to acknowledge and, indeed, work beyond. As I want to suggest, notions of Powys’s intellectual weakness as a *novelist* have persisted in part due to the longstanding association of modernist writing with an explicitly urban modernity, against which it is easy to position the “charlatan” Powys as an anti-modern and anti-modernist writer consumed by intellect-effacing sentiment and by received notions of ‘Nature’. To be sure, Powys’s description of Joyce, above, records a notable distaste for a ‘rank ooze of the river-bed of modern life’ with which Powys rarely engages directly insofar as modern equates with urban, yet we need to explore how Powys moves beyond his posturing and his anti-modern and anti-modernist sentiments, all of which have often clouded critical readings of his writing.

Sam Wiseman quotes an instructive passage from Powys’s early novel, *After My Fashion*, which I want to reproduce here.¹² In the text, the artist, Richard Storm, has returned from a long residence in Paris to Sussex and, as Wiseman notes, he now ‘feels a strong desire to reconnect with Sussex [...] stem[ming] not so much from an urge to efface the experiences of Paris, as to somehow make them cohere with his sense of home’.¹³ Here is Powys’s description of Storm’s desire:

What he, Richard Storm, was really “after” now, what he was in search of, what he actually wanted to express, in this poetry he intended to write, he himself could hardly have said. [...] A certain craving for air, for space, for large and flowing

¹¹ Ezra Pound, quoted in Krissdóttir, p. 135.

¹² *After My Fashion* was written in 1920, but not published until 1980, by the Village Press.

¹³ Sam Wiseman, *The Reimagining of Place in British Modernism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2015), p. 46.

movements, for unbounded horizons, had suddenly come upon him and had ruined the peace of his days as he returned to his old haunts. [...] Some queer unexpected stirring in his soul seemed driving him forth into a world larger and more onward-looking, if less clear-cut and complete, than the one he had dwelt in contentedly for so long. (AF, 10)

Storm's longing for 'air' and 'space' anticipates Powys's sense of a stifled and stifling urban modernity, but as Wiseman argues, 'Storm cannot return to a nostalgic understanding of Sussex as he previously knew it, but must instead attempt to entwine his sense of it with his newly "deracinated spirit"'.¹⁴ This kind of approach to Powys's writing is exemplary precisely because it acknowledges how the exaggerated binaries and self-positioning that we often find in his discursive writings and correspondence are nuanced in the fictions: 'Powys subverts dominant urban/rural associations', Wiseman notes, 'figuring Paris as a restrictive "clear-cut and complete" world, while rural life offers openness and strangeness'.¹⁵ It is equally likely that the 'clear-cut and complete world' that Storm has 'dwelt in contentedly for so long' in fact refers to his nostalgic sense of Sussex, but the point stands that Powys's move away from urban modernity is to be inflected by the epistemological insights that we might associate more readily with the period's literary treatments of urban realities. Michael North, for instance, describes the modern subject as one who 'sees as mere convention what had hitherto been unnoticed and unquestioned contexts of meaning', and it is Storm's similar contextual awareness that precludes us from reading his geographical and spatial return to Sussex as a relapse into 'nostalgic understanding'.¹⁶ The lingering desire for this lost, 'clear-cut' world suggests how Powys is hardly willing to reject or ironise '*mere* convention': Storm certainly feels a preference for the 'air' and 'space' supposedly offered by rural environments. It does, however, begin to suggest the way in which his fictions will go beyond these simplistic binaries in pursuit of the 'distinctively imaginative regional form' that Wiseman discerns.¹⁷

¹⁴ Wiseman, p. 47.

¹⁵ Wiseman, p. 47.

¹⁶ Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 182.

¹⁷ Wiseman, p. 54.

What Alexandra Harris describes as a ‘desire to invoke tradition’, a ‘turn towards home’ that is ‘partly [...] a response to the fiercely experimental ethos of high modernism’ is, as we will see, at work in Powys’s turn to both the rural and romance.¹⁸

With such observations in mind, then, this chapter will explore the obviously problematic discursive writings in an attempt to locate something of the ecological imagination that is found at work in Powys’s fictions. Many of the manoeuvres that can be found in the ‘distinctively imaginative regional form’ described by Wiseman are anticipated or even rehearsed in these nominally “philosophical” texts, often quite explicitly, and the arguments to be found therein will thus prove enlightening. While many critics have neglected the discursive writings, then, this thesis begins with these overtly problematic texts in order to reclaim the interesting and instructive commentary that arises around three particular nodes of thought: First, Powys’s reading of his modern(ist) contemporaries; second, his development of ‘beautiful’ and ‘poetical’ aesthetic principles; and thirdly, the particular form of mythopoetic writing in which his instruction that his readers ‘concentrate [...] upon what [literature] reveals to you of the life-motions of the earth’ (MC, 192).

As this might suggest, in what follows I will be observing the importance of reading beyond the idiosyncratic personal philosophy that Goodway, following Kenneth White, describes as the ‘life-technique’, a series of didactic instructions to what *The Meaning of Culture* calls, somewhat paternalistically, ‘the ordinary person of average intelligence’ (MC, 190). As we may well have sensed, such instruction is intended to liberate this imagined audience from the perceived anxieties of modern, urban living; indeed, this facet of Powys’s discursive writings is perhaps as close to what might now be described as “self-help” guide as it is to a philosophical debate. We will begin with this ‘life-technique’, then, before moving onto the three conceptual nodes with which I am primarily concerned.

¹⁸ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), pp. 10-11.

In doing so, we will see that Dobrée's claim that *The Meaning of Culture* is 'not a reasoned argument, but a sustained emotional outburst' has a certain accuracy.¹⁹ Yet, as we move beyond the 'life-technique', we will find a series of ruminations upon what is called 'Nature', culture, and modern art and modernity that will prove critically useful in our later discussion of the fictions. Powys's responses to Joyce, Eliot, D.H Lawrence and non-objective art, for instance, aid him in his description of the two aesthetic principles that he describes as the 'beautiful' and the 'poetical': the former drawing upon objects from technological and urban modernity, and the latter, from a discernibly rural world in which are included 'loaves of bread . . . honey in the honeycomb . . . summer hay-stacks and spring withy-beds . . . the flames of candles . . . the flight of birds . . . the shoals of fish' (MC, 46). These are all, we might note, consciously homely objects and figures, or 'profoundly and emotionally humanized', as Powys is to describe them (MC, 48). Despite an obvious preference for certain forms of experience, however, Powys is also defending and developing a form of writing that is understood as a conscious continuation of literary tradition, as opposed to those forms of modernism that demanded a radical breach from the past. For Powys, 'since time alone can humanize inanimate objects [...] a torpedo-shaped racing motor-car is beautiful but not poetical, whereas a bare "wishing-bone" is poetical because of fairy-story association but absolutely unbeautiful' (MC, 49). That Powys at times collapses modernism and modernity into this futuristic pursuit of the "new" is to be noted; indeed, the selectivity of his reading of his contemporaries is suggested by his sense of 'a fatalistic resignation to the particular epoch in which we happen to be born' (MC, 49), the prevalence of a 'blunt, brutal, downright realism, so popular at the moment' (MC, 41).

Powys's attempt to 'dismantle' a mode of "high" modernism as posited by, for instance, McGann, is to be problematized, however, not least because Powys, as we will see, is interested in remaking, and not simply returning to, the 'poetical' traditions he has in mind. As much as he debars them this 'poetical' quality, Powys gleans epistemological insights from modern(ist) cultural productions that lead him increasingly to frame his 'poetical' versions of 'Nature' and landscape as a

¹⁹ Dobrée, p. 178

‘humanized’ form that is to be set against the ‘beautiful’: ‘Modern art has discovered a completely new element for its exploitation, namely the purely mathematical and chemical structure of matter itself’ (MC, 74). As we will see, when Powys announces his desire for ‘*new* imaginative adventurers’ who will reclaim ‘those elements, at present slighted, of romance and sentiment’ (MC, 44; emphasis added), he thus does so with a conscious appeal to the “new”, to the modern subject for whom ‘what is called “Literature” plays a much larger part in the creation of those impalpable “worlds” in which we all live, than one always recognizes’ (MC, 40). If Powys’s ‘life-technique’ can be understood as an instruction that ‘city-dwellers [...] hasten into the country at least once a week, and spend all [their] dreams during the other days in remembering that happy seventh-day excursion’ (MC, 149), the preference for rural *writing* is thus far from a mere expression of anti-modern and anti-modernist tendencies. For this itself is a desire for a partial return, like that enacted by Richard Storm, which will resonate with the term “re-enchantment” as it is described by Nicholas Paige, who hears in modernity:

a reprise or recall in which the disenchanted modern mind experiences enchantments at a remove, usually via art. The estrangement effect can come from cultivated self-consciousness or irony; it can also derive from a sense of enchantment as a historical artifact, a thing of the past.²⁰

As we will see, Powys’s sense of sacred and ‘humanized’ landscapes is to become entangled with a thoroughly modern attention to ‘the purely mathematical and chemical structure of matter itself’.

To be sure, It is in the discursive texts that Powys is closest to that caricature of him as a ‘Nature worship[er]’, and it is in full recognition of this that the closing section of this chapter explores the poetic language and figures in which the ‘life-technique’ is couched, in both *The Meaning of Culture* and *The Complex Vision*, for a sense of

²⁰ Nicholas Paige, ‘Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics’, in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), pp. 159-180 (p. 180).

just what this caricature might entail.²¹ Having acknowledged Powys's interest in both the 'poetical' and the 'beautiful', however, it is my expectation that we will be in a position to find both at work in the mythopoetic writing with which this section is concerned. Indeed, for all its "charlatan" posturing and 'emotional' argument, there is an ethic to be discerned in Powys's instructions to his reader, as we will see. First, however, we need to turn to the anti-urban trajectory of the Powys's idiosyncratic personal philosophy in order to understand how Powys's 'dramatization of primitive drives' has been read as 'a classic example of counter-modern modernism, wherein excrescences like the empire and the city are only present in their radical absence'.²²

I: Powys's 'life-technique': Instructions to the Reader

We might note that *The Meaning of Culture*'s lengthiest description of urban experience is to be found, suggestively, in the chapter entitled 'Obstacles to Culture'. Here, we find a lengthy description of 'the ubiquitous atmosphere of [...] psychic vulgarity' that Powys discerns in the metropolis:

Certainly when one contemplates the general condition of mental life in a large city, it seems as though it needed an inhuman obstinacy to avoid being sucked down by the vortex of vulgar sensationalism that seethes around us at every moment. When one considers the psychological fact that written and repeated brutalities hit the mind more deeply and vulgarize the spirit more grossly than those that we see in real life, and when one contemplates the unbelievable crowds of people that every day are saturating themselves with the illustrated tabloid sheets and thirstily imbibing the raucous comedy, the hoarse publicity, the incredible sentimentalism of their "Radio Selections"; when one finally considers the mere invention of such monstrosities as the ordinary "close-ups" in the movies; the wonder grows that any human beings are left in these places whose debauched wits retain the least resemblance to old-fashioned human minds. (MC, 124-125)

²¹ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (Routledge: London, 1999), p. 72.

²² Matthew Hart, 'Regionalism in English Fiction between the Wars', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*, ed. by Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 89-101 (p. 96).

In one sense, the passage finds Powys at his most reactionary, hence Frank Gloversmith's early indictment of 'a sour, bitter, and blind confusion about the aim of cultivating personal sensitivity; but madly logical, since the whole structure of feeling is built from negative responses to forms of contemporary living'.²³ It is hard to reconcile such statements with Virginia Woolf's observation that 'the telephone, which interrupts the most serious conversations, has a romance' of its own, of course, but such broadly negative responses to urban life, modern technology, and discernibly popular culture nevertheless need to be understood in their particular contexts.²⁴ "Vortex" had of course acquired particular resonance through Pound's use of the term, and in this sense we might hear Powys as working to distinguish himself further from a modernist practice that he felt had embraced too readily the experiences of 'mental life in a large city'. Here, we might recall Walter Benjamin's celebrated discussion of the 'shock' of urban modernity:

The invention of the match around the middle of the nineteenth century brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. One case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of a receiver has taken the place of the steady movement that used to be required to crank the older models. Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the "snapping" of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the movement a posthumous shock, as it were. Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series

²³ Frank Gloversmith, ed., 'Defining Culture: J.C. Powys, Clive Bell, R.H. Tawney and T.S. Eliot', in *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 15-44 (p. 18).

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, iii: 1919-1924, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 353-360 (p. 356).

of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery.²⁵

Powys shares Benjamin's sense that technological and urban modernities contribute to an increasingly hurried onslaught of 'brutality', as 'haptic', 'optic', and even 'written' 'brutalities'—to borrow Powys's word—'hit the mind'. Hence the description of 'two separate human heads *whirling* through a New York subway tunnel' (MC, 26). Both of these are 'covered with conventional hats', and strikingly positioned as 'staring helplessly at the subway advertisements' (MC, 26; emphasis added). One however, is an 'un-bookish head', and while this has 'likely enough [been] endowed by Nature with a whimsical philosophy of its own, [this] has probably been so debauched by its daily reading of newspapers and magazines that its only humour consists in a pathetically standardized facetiousness' (MC, 26). As Patrick Collier argues, 'the newspaper's [...] development into a popular commodity' contributed to its 'liabil[ity], from various political and aesthetic positions, to attack as a loaded, multivalent signifier for urban modernity', and certainly, it is Powys's sense of a popular culture and urban life as corrosive and debasing influences upon the modern subject that erupts from select passages of *The Meaning of Culture*.²⁶ Indeed, related to Benjamin's biological portrait of rapidly firing 'nervous impulses' is Powys's pathologically 'nervous' individual, dislocated by this 'whirling' speed and caught up by images of 'the angry or sarcastic word of our gentleman's employer . . . the worry about his unpaid doctor or furious landlord' that 'throw their fretful patterns over the pictures of soap and tooth-paste and toilet-powder' (MC, 26).

We will return to Powys's quarrel with subway trains and newspapers as they are transformed into the subject matter of modern art later. For now, it serves to note that these rather mean-spirited descriptions of adverts, newspapers, and other ephemera of modern, urban culture suggest how Powys shares with many of his modernist contemporaries an anxiety about the cultural conditions of his contemporary moment.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 155-201 (pp. 174-175).

²⁶ Patrick Collier, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 27.

Where the later Eliot, for instance, in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), advocated a hierarchical, class-based society in which the discerning taste of a coterie of élites was imagined as productively influencing and informing the nation's cultural wellbeing, Powys's discursive writings are consistently minded to 'make war upon certain gregarious elements in our modern life [...] such as seem to be slowly assassinating all calm ecstatic happiness' (DS, 9). In *The Meaning of Culture*, it is thus a 'deep organic *personal* culture', a 'secret and stoical exultation known only to ourselves' (MC, 14; emphasis added), which 'protect[s] from disintegrating elements' that Powys is to be primarily concerned with (MC, 9). Instead of analysing cultural and class-based relationships except in the broadest terms, Powys turns to his notion of the 'life-illusion', a cultivation of personal values that, Powys imagines, will allow his readers to resist not only the 'vulgar sensationalism' of urban modernity, but any 'objective, if not [...] worldly, standard of efficiency in life':

If [...] our culture were sceptical and sagacious enough, and individualistic enough—as it ought to be and can be!—to hold in deep contempt all the opinions of the crowd and all objective and worldly standards, this ultimate life-pride of personality within us [...] could be perfectly content with itself apart altogether from external success, or fame, or prestige, or any reputation in the eyes of others [...] We should fall back upon that noble and primordial life-pride which animals, birds, fishes, and possibly even trees and plants, experience. (MC, 115)

Against the hustle and bustle of urban crowds, and the values of 'success', 'fame', and 'reputation', Powys holds an image of robust, bodily integrity, coupled with sensitivity towards what he calls 'Nature':

It is precisely here that a real sceptical culture, by inspiring us with a philosophical contempt for all human grandeur and all human praise, may throw us back upon a deep, noble, simple, childish life-illusion according to which what we are exultantly and inviolably proud of is simply the fact of being alive, of being able to go walking about, touching things with our hands, blinking into the sun, feeling the wind on our face, the ground under our feet! The sort of pride a really subtle and poetical culture will supply us with is the same sort of pride an ichthyosaurus would feel as it wallowed in the mud; the same sort of pride that a horse or cow or a fir-tree may be

supposed to enjoy.

(MC, 115-116).

Certainly, critics have taken Powys's claim, in the *Autobiography*, that his 'writings—novels and all—are simply so much propaganda, as effective as I can make it, for my philosophy of life' (A, 641). It is in response to such descriptions of 'the fact of being alive', I take it, that Hooker declares Powys's *oeuvre* to be a 'Wordsworthian quest [...] that marks Powys as a late successor to the Romantic poets, but [...] conducted in modern circumstances of cultural and psychological breakdown'.²⁷ In one sense, this is precisely the 'quest' that the titular character of *Wolf Solent* (1929) will undertake. As we will see in Chapter Two, however, Wolf's own 'torrent of *wild, indecent* invectives upon every aspect of modern civilization' is more ambivalently framed (WS, 14). So too, the notion of a 'quest' itself is, in that novel, subjected to a degree of irony, as Powys's 'Henry James rule of "straining" the whole thing through one character's consciousness' (A, 544) invites the reader to scrutinise Wolf's romance-inspired 'life-illusion' from various external perspectives. That *The Meaning of Culture*, published two years after *Wolf Solent*, has returned to a straightforwardly didactic exposition of this 'life-technique' and its own 'invective' against 'modern civilization' suggests how Powys finds the novel a more subtle and effective medium for thought, perhaps, but the crucial point here is that, while Powys is drawing upon recognisably Romantic ideas in his attempt to cultivate 'interior feeling' on behalf of his readers—'to philosophize is not to *read* philosophy; it is to *feel* philosophy' (MC, 12-13)—he is also beginning to understand literature as a medium that is potentially disruptive of received cultural norms.

It is in this spirit, in fact, that he locates the 'cave-man cult' or 'super-vital cult' of D. H. Lawrence—as a novelist, principally—and Richard Jefferies as of particular interest to his imagined 'ordinary person of average intelligence', who is to (re)gain 'the simple and frank enjoyment of the physical sensations of his body' from reading these writers (MC, 190-191). Just how seriously these 'physical sensations' are entertained as an answer to urban modernity is arguable, though I am more concerned, here, with Powys's sense of 'the mere animal sensation of being alive':

²⁷ Jeremy Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 108.

These sensations need not be so extreme, either in the direction of lust or in the direction of mysticism, as the impulses described by some of these writers [Lawrence and Jefferies]; but it is an enormous gain to our culture when we allow ourselves time to enjoy with a certain indolent and dreamy passivity *the mere animal sensation of being alive*. Very soon after these primordial sensations in which we revert, through long atavistic stages, to the feelings of the ichthyosaurus and the diplodocus, we shall come, if we read Wordsworth, to make much of many more gentle and less primeval feelings. Here, too, the rocks and stones and trees will draw us back and down, to the beginning of things, to the dark, old secrets of flood and fell; but these primal presences will now be associated with the frailer lives of flowers and mosses and grass, and with the movements of cattle and birds (MC, 190-191; emphasis added).

Where a reviewer of Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, in 1915, was moved to record his disgust at a book that 'ha[d] no right to exist' on the grounds of it being 'a deliberate denial of the soul that leavens matter'—'these people are not human beings. They are creatures who are immeasurably lower than the lowest animal in the Zoo'—Powys, approaching Lawrence's writing in the different cultural moment of 1929, emphasises the human's 'animal' and 'primal' heritage in a more positive light.²⁸ As Jeffrey McCarthy has noted, 'a recurring thread among postwar English social commentators and reformers was one or another sense of rural England as the "organic community", the "real" country, the seat of regenerative values for a troubled culture"', with 'appreciations for rural life [evident] all over 1920s Britain'.²⁹ Powys reads something of this in Lawrence and Jefferies, however rightly discerning a 'call to prefer Nature to humanity', albeit one that will not 'disturb very much the type of rusticated pastoral mind that has never separated, in its most casual thought, humanity from Nature', or at least those who have cast 'a not unseeing-eye' upon 'the ways of pikes and weasels and magpies and foxes and sparrowhawks and sheep and cattle and [...] the tilling of the fields' (MC, 190). Clearly, then, Powys associates closeness to 'Nature' with the

²⁸ James Douglas, Review of *The Rainbow*, *Star*, 22 October 1915; See *D. H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by R. P. Draper (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 93-95 (p. 93).

²⁹ Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 122.

rural rhythms of farming and tilling, but he stops short of endorsing a return to the supposedly “organic” community.

Instead, Powys is interested in the ‘sensitized’ mind:

No one who knows anything of existence in the country is ignorant of certain malign and ill-starred powers at work there, powers as hostile to any harmonious human life as the worst criminals and the worst smart people of the metropolis! How often does habitual work on the land turn to flint or stone the inherited sensibility of a farmer, of a peasant proprietor! How often does the breeding of beasts for the market brutalize a man's mind and dull the sensitiveness of his imagination till he resembles a clod of dung! What callous, vulgar wretches so many among our colonial settlers are, full of such ferocious preoccupation with their exports and their cargoes that their hearts have grown harder than fossilized sea-urchins! One has not had much experience of life if one still cherishes the illusion that when a man's body has long been subjected to the influence of the elements, his heart and his intellect must necessarily have grown subtle and sensitized. (MC, 182)

The final line indicates what Powys demands of a ‘deep organic personal culture’, and speaks of his humanist investment in literature as a medium to ‘sensitize’ the heart and intellect. Powys’s indictment of vivisection as lacking conscience suggests how he associates certain facets of modern, scientific epistemology with an imbalance of these two organs, hence, in *The Meaning of Culture*, the opprobrium levelled at ‘certain physicists, certain metaphysical logicians who follow the vortices and spirals of Nature’s serpentine coils with a ferocious intensity that leaves all personal human life a thing of shreds and patches’ (MC,131). Powys’s argument is not that society should go “back to the land”, necessarily, but rather that individuals should seek to develop these ‘sensitized’ minds and ‘not unseeing-eye[s]’, engaging and valuing a thoroughly humanised ‘Nature’. The trajectory, accordingly, is towards a mode of attention based upon supposedly ‘human’ qualities that are imagined to be in excess of the instrumental and economic values of ‘market’ goods, ‘breeding’, ‘exports’, and ‘cargoes’.

In a short essay on Lawrence, Powys displays a marked ambivalence towards the ‘misanthropic Return to Nature’ of this ‘born Jacobin’:

his poetic prejudice against industrialism and machinery makes [him] [...] more anti-social than any dictatorship could possibly tolerate; and it has been this anti-social element in him, this misanthropic Return to Nature, that always led him to hanker after the free ranch-life of Mexico and New Mexico [...] where his “dark gods” encounter something reciprocal and corresponding in solitary eagles and serpents of the descendants of the Lost Atlantis.³⁰

That Powys reads Lawrence’s ‘prejudice against industrialism and machinery’ as ‘poetic’ will become significant in this study, though equally, we need to acknowledge that it is the Lawrence of the later novel, *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), and not of *The Rainbow* (1915), for instance, in which Powys locates such misanthropy.³¹ For now, however, I want to note how Powys’s ‘life-technique’, set as it is against what Wiseman describes as a ‘desolate urban wasteland associated with psychic dissolution’, begins to demand specific responses to what Powys describes as ‘Nature’.³² ‘The most important aspect of all culture’, Powys claims, ‘is the gathering together of the integral self into some habitual way of response to Nature, that shall become ultimately automatic by means of fuller and fuller awareness’ (MC, 147). That this should require rural scenes is, of course, arbitrary; so too, it speaks of a lingering association of ‘Nature’ with the English countryside, a reaction to ‘industrialism and machinery’ that is as prejudicial as any harboured by Lawrence. Beyond the ‘life-technique’, however, there is an earlier discussion in *The Meaning of Culture* that is to prove crucial to Powys’s poetics, and thus to the present thesis. This comes in the form of a distinction between the ‘poetical’ and the ‘beautiful’, and it is

³⁰ John Cowper Powys, ‘D. H. Lawrence’, *The Powys Review*, 16 (1985), 52-54 (54). Originally published in *Sex in the Arts: A Symposium*, ed. by J.F. McDermott and K.B. Taft (London: Harper & brothers, 1932).

³¹ For Michael Bell, *The Plumed Serpent’s* problematic racial and sexual politics result in ‘the most striking and extended instance of Lawrence’s unwitting self-parody’. It is perhaps unsurprising, in this sense, that Powys locates a ‘misanthropic’ quality in the text. See *D. H. Lawrence: Language and Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 165-207 (p. 165).

³² Wiseman, p. 44.

to these categories, and the landscapes that, for Powys, come to represent them, that I now want to turn.

II: Powys's First Aesthetic Principle: The 'Poetical'

As I have suggested already, while the 'life-technique' acquires a central place in the latter portions of *The Meaning of Culture* there is, nevertheless, a more interesting and insightful discussion of aesthetic principles at work in earlier portions of the text. This is to be found dispersed, particularly, through chapters entitled 'Culture and Literature', 'Culture and Poetry', and 'Culture and Painting', and while Powys is still concerned with how his audience of 'intelligent people [who] enrich their lives by reading books without the least notion of the technical subtleties of writing' might '[use] literature to the best effect' (MC, 59, 24), the comparison between the 'beautiful' and the 'poetical' is of particular interest for those of us who wish to explore the modern(ist) features of his fictions.

Powys's crucial point of distinction between these two concepts is that the 'poetical' represents something old, and the 'beautiful', something comparatively new. For Powys, the former term is difficult to define exactly, yet it speaks, as we have seen, of something 'profoundly and emotionally humanized' or 'composed of a certain traditional body of feelings about life; a body which has gathered by slow adhesions into a presence of values, nuances, discriminations to which must conform what every nation and every age may add as an indigenous quota of its own' (MC, 48). The 'beautiful', by way of contrast, is that which is purportedly too new and recent to have acquired these forms of longstanding cultural association that speak of 'personal human life', included in which are typical representatives of technological and industrial modernity: 'some Japanese picture of an aeroplane [...] or an iron girder, or a locomotive, or a factory-chimney' (MC, 57).

It is here that *The Meaning of Culture's* contemporary reviewer in *The Criterion*, Bonamy Dobrée, indicts Powys for the production of 'a dangerous book, in the sense

that it is inimical to the artist': '[Powys] represents the sort of culture against which every generation has to fight tooth and nail, the culture which opposes the assimilation of new beauty and new reality into poetry'.³³ This is not quite Powys's intention, since he acknowledges, quite explicitly, that 'the illuminated body of some swiftly moving aeroplane [...] engaged in advertising, let us suppose, some toilet-necessity or new brand of cigarettes upon a city sky' is 'a genuine revelation, in the spheres of form and colour' (MC, 47). To be sure, however, if 'poetry' is still to be allowed, even encouraged, to pursue the more 'beautiful' aspects of technological modernity—and Powys adds that '[t]he place occupied in the older times by poetry seems in our own day to be occupied by imaginative prose' (MC, 39)—then Powys is nevertheless attempting to instruct his imagined audience of 'laymen' to turn towards a more "traditional" body of (largely rural) writing, in which might be found the 'murmuring of brooks, sweetness of grass . . . sadness of stirred leaves . . . the deep symbolic meaning of such objects as a plough, a sword, a grindstone, a windmill, a boat, a cradle, a coffin' (MC, 46).

As much as anything else, then, Powys is attempting to define two significant and distinct aesthetic principles and working to isolate the kind of subject matter that is to be preferred in his own writing. When Powys writes, for example, that 'the mind that is thrilled by stupendously high buildings, by the amazing flight of aeroplanes, by the incredible swiftness of great liners, more than by rocks and grass and trees, is a mind that loves beauty more than poetry' (MC, 50), he is contrasting his interest in largely rural landscapes with the urban locales of, say, Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), with its aeroplane 'curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, an O, an F', which recalled in both Powys's oppositional figuring and his sense of the 'revelation [...] in the spheres of form and colour' brought about by aeroplanes advertising toilet "necessities" and cigarettes (MC, 50).³⁴

³³ Dobrée, p.179.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 24.

This distinction from a certain received notion of “high” modernism as focused on technical and intellectual virtuosity, however selective, is quite conscious: indeed, Powys, at various points, invokes his “charlatan” persona, criticising ‘clever moderns’ and emphasising that he is writing for an audience ‘without the least notion of the technical subtleties of writing’ (MC, 59). As McGann notes, Powys’s refrains of ‘How little of an artist I am’ (LLW, 194) run throughout the *Autobiography* and correspondence: ‘I am anyway no artist’, he states to his brother, Llewelyn (LL, II: 126).³⁵ Despite or even because of such posturing, however, Powys’s rural fictions contain an artfulness that needs to be acknowledged. Take, for example, an early description of John Crow, in *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932). Here, Crow is returning to his birthplace and childhood home, Glastonbury, from France:

A lump of long frozen--tears began to melt in his throat [...] composed of all his memories of his childhood; composed of the image of his grandmother, reading to him in the low-ceilinged, old-pictured, old-brocaded Rectory drawing-room; composed of the image of his grandfather with his snow-white hair in short, wavy curls covering his round, brittle-looking skull, and his voice melodious as a great actor’s. Mingled with these came memories of the taste of certain species of unusual pink-coloured strawberries that grew in the walled garden and the sharp, pure taste of red gooseberries that grew from near the manure heap there; and surrounding all these as if by an atmosphere of something still more intimately felt, there came over him, under the impact of that Norfolk utterance [of the driver’s], an impression of acrid smoke, the smoke of burning peat, rising from innumerable cottage hearths.

(GR, 25)

This ‘mingl[ing]’ of sense, image, and impression takes modernist themes of memory, experience, and subjectivity and transforms them into a particularly detailed form of rural writing. The tone is nostalgic—not least because Crow is himself experiencing the thaw of a ‘frozen lump twenty years old’—but I want to note what Wiseman describes as a ‘sense of interpenetration and liminality [that Powys uses] to convey the commingling of subject and environment, human and nonhuman life, internal and external experience’.³⁶ This is accomplished through overtly ‘poetical’ features, to

³⁵ McGann, p. 314.

³⁶ Wiseman, p. 9.

borrow Powys's term—for example, the 'smoke' from 'innumerable cottage hearths', or the 'pure taste of red gooseberries'—but while these might well speak of Powys's preference for rural over urban experience they do not terminate in this pastoral prejudice but rather seek to approach modernistic insights regarding subjective experience through ostensibly anti-modern sentiments.

This, perhaps, is the basis of Dobrée's ire, for while Powys remains sensitive towards the technical 'revelation' of technological and even futuristic modernisms ('a torpedo-shaped racing car is beautiful but not poetical'), these aspects of the 'beautiful' remain, for Powys, expressions of 'a non-human absolute', a 'purely aesthetic revelation' that, as *The Meaning of Culture* sees it, has nothing to do with the sense of 'accumulated *human* tradition' that Powys locates in rural scenes and objects (MC, 56-57). As he explains:

Poetry is composed of a certain traditional body of feelings about life; a body which has *gathered by slow adhesions* into a presence of values, nuances, discriminations to which must conform what every nation and every age may add as an indigenous quota of its own. (MC, 48; emphasis added).

For Powys, these 'feelings' are necessarily the product of literary subjects with a longstanding cultural presence; the 'poetical' thus attends to something 'profoundly and emotionally humanized; and since time alone can humanize inanimate objects, the mere fact of being very old can make ugly objects beautiful, while the mere fact of being very new can make beautiful objects unpoetical' (MC, 48-49). Hence, the rejection of the 'torpedo-shaped racing car', for instance, in favour of 'a bare "wishing-bone" [that] is poetical because of fairy-story association but absolutely unbeautiful' (MC, 49); or in *Wolf Solent*, the titular character's articulation of his love of 'philosophical phrases': 'I think we're thrilled by the weight of history that lies behind each one of these phrases [...] 'it isn't just the word itself, or just its immediate meaning. *It's a long, trailing margin of human sensations, life by life, century by century*' (WS, 354; emphasis added).

This emphasis on ‘sensation’ and ‘feelings’ signals Powys’s own participation in what Etienne Terblanche describes as modernism’s ‘break away from realism [...] towards *actuality*’, a process that, he argues, involves a combination of ‘the “objective” world and the joy of subjective awareness’.³⁷ Indeed, Powys’s dissatisfaction with ‘[t]he blunt, brutal, downright realism, so popular at the moment’, is framed in terms that suggest how these emotional complexes are understood to be palpably, and actually, real:

The sensation of “blueness”, for example, as it is glimpsed between the tall buildings, ceases for both types of mind to be a mere sensation because of all the quasi-literary traditions that hang about one single word. The word “sky”, the word “cloud”, the word “grass”, the words “autumn leaves”—these apparently arbitrary syllables—carry with them so cumulative a weight of human association that they fling a complicated atmosphere about the simple sensations of “blue” or “green” or “white” or “red”.
(MC, 43).

It is these figures of ‘cumulative [...] association’ and ‘slow adhesions’ that I want to note, particularly, here; for if modernist writers like Pound, for instance, pursued literary forms in which the “‘image” [...] presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’,³⁸ Powys is instead to seek rural landscapes that express the kind of ‘emotional complex’ brought to mind by Crow’s ‘lump of long-frozen tears [...] composed of all his memories of childhood; composed of the *image* of his grandmother’. So it is that Powys appropriates a modernist language of ‘image’ and ‘impression’, even as he seeks to ground this ‘instant of time’ within its personal, cultural, and historical—or, for Powys, ‘human’—contexts. What Powys’s subjective mode of representation is to record is thus not the haphazard experiential shocks of an urban environment, but rather a palpable if somewhat wistful ‘complex’, a sense of existing within a landscape that exceeds the human subject in all directions, geographically and temporally.

³⁷ Etienne Terblanche, *E.E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 30.

³⁸ See Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 4.

Beyond the relatively banal comparison of urban and rural, in this sense, is Powys's sense of a form of writing capable of accentuating and even conjuring intimations of transhistorical continuity:

Poetry hovers over everything that has been a background to *human life*, over everything that has been a permanent accessory, a daily tool, long enough for a certain organic identification to have grown up between the diurnal uses of our race and this or that fragment of material substance. (MC, 50).

Crow's 'impressions', in *A Glastonbury Romance*, can thus be read as localised manifestations of a larger interest in an imagined process whereby human cultures develop forms of identification and association with particular landscapes. Hence, 'poetry is [...] something profoundly and emotionally humanized' (MC, 48); something 'wherein th[e] animism or vitalization of the inanimate is most marked' (MC, 50). Jed Esty has noted Powys's attempt to 'disperse and revise the Jamesian centre of consciousness' in *A Glastonbury Romance*, arguing that the pageant scene, in which Powys brings together almost his entire cast of over forty fictional characters 'manages to diffuse narrative perspective in the direction of a genuinely transindividual or collective consciousness', and indeed, this discussion is pertinent here.³⁹ For there is a transhistorical dimension to these perspectival experiments, one that manifests a particular fascination with the processes by which 'material substance' and human culture become entangled and related over time.

Language is to be central in this Powysian project, in ways that further establish Powys's participation in, and divergence from, the move towards psychological and experiential 'actuality' found in the writing of his contemporaries. While the landscape of Glastonbury, for instance, 'seem[s] full of human memories' (GR, 92)—as one character observes, 'All the Holy Grail legends gather to a head here' (GR, 120)—the novel will nevertheless frame these emotional and cultural associations sensitively and carefully. This consciousness of story and memory as cultural forms

³⁹ Esty, p. 69.

that trail tantalisingly into the past is encountered in other Powysian fiction. In our discussion of *Wolf Solent*, for instance, we will find a ‘queer and quite special sense of romance’ experienced by the titular character: ‘was it that there was aroused in him some subtle memory of all the intangible sensations that his ancestors had felt [...]. Did, in fact, some floating “emanation” of human regrets and human hopes hover inevitably about [the road]?’ (WS, 128). On the one hand, this interest in ‘floating emanation[s]’ might seem to recall the yearning for ‘racial heritage’ found in the journalist H. V. Morton’s *In Search of England* (1927), published just before *Wolf Solent* and *The Meaning of Culture*, which argued that ‘the greater the number of people with an understanding love for the villages and the country towns of England [...] the better seems our chance of preserving and handing on to our children the monuments of the past, which is clearly a sacred duty’.⁴⁰ On the other, as commentators such as Richard Maxwell, Andrew Radford, and Sam Wiseman have shown however, Powys’s writing is far from a reactionary exposition of parochial Englishness.⁴¹

Compare, for instance, Powys and Morton’s shared interest in country lanes. Here is Morton:

When the public really feels that these signposts along the road which the English people have followed in the course of their development are not dead shells of the past but a living inspiration to the present, to the future, and, in addition, that they possess a personal interest to them as part of a common racial heritage, then we shall have advanced a long way and—perhaps the petrol engine will have atoned for a few of its sins!⁴²

Morton’s vision is one of a culture in which ‘the popularity of the cheap motor-car is also greatly responsible for [a] long-overdue interest in English history, antiquities,

⁴⁰ H. V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. viii.

⁴¹ See Richard Maxwell, ‘The Lie of the Land, or, Plot and Autochthony in John Cowper Powys’, in *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays*, ed. by Denis Lane (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), pp. 193-213.

⁴² Morton, p. viii.

and topography'.⁴³ Read in this light, Powys's interest in 'poetical' objects and roads that '[seem] full of human memories'—'there was not a sign-post or a milestone on that wayside but had gathered to itself some piteous encounter of heart-struck lovers, some long and woeful farewell, some imperishable remorse!'—acquires specific cultural contexts (GR, 92). But while Powys, too, is concerned with the idea that the supposedly 'dead shells of the past' might become animating and vital presences in the present moment, he is careful to frame his characters' experiences of these as what Andrew Radford describes as 'ghostly conversations: imaginative empathy animates the defunct and quickens the sense of association between "then" and "now"'.⁴⁴ That Solent's 'queer and quite special sense of romance' is framed as a direct question to the reader (*was it that there was aroused some subtle memory [...] did, in fact [...]?*) is thus precisely the point, for this suggests how the sense of 'organic identification' described in *The Meaning of Culture* is already developed, in the fictions, into a more open-ended and elliptical sense of continuity. There is to be a palpable sense of tradition at work in the novels we discuss, then. Crucially, however, Powysian tradition acknowledges the past, and relationships with the land that are both literary ('fairy stories') and lived ('old rituals, old mythologies'), as inhering in cultural productions, imaginative constructs, and emotional complexes that lead characters to '[wrestle] with a soil and with the growths of a soil that [is] [...] soaked in legends' (GR, 214). Powys's 'poetical' landscapes thus speak of a world in which 'inanimate' and 'material' substances have become 'profoundly and emotionally humanized', inflected with personal and cultural significances: 'rivers and highways that carry old legends, old memories, old tragic transactions into the unborn future' (MC, 46). Language's role in fostering, sustaining, and indeed, questioning, these emotional complexes is to be a concern throughout our discussion.

This slightly portentous tone recalls us to the matter of Powys's "charlatan" persona; indeed, something of this is discernible, I would suggest, in his call for writers capable of effecting a reclamation of 'romance and sentiment':

⁴³ Morton, p. vii.

⁴⁴ Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 9.

All good literature is spread out, like a Platonic over-world of ideal forms, just a little above the “real world” in which we spend our material being; and it will not be long ere those elements, at present slighted, of *romance and sentiment* are summoned back to earth from their temporary exile by the magnetic lodestones of new imaginative adventurers.

(MC, 44; emphasis added)

As this suggests, Powys is not quite as opposed to discoursing upon the art or even ‘technicalities’ of fiction as he suggests, but rather concerned that ‘a fatalistic resignation to the particular epoch in which we happen to be born’ has led to a consuming fascination with the ‘beautiful’, the new (MC, 49). That Powys responds to a period that had seen a proliferation of artistic manifestos in the form of an artistic *prophecy* (‘it will not be long ere...’) is thus suggestive, for he hereby begins to perform the reclamation of ‘romance and sentiment’ that his discursive writing denotatively announces. Indeed, when Powys observes, at the start of *The Meaning of Culture*, that the writer who is not ‘interested in the question whether his attitude is “intellectual” according to the current fashion or not’ might ‘even be guilty of a certain malicious satisfaction when it appears so completely out of fashion as to seem naïve and simple to the point of imbecility’, we recognise the posturing at work (MC, 10). This is to become increasingly obvious as we explore what Powys frames as the antithesis of the ‘poetical’, the ‘beautiful’.

III: Powys’s Second Aesthetic Principle: The ‘Beautiful’

As Powys’s emphasis on ‘new imaginative adventurers’ begins to suggest, his own literary practice, for all its interest in subjects that might be ‘out of fashion’, is nevertheless to be distinguished from the production of that ‘old fashioned pedant’ incapable of acknowledging the formal and technical developments of modernist writers. Crucially, Powys is sophisticated enough to recognise that ‘[t]here are [...] certain landscapes upon the earth that one instinctively recognizes as appealing to the beauty-loving mind’, rather than that which seeks to immerse itself in the ‘poetical’ (MC, 50). These are landscapes with ‘non-human, non-historical, chemic-cosmogonic

character, and their power is not a matter of literary suggestion but a direct impact of form and colour arranged in non-human patterns' (MC, 50). As this might suggest, for all *The Meaning of Culture*'s privileging of supposedly traditional or even romanticised forms of 'Nature', Powys is not blind to the new insights and discourses that were being shaped by both the natural scientists and artists of his day.

In the chapter, 'Culture and Painting', for instance, Powys acknowledges the 'profound symbolic value' of those 'extreme modernities' in which 'the glittering point of attack is the orgiastic dance; and, behind the dance, the sullen beating of tom-toms and the wild brass of trombones':

After their mad fashion these things are true. And why should they not have as much right to imitate the universe's obscene and monstrous gestures as her gentle and modest ones? No, they are not contrary to reality. With all their squares and splashes and scrawls and protrusions and dust-storms and wind-spirals, they represent a certain chaos in things which is one of Nature's own chemical secrets. The filigrees and arabesques of certain organic trails, the rhythmic patterns of earth-worms, for example, traced in wet mud, are an aspect of this, and the reckless movements of infusoria and amoeba in any drop of microscopic pond-water [...].

(MC, 73)

In one sense, Powys misses what is at stake in these modern paintings. Pericles Lewis notes that such 'Nonobjective (or, loosely, "abstract") painting present[ing] patterns of lines and colours on a canvas with no ostensible "subject"' is one of the 'technical innovations [that] illustrat[es] the formal aspect of the crisis of representation' occurring across the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.⁴⁵ For Powys, however, this 'crisis' has hardly occurred, with even such abstract patterns functioning as forms of direct 'represent[ation]', even 'imitat[ion]'. Yet there is also an insightful and disruptive sense of 'Nature' informing Powys's discussion, one that suggests how the 'poetical' and poeticised countrysides of his writing are not indicative of the full breadth of his literary responses to a more-than-human world, 'Nature' included.

⁴⁵ Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 3.

For all their human suggestiveness and ‘profoundly and emotionally humanized’ character, Powys’s landscapes bear details that go beyond this ‘poetical’ haze. In *Porius* (1951), for example, we will encounter the kind of ‘chemic-cosmogonic’ landscapes that Powys associates with the ‘beauty-loving mind’, as jagged rock faces and ‘mathematical’ biotic processes threaten the human subject with its incapacity to project order and intelligibility onto the chaotic materialities of ‘Nature’ itself (P, 424). These ‘non-human’ agencies and materialities are to be found throughout Powys’s fictions. Situated somewhere between these two extremes of the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘poetical’, for instance, are *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*. In one of *A Glastonbury Romance*’s scenes the industrialist, Philip Crow, seduces Persephone Spear by taking her into the darkness of Wookey Hole Caves, and there we can see how Powys’s sense of the ‘poetical’ and the ‘beautiful’ often work in tandem. The scene was heavily bowdlerised in the wake of complaints from Captain Gerard William Hodgkinson, who owned Wookey Hole Cave at the time of *A Glastonbury Romance*’s publication and thought himself to be reflected in Powys’s treatment of the industrialist, Philip Crow.⁴⁶ In a deleted passage we see, quite clearly, Powys making a distinction between a legendary and symbolic interpretation of the cave’s materialities, and the ‘non-human’ matter of the cave itself:

[I]t was *the shape* of these stalactites and stalagmites that was so overpowering to the imagination. They were all of them phallic. Not one single excrescence in that huge cavern that was not wrought, for the imagination of men and women, into some variety of phallic form. They were like the phalluses of hordes of Cyclops and herds of behemoths. It was as if the Witch of Wookey—the mere idea of whose legendary personality, described to that friend of Louie and Lily Rogers, had made the woman fall into hysterics—had hung these trophies, as memorials of her monstrous encounters, upon the walls of her obscene cave.⁴⁷

‘Romance and sentiment’ are certainly reclaimed, here, though we sense the overt

⁴⁶ For a full account of these excisions, and the events surrounding them, see Paul Cheshire, ‘*A Glastonbury Romance*: Cuts and Alterations to the UK Printed Texts 1932-1955’, *The Powys Journal*, 27 (2017), 65-86.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Cheshire, p. 69.

function of the ‘imagination of men and women’ at work, the consciousness of the way in which the cave’s ‘legendary’ associations have granted it a very particular atmosphere. The juxtaposition of Spear’s seduction with the ‘trophies’ of ‘monstrous counters’ hung upon an ‘obscene cave’ invites readers to draw their own comparisons between myth and modernity, transforming the extramarital liaisons of Glastonbury’s inhabitants into stories in which a kind of “charlatan” exaggeration—an element of romance’s atmosphere of oral storytelling—is woven into Powys’s strained similes. Of equal importance is a later scene in which John Geard falls asleep in the caves amidst these ‘prehistoric stalactites’ (GR, 519): ‘No sign of life was there, no grass-blade, no insect, no bird. He was alone with the metallic elements out of which all organic entities are formed’ (GR, 332). A later chapter will deal with these overlapping perspectives for, as I want to suggest, the novel is intensely aware of Glastonbury as a site in which human and non-human significances have become interwoven over time.

As critics such as Charles Lock and Esty have noted, Powys’s experimentation with perspective and polyphony further complicates readings of him as a straightforwardly anti-modernist writer.⁴⁸ The division between Powys’s rural fictions and the urban writings of his contemporaries is in many ways arbitrary, not least because his works are conceived in consciousness of the experimental literary forms devised by these contemporaries. In *Ulysses* (1922), for example, Joyce had attempted ‘in conception and technique [...] to depict the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman’.⁴⁹ The attempt had a marked reaction on Powys, who recorded, in an essay on *Finnegans Wake* (1939) originally published in the periodical *Modern Reading* in 1943, and collected, with slight revisions, in *Obstinate Cymric* (1947), both his distaste for certain elements of *Ulysses*—as we have seen—and his debt to a writer who had nevertheless expanded the boundaries of novelistic representation.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Charles Lock, ‘Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55:3 (1986), 261-281.

⁴⁹ James Joyce, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Richard Ellmann (London: Faber, 1975), p. 289.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the essay, and of Powys’s responses to Joyce and his writing more generally, see Charles Lock, ‘John Cowper Powys and James Joyce’, in *In the Spirit of Powys*, ed. by Denis Lane (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), pp. 23-42 (p. 33).

‘At what hour of the day’, Powys asks his readers in relation to *Ulysses*, ‘did the inspiration seize [Joyce] to become the mythologist and subhuman chronicler of one small spot on the outskirts of a city, a spot bounded horizontally and topographically by that city’s limits, but unbounded, perpendicularly and astronomically, from Zenith to Nadir?’ (OC, 21). Such language directly echoes the terms in which Powys describes *A Glastonbury Romance*, for there, Powys had himself attempted to present ‘a particular spot upon the earth’s surface [...] its whole being from zenith to nadir, and from circumference to centre’:

[This is to be achieved] by describing [Glastonbury] and analysing it under the moods of the weather and under various chemical and spiritual influences and in regard to its flora and fauna and geological strata; and in regard to the historic changes that have come to its human inhabitants in connection with these things; and to its whole being from zenith to nadir, and from circumference to centre. (AR, 7)

Later chapters in this thesis will increasingly explore the way in which these ‘human’ processes are understood as occurring in, and ‘in connection with’, shifting meteorological and biotic systems, both ‘chemical and spiritual’. For as this passage suggests, Powys’s turn to the ‘human’ is increasingly to be located within temporally, geographically, and ecologically expansive contexts in ways that demand refreshed attention. For my purposes here, however, it serves to note the striking correspondence between Powys’s description of *Ulysses* and his stated intention. For as much as Powys is at pains to distinguish his work from a certain form of “high” modernism in his discursive writings and correspondence, his texts are nevertheless more ambivalent and productive participations in forms of modernist experimentation than his “charlatan” posturing often allows.

Heidi Scott’s sense that ‘both writers and ecologists are close readers of natural systems, and both use the imagination to rework cryptic natural processes into coherent theories that elucidate patterns—even chaotic patterns’ is helpful here.⁵¹ As

⁵¹ Heidi C. M. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), p. 5.

this suggests, Powys's writing of 'Nature' is not merely an act of direct representation or imitation, but a mode of *exploration* that will seek to make sense—however provisionally—of a more-than-human world that is always somehow beyond its human perspectives, but with which its characters and cultures are fundamentally entangled. It is in something of this spirit, in fact, that Powys "reads" certain modernist artworks in *The Meaning of Culture*. Developing his sense that different aesthetic and cultural practices reveal different perspectives on what he calls 'Nature', for instance, Powys claims that 'romantic nineteenth century art [found 'the centre of its aesthetic preoccupation'] in the magic of Nature', whereas 'Modern art has discovered a completely new element for its exploitation, namely the purely mathematical and chemical structure of matter itself' (MC, 75). Crucially, Powys does not see this 'Modern' insight as a progression from the earlier sense of 'romantic [...] magic' or as a mode of rationality that extinguishes it, but rather as another perspective, or aesthetic principle, to inhabit:

Even when the more extreme among modern artists choose to abandon the ordinary appearances of life, as they are recognized by normal human vision, for certain recondite aspects disentangled from the rest by a de-emotionalized curiosity, it is still our affair to follow their lead in this as far as we can and to learn from *them a new response to Nature from a fresh and original slant*, a slant that boldly *carries our common consciousness one or two steps further, in recognition of a reality hitherto unrevealed*.

(MC, 62; emphases added).

There is an investment in the epistemologically and even ontologically instructive capacity of art, here, that goes beyond readings of Powys as a writer who merely 'worshipped nature, and sought to inspire others to do likewise', or a 'bookish solitary, who enjoyed contemplating Nature on long walks'.⁵² Wiseman's sense that Powys's writing returns, with Richard Storm, to the rural with a refreshed and, indeed, modern sense of context and understanding is helpful; for as much as Powys's writings will seek to find or lose themselves in 'poetical' landscapes amenable to being 'profoundly and emotionally humanized', these are to be recognised as

⁵² Goodway, p. 121.

materialities in which the human is otherwise, and ecologically, implicated, too. A key point, then, is that Powys's *oeuvre* incorporates facets from each of these versions of 'Nature', even as he records his preference, in *The Meaning of Culture*, for the more 'poetical' features of his literary worlds and even instructs his readers to pursue a Romantically-inspired communion with the green forms that might be found there. With this in mind I want to make my own return to Powys's 'life-technique', for we are now in a position to observe the seeds of the ecological imagination that this thesis is to explore.

IV: A 'pluralist and animist metaphysics'

To conclude this chapter, I want to dwell a little on the potential, ecocritical contexts in which we might begin to read Powys's 'poetical' and 'beautiful' landscapes and the shifting and often contradictory 'Natures' they evoke. The point is not to suggest that the discursive writings reveal a consistent or even confident ethic, or even a sense of 'Nature' that is to be explored in the fiction (though certainly this is true), but rather that they display the burgeoning ecological consciousness of Powys's fictions, his desire to produce forms of writing in which the human is entangled with various non-human actants, materially, culturally, psychologically.

We can see this if we return to *The Meaning of Culture*'s more didactic exposition of the 'life-technique', and particularly, a passage in which Powys sets a final 'test' for his reader. Here, it is necessary to quote Powys's exposition of his particular sense of 'culture' at length:

Here precisely is a situation wherein one may mentally test oneself as to the presence or absence [...] of the sort of culture defined in this book [...]. Turning your back to the traffic in the highway and standing for a moment at the road's edge you may chance to see a thistle growing there or a solitary dock-leaf or a faded, flowerless sprig of iron-weed or milk-weed. This abject and forlorn plant, let us imagine, is growing on the crest of a sandy bank wherein at a glance you can see embedded certain common fossil-shells – ammonites perhaps – and beneath the stalk of the

plant and a little above those stone fossils you can catch a glimpse of the trailing roots of a neighbouring elder-bush [...]. (MC, 155-156)

Note the conscious turning away from ‘traffic’ and the ‘highway’, from the conduits of modern, urban life, towards fragments of nonhuman nature in which are included ‘common fossil-shells’ and ‘ammonites’ as tokens of a prehuman past. That the materialities of urban life militate against one’s sensitivity to what Powys calls ‘Nature’ is obviously an extension of his own prejudices, but the point is not so much the (il)logic of Powys’s argument as it is his central investment in literature as a cultural medium that might lead the individual to contemplate his or her position within a temporally and geographically expansive landscape:

[A]s you gaze at these things, innumerable memories, drawn from a thousand impressions of childhood, flow into your mind. The blurred edge of that sandy bank, here a grass-blade, there an empty snail-shell, the grey spikes of that thistle, the texture of that dock-leaf, gather to themselves a symbolic value as you stare at them. They become representative of the whole mysterious face of the earth, held up in that November greyness, haggard and tragic, to that curved dome of grey vapour which is all you can see of the overarching sky. And as you continue to look at all this [...] forgetting all else, it gradually comes over you, that between your secret identity—part physical, part psychic—and the secret identity, physical and psychic also, of these stalks and leaves, of these sand-grains and stone-fossils, there is a reciprocity beyond all rational understanding. [...] What matters is that you should concentrate your thoughts upon the whole rondure of the turning globe as it transports all its living burden through measureless space-time, of which burden, just now, this thistle-head, these ash-roots, this tarnished dock-leaf, together with your own flesh-covered human skeleton, are transitory fragments. (MC, 156)

There is much to unpack here. Firstly, we might note that Powys’s writing is in one sense drawing upon what Timothy Clark describes as an ‘essentially romantic tradition in which identification with other creatures is just material for a cult of

heightened personal experience, of escape into forms of psychic epiphany'.⁵³ Clark's word, "just", of course, signals the contemporary ecocritical discomfort with these unfolding personal, psychic epiphanies, the sense that 'identification' with the nonhuman is ultimately made to serve human ends in a sense of elation that occludes the vitality, integrity, and strangeness of the non-human other. As this suggests, Hooker's largely celebratory reading of Powys's 'Wordsworthian quest [...] [that] seeks to lose—and find—itsself in the continuity of life' needs updating.⁵⁴ Goodway, too, compares Powys's writing favourably with 'Wordsworth, in order to suggest Powys's characteristic attention to and communion with the natural world, animate and inanimate', and Blake, 'since Powys shares his reverence for life and belief that "everything that lives is holy", as well as his radical rejection of the established order'.⁵⁵

Beyond these appraisals or rejections of imaginative 'communion', however, there is also a potent sense of the mythopoeic at work in these numinous invocations of 'secret identity' and 'reciprocity beyond all rational understanding' that I do not want to dismiss out of hand. Scott Freer describes modernist mythopoeia as marking 'the modernist shift in a spiritual perspective from transcendent religion to a humanist reimagining of the natural, godless world',⁵⁶ and indeed, Powys will state, in *The Meaning of Culture*, that 'what culture has to do today in these human adjustments [...] is to find some substitute for religion' (MC, 231). Such language indicates Powys's participation in a 'shift' that, for Freer, is to 'accommodate various shades of secularity and religiosity, for it brings an inconclusiveness to the mysteries of existence to be embraced and poeticized'.⁵⁷ Hence, perhaps, Powys's insistence that 'the whole essence of [this] cult [of sensation] is a heightened awareness of the mysteriousness of the universe' (MC, 238).

⁵³ Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 198.

⁵⁴ Hooker, p. 108.

⁵⁵ Goodway, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁶ Scott Freer, *Modernist Mythopoeia: The Twilight of the Gods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 17.

⁵⁷ Freer, p. 17.

Such moments of writing can be read, as much as anything else, as a search for a language that might do justice to a ‘natural, godless world’ that exceeds and encompasses the human subject. My intention here is not to defend this ‘mythopoeic’ and mystified invocation of an overtly poeticised, and notably rural, ‘Nature’—indeed, we need to acknowledge the anti-intellectual imperative that is at work, too—but rather to note how the imagination that is at work here is crucial to the perspectival and imaginative devices of Powysian fiction to which we will attend later chapters. Note, for example, the intensely detailed observation of minutiae including a ‘grass-blade’, an ‘empty snail-shell’, even the ‘texture’ of a ‘dock-leaf’, and the way in which this is accompanied by an opposing shift in scale towards the ‘whole rondure of the turning globe’. As I have suggested, we find a similarly elastic sense of scale in Powys’s fictions. Powys’s inclination ‘to take nothing in Nature for granted’ (MC, 165) produces a keen eye for ecological detail discernible, for example, in *Weymouth Sands* (1934), where one of Powys’s characters is drawn with intense curiosity to the ‘ground underneath his feet’, noting ‘the smooth, wet sea-sand, ribbed, glittering, warm, and covered with tiny little pyramidal hills composed of minute models in sand of the sand-worms that threw them up’ (WES, 307).

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Powys’s sense of planetary and even interstellar (‘measureless space-time’) scale, which we will see throughout his fiction. Indeed, in each of the novels that I have chosen to engage with in this thesis, the figure of the earth itself acquires central importance. In *Wolf Solent*, the titular character envisions a ‘vivisected’ earth; in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Sam Dekker becomes ‘vividly conscious of himself as one entity among all the rest, carried along upon the night journey of the voyaging planet’ (GR, 937); in *Porius*, Powys’s Merlin figure, Myrddin Wyllt, imagines the earth as a materiality damaged and blasted by the airborne destruction of The Blitz and beyond (P, 112, 518). For Timothy Morton, [s]eeing the Earth from space is the beginning of ecological thinking’, just as [s]eeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics’.⁵⁸ While Powys was not, of course, privileged to see the Earth from space, these images

⁵⁸ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 14.

further suggest his awareness of literary form's capacity to facilitate speculative or imaginative modes of seeing both oneself, and what he calls 'Nature', from multiple perspectives, in both its 'beautiful' and 'poetical' manifestations and beyond.⁵⁹

In *The Meaning of Culture*, such imaginative liberation is curtailed by Powys's pursuit of the 'life-technique'; the anti-anthropocentric thrust of this elastic scale, accordingly, is largely deflected by Powys's continued emphasis on the 'strange and profound *satisfaction* in feeling this consciousness of identity between your own transitory life and the transitory life of other earth-products, whether organic or inorganic' (MC, 157; emphasis added). Yet such writing is not merely the thoughtless manifestation of a text in which 'claims to philosophical detachment, rational argument, and scholarly critique are just not tenable'.⁶⁰ For Powys, in fact, the 'sense of identity' that he is concerned with is not 'any fantastic, mythical, or even mystical experience', but rather 'the calm recognition of an absolute fact' (MC, 157). As Powys sees it, the human's entanglement in material nature is the inescapable ground of its being, a mark of its incorporation into the 'chemistry of earth-life' that goes beyond even mystical sensation (MC, 157). Hence the more explicit claim that 'the earth is actually and literally the mother of us all. One needs no strange spiritual faith to worship the earth' (MC, 150). Certainly, it has to be recognised that a text like *The Meaning of Culture* is interested in transforming this 'fact' into the basis for its 'cult of heightened personal experience', and even acknowledged that the response to modern urban living is reactionary. But rather than dismissing the discursive writing out of hand, I would suggest that it is more productive to explore the ways in which Powys's instruction towards this 'life-technique' develops a mythopoeic poetics in which 'atmosphere' and figurative language stage relation, entanglement, and wonder between the human observer and the more-than-human world in which he or she is necessarily implicated.

Note, for example, the metaphors with which Powys instructs his readers to

⁵⁹ Sam Wiseman also quotes this passage from Timothy Morton in his discussion of Powys's Wessex novels and their representation of place. See Wiseman, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁰ Gloversmith, p. 17.

‘experiment with ordinary life’:

Since we are men and women [...] there soon arrives a moment when our philosophy loses its plant-like passivity. Grown now into a conscious system of thought it draws from the flowing saps and vegetative essences of its organic sub-life an active integral consciousness which feeds upon the spectacle of the world. It projects sensitized antennae, this consciousness; it thrusts forth a moth-like tongue. It selects, refuses, advances, and recoils before what confronts it.

(MC, 12)

Though nominally concerned with the ‘heightened awareness’ of the human figure, Powys’s language is infused with a sense of relation and entanglement between human and nonhuman forms. Imagining human consciousness as a ‘conscious system of thought’ in which the ‘flowing saps’ of a ‘Plant-like passivity’ are substituted for a kind of creaturely agency, Powys figures the human mind as an apparatus to be quite seriously compared with a ‘moth-like tongue’ or the ‘sensitized antennae’ of insects.

The language used here will appear, too, in the novels: indeed, these vegetative figures will be immediately familiar to readers of *Wolf Solent*, for whom they will recall those instances in which the titular hero imagines his ‘thought’ as ‘t[aking] the form of slowly stirring, vegetable leaves, big as elephants’ feet, hanging from succulent and cold stalks on the edges of woodland swamps’, or of *A Glastonbury Romance*, in which ‘the huge antennae of Bloody Johnny’s soul’ are described as ‘fumb[ing]’ towards spiritual epiphany (WS, 16; GR, 1042). As we will see, both novels subject these steady advances towards personal ‘epiphany’ to a degree of irony, scrutiny, and indeed, comedy. Much of the texture of Powys’s novels comes from the varied and often conflicting manner in which ‘Nature’ and the nonhuman are deployed. If *A Glastonbury Romance*’s description of (human) characters as ‘anthropoid mammals’ or ‘male animal[s]’ (GR, 112, 1037), for instance, indicates something of Powys’s incorporation of recognisably naturalist discourse, then *Wolf Solent*’s character names—*Wolf Solent*, *Darnley Otter*, with his ‘mackerel-coloured eyes’ (WS, 43), *Bob Weevil*, with his ‘water-rat feature[s]’ (WS, 276)—as Wiseman suggests, find Powys exercising the ‘artifice of his metaphorical world in order to undermine potential “over-intellectual” literary-critical readings’ even as he

‘emphasis[es] connections and correspondences between human and nonhuman life-forms’.⁶¹ Central to Powys’s ecocritical importance is his use of language, though as will become readily apparent, his use of language is by no means reducible to the ethic that I consider it important to trace. The discursive writing is crucial, in this sense, as it attunes our own critical antennae to the kind of writerly imagination in which an ethic of entanglement and wonder is to be diffused through more playful, and certainly more various, uses of language.

With this in mind we might turn to one of Powys’s earliest, and indeed, weakest texts, *The Complex Vision*, since it contains a striking example of how what Goodway describes as Powys’s ‘pluralist and animist metaphysics’ become expressed in mythopoetic writing.⁶² Krissdóttir describes this text as being ‘almost unreadable, partly because Powys is attempting to describe a state which is [...] indescribable, partly because it is highly theoretical and abstract, and partly because his logic is faulty’.⁶³ Nevertheless, there are some lucid passages and observations to which we should attend.

At the outset of *The Complex Vision*, Powys states that his intention is to steer a course between the ‘hypotheses of Physical Science’ on the one hand, and the ‘speculations of a[n] [Henri] Bergson or a William James’ on the other, thus signalling his intention to incorporate both scientific and philosophical knowledge (CV, xxiii). Powys appraises the ‘Pluralism’ of William James throughout his discursive writings and correspondence, observing, in *In Spite Of*, ‘we have been influenced by the pluralism of Wiliam James’ (ISO, 309). David Goodway quotes from a transcription of an important letter to the Welsh scholar and poet, Iorweth Peate:

In plain words in spite of an almost morbidly Christian conscience . . . my attitude to all these questions is essentially agnostic and heathen & indeed *pluralistic* as opposed to *monism* of every sort, the sort of pluralism W. James wrote of [...] I like absolutely free speculation in these things and *I like to question* not only the *existence* of God—

⁶¹ Wiseman, p. 50.

⁶² Goodway, p. 101.

⁶³ Krissdóttir, p. 160.

the *desirability* of following Christ—the *value* of the moral order (like my brother Llewelyn the *only thing* wh. I feel & *know* to be evil wicked and wrong is *dire mental & physical cruelty*)—the *value* of the Family etc. etc. etc.⁶⁴

That Powys is rehearsing a rejection of moral categories—‘God’, ‘Christ,’ and ‘Family’ (equally capitalised)—that had, by 1945, itself become almost too familiar is suggested by the repeated ‘etc’ with which the thought terminates. *The Complex Vision*, however, is an early example of such ‘free speculation’, a mode of writing that, while purportedly operating along philosophical and even scientific lines of inquiry, is to examine the ‘conscience’ of these epistemologies. That Powys *is*, in this text, attempting to produce a work of scholarly philosophy, or at least emulating its language, might give us pause for thought, but as in his best writing, the intention is to push back against what Powys sees as a reductive, mechanistic rationalism through an emphasis on comparatively imaginative modes of understanding. We see this in *The Meaning of Culture*, too, where Powys suggests that ‘Culture is always ready to take very lightly those fantastic faults of mystical exaggeration of which expert pedantry makes so much. And this is the case because what culture is concerned with is *a certain stimulation of one’s imaginative reaction to life*’ (MC, 193; emphasis added). For Powys, ‘imaginative reaction’ is more important than philosophical or scientific certainty, with James’s ‘pluralism’ becoming the justification for a mode of ‘mystical exaggeration’ that is, later, to be evoked as a self-consciously “charlatan” ethic:

Without this element [of “charlatanism”] [...] the pursuit of truth would resemble something between a four hours’ speech by Mr. Gladstone and a four weeks’ visit to some scientific retreat, where they investigate dogs’ saliva through slits in their necks. In plain words truth would be, as it is to these haters of “charlatans”, something at once portentously pontifical and shamelessly cruel.

(A, 287)

This move, whereby the ‘imagination’ is mobilised against the perceived instrumentalising pressures of modernity, and vivisection particularly, is typical of

⁶⁴ Quoted in Goodway, pp. 153-154.

Powys's writing. This is to be much more productively framed in the fictions, as we will see. Indeed, it is not just the practice of vivisection but, in *Wolf Solent*, the titular character's "vision" of 'the whole round earth' as a 'smooth-bellied, vivisected frog', beset by the 'monstrous Apparition of Modern Invention' suggests how such sentiments are to be diffused into overt displays of imaginative license that seek to escape their local, human perspectives (WS, 15-16). The figuring of the imaginative *versus* the 'portentously pontifical and shamelessly cruel' is, of course, far too comfortable and oppositional; it is, however, also our point of entry into a body of writing that will often, but not always, bring nuance to these positions.

The point to note, then, is Powys's conscious, and consistent, participation within a 'literary-critical tradition, informed by humanist and romanticist assumptions [...] within which it can be construed as positively advantageous to be dissociated from science and rationality'.⁶⁵ Powys, of course, is not quite a 'literary critic', but his sense of *literature*—and writing more generally—as facilitating one's 'imaginative reaction' draws on a similar heritage.

This, in fact, is the preoccupation of *The Complex Vision*, which sets out to puncture a mechanistic reading of 'Nature' as a predestined and contained system to be mapped and known by 'metaphysical logicians'. Writing, for example, that 'we may take into our hands a pebble or a shell [...] and we may feel as though the universe were in our grasp', Powys reacts admonishingly:

When we remember that this little piece of earth is part of a continuous unity which recedes in every direction, world without end, we are driven to admit that the universe is so little within our grasp that we have to regard it as something which breaks and baffles the mind as soon as the mind takes hold of it at all. (CV, 86)

This impulse to connect a 'little piece of earth' with a 'continuous unity' is fundamentally ecological, though we might note that Powys is as willing to give way

⁶⁵ Jeff Wallace, *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 20.

to a sense of sublime mysteriousness, a reading in which the universe ‘breaks and baffles the mind’, as he is to explain or interpret how, exactly, this ‘continuity’ might be established. When Powys later adds that ‘the forms, shapes and events of habitual occurrence, which we are inclined to take so easily for granted, are part of a staggering and inscrutable enigma’, we recognise that his intention is less to delineate the mechanisms of this ‘enigma’ than it is to challenge the habitual capacity to take the human’s passing transience ‘for granted’ (CV, 86).

This too, however, might be productive, if, as Susan Stanford has suggested, ‘Planetary [...] means leaving the comfort zone for the contact zone’, ‘examin[ing] the meanings of the non-human world for the human and the interactions of human modernities with the Earth as a planet in the cosmos’.⁶⁶ This attempt to ‘contact’ the strangeness of other scales and perspectives is, as I want to suggest, to become a fictional manoeuvre that underpins a distinctly Powysian poetics: as Esty has observed, for instance, the ‘experiment in perspective’ found in *A Glastonbury Romance* ‘is arguably the most important formal feature of the novel’.⁶⁷ We find one striking, and to my mind insightful, example of this in *The Complex Vision*’s chapter called ‘The Illusion of Dead Matter’, where Powys turns to the planetary scale precisely to defamiliarise our habitual and received use of language as it relates to the non-human. Powys develops an argument that the term, “life”, is misleading because it leads us to distinguish, hierarchically, between animate and inanimate forms. Describing a ‘dead body’, which is ‘certainly possessed of no more life than the inanimate boards of the coffin in which it lies’, for instance, Powys adds that this body ‘is only “dead” when considered in isolation from the surrounding chemistry of planetary life’ (CV, 256-257). As we will see later, ‘chemistry’ is to prove a significant term in Powys’s writing for its capacity to emphasise forms of interaction and agency that remain elliptical and undefined.⁶⁸ Here, however, Powys qualifies the usage in

⁶⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies’, *Modernism/modernity*, 17:3 (2010), 471-499 (493-494).

⁶⁷ Esty, p. 68.

⁶⁸ As Radford notes of the term’s use in *A Glastonbury Romance*, ““Chemistry” is crucial [...]: the novel esteems an elliptical tradition that never becomes enshrined in “categorical mandates””. See *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 89.

lucid, and rational, terms:

Its [the body's] chemical elements, as they resolve themselves slowly back into their planetary accomplices, are part and parcel of that general 'body of the earth' which is in a state of constant movement, and which has the "soul of the earth" as its animating principle of personality. And just as the human corpse, when the soul has deserted it, becomes a portion of those chemical elements which are the body of the planet's 'personal soul', so do the dead bodies of animals and plants and trees become portions of the same terrestrial bodies.

Thus strictly speaking there is no single moment when any material form or body can be called 'dead'. (CV, 257)

Again, the sense of material scale provided by the earth establishes forms of connection and interaction between the human—at least in terms of 'chemical elements'—and nonhuman nature. Powys's sense of 'life', as this suggests, is dispersed and diffused, inhering not in single, living organisms, but instead in a kind of Bergsonian vitality that is inherent to the 'chemical elements' and 'material form' of the planet.

Powys's invocation of Bergson, in fact, is explicit, though where the proponent of *élan vital*, as Powys sees it, 'seeks to interpret human life in terms of the universe', Powys understands his own practice as 'seek[ing] to interpret the universe in terms of human life' (CV 164). It is here that Powys becomes either overtly imaginative, or enthralled by the 'fantastic faults of mystical exaggeration' that plunge his text into unreadability, depending upon how sympathetically we choose to read this early text. More productive than such polarised responses would allow, however, is his development of a *language* that will 'remain frankly anthropomorphic and mythological' (CV, 321):

Thus, at the end of our journey, we are able, by a final process of drastic elimination, to reduce the world in which we live to a congeries of living souls. Some of these souls possess what we name animate bodies, others possess what we name inanimate bodies. For us, these words, animate and inanimate, convey but a slight difference in

meaning. Between a stone, which is part of the body of the earth, and a leaf which is part of the body of a plant, and a lock of hair which is part of the body of the man, there may be certain unimportant chemical differences, justifying us in using the terms [...]. But the essential fact remains that all we see and taste and touch and smell and hear, all, in fact, that makes up the objective universe which surrounds us, is a portion of some sort of living body, corresponding to some sort of living soul.

(CV, 367-368)

As far as philosophy goes, the attempt is limited; but as a developing poetics informing Powys's later fictional writing, the figuring through which we encounter a universe in which stones, leaves, and even hairs carry a significance extraneous to their human value is instructive. Powys's novels, as we will see, are frequently to be found reclaiming these ostensibly negligible fragments and idiosyncratic perspectives, whether through Powys's keen eye for ecologically connected detail or through their overt uses of anthropomorphism.

Here, however, the point is Powys's sense of this 'anthropomorphic and mythological' language as being shaped by an ethical imperative. Powys is keen to distinguish his position, for example, from that of those 'evolutionists [who] tell us that personality is a thing of late appearance [...] out of the "lower" forms of life' precisely because 'we have no *right* to assume that the life of the earth and of other planetary and stellar bodies is a "lower" form of life' (CV, 308; emphasis added). A similar point is raised in another discursive text, *In Defence of Sensuality* (1930):

It is hard to believe that there can be any quivering thrill of ecstatic delight in the coupling of toads, in the herd-amorousness of flies, in the automatic eroticism of fishes. But this dullness of belief is our human limitation. It is not possible to generalise about the interior feelings of animals. The lion and the eagle may be less lonely than they are reputed to be. The cow—the divinest of animals—may be very lonely in her mind, and may prove to dream the most individual dreams.

(DS, 11)

As these observations imply, Powys recognises that 'automatic', instinctual, or mechanistic models of nonhuman consciousness in which the human is hierarchically

privileged are untenable in his contemporary moment both scientifically and ethically: ‘if what is called Evolution simply means *change*, then we have not the least objection to the word’, Powys writes, since ‘[b]oth progress and deterioration are of course purely human values’ (CV, 315). This inclination to move beyond ‘purely human values’ is crucial; it suggests how Powys, in his own way, shares with contemporary thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles a sense that ‘consciousness [...] is an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow’.⁶⁹ Hayles, of course, is writing of a distinctly and explicitly ‘posthuman’ experience; Powys’s sense of ‘personality’, by way of contrast, is perhaps more fully explained by a sense of agency or otherness, a disinclination to devalue nonhuman materialities of all forms in light of received notions of human centrality and exceptionality.

This is a disruptive stance that Powys shares with many of his modernist contemporaries. As Carrie Rohman observes regarding the concept of the “animal”, specifically, ‘the animal problem takes on a particularly charged valence since modernism comes on the heels of Darwin’s catastrophic blow to human privilege vis-à-vis the species question’.⁷⁰ In broader terms, Gillian Beer has similarly described the ripples of Darwin’s shock to anthropocentric privilege as they continue to expand in the modernist moment: ‘Since Darwin, humankind could no longer take for granted its own centrality or its own permanence’.⁷¹ As the later examples from *In Defence of Sensuality* suggest, the mystical portentousness of *The Complex Vision* is often refined in the later works, blended with a self-conscious use of exaggerated language that needs to be acknowledged in its own terms.

To throw this into relief it is important, here, to observe a provisional distinction between the engagements with nonhuman interiority and otherness that Rohman

⁶⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁷⁰ Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 1.

⁷¹ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 19.

describes in *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (2009). For Rohman, ‘we must insist [...] that these questions should not be invested in “returning” or “giving” language to the animal. Rather, as Derrida points out, it is necessary to dismantle the humanist relation to language by recognizing linguistic modalities outside the human’.⁷² Let us bear this in mind while we read Powys’s continuing argument:

Does a maggot in an apple visualise the Categorical Imperative? [...] The universe is rich and strange; and the imaginative reason of man is aware of many atavistic reversions to the sub-human life of the animal and vegetable worlds. And when it is a question of the ultimate secret of Life, it seems a sort of human megalomania to limit it to moral ideas that are peculiar to our species alone.

(DS, 17)

Certainly, we will see Powys’s challenging fictional representations of ‘linguistic modalities outside the human’ in both *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius*. The former, for example, renders ‘the language of trees’ as the ‘gibberish: *wuther-quotle-glug*’ (GR, 89); the latter sets a human character’s (in)capacity to interpret a river’s contours meaningfully against the sounds emanating from a course of water that ‘gurgled and sucked and oozed and rippled and sighed, just as it had done [...] thousands of years ago’ (P, 48). Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that Powys’s writing is to acknowledge the irreducible alterity of the nonhuman, animal mind, or of nonhuman materialities, as an ethical starting point that liberates its consciously and overtly fictive projections. As Carrie Rohman observes of D.H. Lawrence’s writing, ‘[his] portrait of the human who *cannot know* challenges the tenets of Western speciesism’.⁷³ Powys, too, is to challenge this notion, though he is to do so by oscillating between mystical observation, and imaginative transgression, of the epistemological limits offered by a ‘rich and strange’ universe.

This, too, is to become a conscious reclamation of ‘romance and sentiment’, of romance’s childish approach to storytelling strained through a curiously “charlatan”

⁷² Rohman, p. 17.

⁷³ Rohman, p. 26.

sensibility. We sense something of this in Powys's correspondence with Henry Miller, for instance, where Powys observes three tenets of his own fictional practice:

[W]hen in my writings I am really most myself and at my best I think it is in 3 ways—(1) by simple oratorical eloquence—(2) by the invention of exciting adventures—(3) by certain airy-humorous descriptions about children, half-wits, idiots, animals and even certain animistically observed and subhumanly recognised *INANIMATES!*⁷⁴

What Powys understands by 'simple oratorical eloquence' is to become increasingly apparent throughout our discussion, though here I want to reassure the reader that the rather portentous tone struck in *The Complex Vision* is not the end-point of Powys's eloquence. This acknowledged, we can see that Powys understands his fiction, here, as developing 'airy-humorous' forms of the 'frankly anthropomorphic and mythological' imagination that is developed in that text, incorporating 'animistically observed and subhumanly recognised' perspectives into his literary worlds. In a further letter, this time to Louis Wilkinson, Powys again observes a kind of literary 'play' at work in his writing:

I live by Books, and especially Books about exciting old old old old stories—history that is too old to be true. Above all, mythology—which contains a certain sort of fairy stories made into metaphysics and religion for me to play at! (LLW, 296).

The relationship between 'metaphysics and religion' and 'fairy stories' is, as this suggests, to become variously blurred in the fiction. The titular character in *Wolf Solent*, for instance, at one point encounters a 'small single leaf [that] lay on the pavement' and 'endow[s] it with nerves like his own', 'th[inking] of it as being separated from its companions and doomed to be trodden underfoot alone' (WS, 479). The 'anthropomorphic' consciousness of *The Complex Vision* is much more fancifully deployed, here: though Powys's critical irony is also manifested as the intensely self-conscious and moralising Solent opts to "save" the leaf by throwing it away from the

⁷⁴ John Cowper Powys, *Letters to Henry Miller* (London: The Village Press, 1975), p. 1.

path. The results are broadly comic, if also a further observation of a universe that fails to be organised according to human desires: ‘he had forgotten the east wind. That unsympathetic power caught up the leaf, and, whirling it high over Wolf’s head, flung it down on the rear of a butcher’s cart that was dashing by’ (WS, 480). As this suggests, Powys is not unaware of the striking divergences between an ‘unsympathetic’ cosmos and the sympathetic forms of imagination that his writing deploys. As his capitalisation of ‘INANIMATES’ in the letter to Miller suggests, there is often something calculatedly overblown at work in Powys’s literary strategies, which do not so much seek to ‘dismantle the humanist relation to language’ as extend and inflate it, often with results that are disruptive of their own representational function. Indeed, what Solent attempts, and fails, to reject as ‘Damn [...] superstition’, here, is in *A Glastonbury Romance* transformed into a fabular narrative perspective that will quite matter-of-factly report on ‘the language of trees’, describe the ‘twinge of egocentric mania’ afflicting an ‘infinitesimal, microscopic insect’, and report a striking meeting between a human louse and a wood louse as if it were an encounter between two human characters (GR, 89, 813, 705-706). The difficulty of accounting for these shifts in tone—from the portentously overblown language (not limited to the discursive writing) to the overtly ludic posturing that increasingly inflects the fiction—is one of the major obstacles that any reading of Powys’s writing must contend with.

In both instances, however, we might observe that Powys is seeking to question the human’s centrality, or at least to reflect, consciously, upon a pervasive anthropocentrism that inflects not only his culture, but also his writing and his language as it is received in the form of the novel and beyond. As John Simons writes of such overt uses of anthropomorphism:

It is not only characters that are transformed but also the very world of the text. As we shift from a fictive world entirely organised around human perspectives to one in which non-human perspectives also have their place, we also shift in our ability to account for literary language and the strategies through which it structures our perceptions by offering a representational matrix which is, potentially, at least complete in itself. The non-human presence in the text emphasises that same

presence's absence from the language that articulates the text.⁷⁵

In a late mythic fantasy such as *Atlantis* (1954), the lengthy opening chapter describing the sensations, feelings, and ideas of a stone pillar and a wooden club is creative, yet perhaps hardly disruptive in a novel that seeks to imagine Odysseus's final voyage to the fabled titular city (AT, 7-12). Where such fantastic manoeuvres produce the generic and tonal instability of the Wessex novels that Wiseman, after Powys's description of Balzac's fiction, describes as 'imaginative realism', however, such blatant anthropomorphism acquires this capacity to 'transform' the world of the text into one in which 'non-human perspectives also have their place', albeit uncomfortably. Yet it is often this discomfort that is productive, as we will see, in that it invites our awareness and interrogation of humanist language's (in)adequacy to these non-human perspectives.

What *The Complex Vision* throws into relief, in this sense, is an image of a vital, animised 'universe', less known than experienced, but ultimately 'rich and strange', surpassing the human's lingering expectations of stability and centrality. We will see something of this in *Wolf Solent*, albeit as it is sensed *through* that novel's central, human consciousness, in a moment. To close the chapter, however, we might note that Powys's pantheistic language is to be found resurfacing in *The Meaning of Culture*, too:

Any man or woman, thus worshipping the whole of Nature in a patch of entangled weeds, begins to grow vividly conscious that Nature is much more than a dimly-realized whole. Nature in fact begins to present herself as a vast congeries of separate living entities, some visible, some invisible, but all possessed of mind-stuff, all possessed of matter-stuff, and all blending mind and matter together in the basic mystery of being. (MC, 180)

As we will see, there is something akin to this 'basic mystery of being' diffused into Powys's consciously fictitious worlds. Here, however, we might note that Powys

⁷⁵ John Simons, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 171-172.

resists conceptualising ‘Nature’ as a ‘whole’ precisely because he wishes to (re)focus his readers’ attention on the individual life forms that are thusly entangled together in this ‘mystery’. As Jane Bennett argues, it might be ‘worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism’: ‘[a] touch of anthropomorphism [...] can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations’.⁷⁶ Hence, perhaps, Powys’s insistence that ‘what we really mean when we speak of the universe is not something static’, but instead ‘a congeries of these personally created worlds wherein animals and birds and fish and plants and insects all contribute to a fresh, vital element of change, as they carry the whole teeming caravanserai forward’ (MC, 189-190). There is a further post-Darwinian inflection to this observation, which conveys something of the ‘the inverted causality formulated by Darwin’, his ‘theory of natural selection, which removed intelligence (and by inference, a rational Creator) altogether as the source of life and put in its place innumerable, dispersed, trivial organic forces operating unconsciously and irrationally, [...] subject to chance, over time’, though we should note that Powys relies, here at least, on mystifying and poeticised figures rather than scientific observation.⁷⁷ The distinction will become harder to maintain in later chapters of this thesis, once we have seen the full breadth and range of Powys’s imaginative response to ‘Nature’ and the nonhuman. Here, however, the discursive writings throw into relief his writing’s trajectory towards a ‘great creative Nature’ (MC, 183) in which the human, and its imagination, is to be fundamentally implicated.

As we have seen, then, *The Meaning of Culture* is a text in which this animistic and pluralistic metaphysic most obviously produces a form of ‘Nature worship’, to recall Gifford’s dismissal of Powys, particularly where Powys instructs his reader to become ‘more than an aesthetic or artistic admirer’, but rather, a ‘lover’, of ‘Nature’

⁷⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 120; p. 99.

⁷⁷ Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst & Lawrence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 6-7.

(MC, 157). This, too, suggests a further contrast with a modernist contemporary: Lawrence, who in *Apocalypse* (1931) had railed precisely against his culture's 'petty little love of nature—Nature!!—compared to the ancient magnificent living with the cosmos' (AP, 76).⁷⁸ Powys's persistent attention to the human's experiential, cultural, and material—rather than merely 'aesthetic' or even 'artistic'—grounding in what he calls 'Nature' suggests how it is this 'love', however limiting, that grows into the more complex and insightful imaginative worlds of Powys's fictions, in which we will be taken further beyond the 'cult of heightened personal experience' described by Clark. To be sure, a cursory engagement with the discursive writings suggests how there might ultimately be something cultish in Powys's sense of culture. More productively, however, is to acknowledge the flashes of creativity and moments of insightful writing which suggest how Powys's elastic and imaginative approach to narrative order and scale, in the fiction, is not simply a form of propaganda for a 'philosophy of life', but rather an exploration of what John Crow, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, describes as 'the terms upon which our life has been offered to us' (GR, 358). Indeed, the language and discourses that Powys draws on, throughout *The Complex Vision* and *The Meaning of Culture*, are worthy of attention not least because they suggest how Powys's approach to narrative order and scale, in the fiction, is not only a means of gesturing towards the human's inescapable entanglement with non-human forces and forms, but also pertinent to any greening of modernism that seeks to ask how experimental literary devices might help to bring something of the more-than-human world into view.

⁷⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. by Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 76.

Chapter Two: Dramatising Rural Regeneration: *Wolf Solent*'s Modernist Romance

While the regional, rural novel has come in for something of a long overdue renaissance owing largely to a nascent greening of modernism, John Cowper Powys's 1929 work, *Wolf Solent*, has remained a marginal presence.¹ Raymond Williams's wholesale dismissal of Powys's 'country based fantasy' has, I think it is fair to suggest, a persistent critical heritage.² A rare mention of *Wolf Solent* in Matthew Hart's essay, 'Regionalism in English Fiction Between the Wars', for example, suggests that Powys's work might be exemplary of a 'counter-modern modernism, wherein excrescences like the empire and the city are only present in their radical absence'.³ To be fair, Hart is more attentive to the form and content of Powys's writing that Williams ever was, particularly in his observation—via Jed Esty—that *Wolf Solent* is 'illustrat[ive] [of the] logic' whereby 'an insular specificity (rather than imperial universality) of English spaces and customs becomes a promise of redemptive political or social agency'.⁴ However, we might still detect a reverberation of earlier dismissals in Hart's sense that Powys's mythopoetic writing, ultimately,

¹ As we have seen, Sam Wiseman's *The Reimagining of Place in English Modernism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2015) devotes a fascinating and informative chapter to Powys's Wessex novels; Fiona Becket's essay, 'James Joyce, Climate Change and the Threat to our "Natural Substance"', in *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce*, ed. by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), pp. 21-38, likewise makes productive reference to *Wolf Solent* and Powys's "'green" credentials' (p. 30). No mention of Powys is to be found, however, in essays such as J. Scott Bryson's 'Modernism and Ecological Criticism', in *Modernism*, ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, 2 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), I, pp. 591-604; nor in Anne Raine's synoptic overview, 'Ecocriticism and Modernism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 98-117. Powys is equally absent from full length studies such as Bonnie Kime Scott's *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's *Green Modernism: Nature in the English Novel, 1900-1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Joshua Schuster's *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015); and Kelly Sultbach's *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 258.

³ Matthew Hart, 'Regionalism in English fiction between the wars', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*, ed. by Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 89-101 (p. 96).

⁴ Hart, p. 96.

serves only to divide readers who are ‘either carried away by Powys’s mythopoetic imagination or forced to wonder, as Leonard Woolf suggests, whether his regional fantasia amounts to more than “sentimentalism, mysticism, and honest quackery”’.⁵

In this chapter, I want to suggest that this ‘regional fantasia’ does, indeed, amount to more than this, while noting that examples of all three of these indictments might nevertheless be found in a novel like *Wolf Solent*. Steering through the Scylla and Charybdis of readerly responses imagined—rather comfortably—by Hart, this chapter explores the particular contexts and priorities of the distinctive form of modernist romance developed in this novel, in an attempt to evidence the various ways in which *Wolf Solent* engages questions of modernity, culture, and the imagination, albeit through an idiosyncratic oscillation between the terms of fantasy and reality. As Jeffrey McCarthy has recently argued, the type of criticism that has ‘treated postwar nature as nostalgia for a Georgian past or as a way to forget war in an imagined green embrace’ is due for revision.⁶ Indeed, Sam Wiseman has recently demonstrated that Powys’s representations of place are not simply examples of a regressive anti-modernism, but fundamentally inflected by his own ‘peripatetic, cosmopolitan existence’:

Despite the intensely nostalgic affection for Dorset and Somerset that we find in [Powys’s] works, there is an ever-present recognition that our sense of place is always dreamlike, imaginative creation—the result of an active process—rather than some kind of authentic mode of belonging, passively absorbed from a chthonic essence.⁷

This sense of ‘imaginative creation’ is to prove crucial and, as critics such as Richard Maxwell, Andrew Radford, and Wiseman have argued, Powys’s major novels denote how ‘chthonic essence’ is itself a cultural and imaginative construction, albeit one that

⁵ Quoted in Hart, p. 97.

⁶ Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 195.

⁷ Sam Wiseman, *The Re-Imagining of Place in English Modernism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 43.

entangles human and nonhuman actants in a variety of processes and histories which his characters sense and recall with an ever-increasing wonder.⁸ Further, while we might still remain politically and critically sceptical of the way in which a novel like *Wolf Solent* might attempt, in Radford's words, to 'divulge the numinous in the rurally local',⁹ the novel's engagement with Dorset's rural culture and rural 'Nature', as we will see, speaks of the creative entanglement that should complicate dismissals of 'fantasy' or 'quackery', country-based or otherwise.

Powys's preface to the novel, written in 1960, offers a tantalising starting point, for there Powys 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' (WS, 11). Before we rush to confirm Powys as a modernist writer in the vein of Mary Butts, for instance, whose Dorset-based modernism constitutes, for one reader, 'a strain of racial mythologizing', we need to reflect upon the suggestive phrasing of "ink-blood" and the conscious framing of 'Nostalgia'.¹⁰ While *Wolf Solent* charts the story of its titular character—a thirty five year-old ex-history teacher, returning to his childhood home in Dorset—the self-narrative in which Wolf figures himself as a 'returned native-born' is decisively framed by what Powys described as 'that Henry James rule of "straining" the whole thing through one character's consciousness' (WS, 14; 38; A, 544). This novel subsequently gains a sustained and recognisably modernist traction as it plays a narrative coloured by Wolf's markedly *subjective* consciousness against the observations and recriminations of characters who are only encountered at second-hand.¹¹

⁸ See Richard Maxwell, 'The Lie of the Land, or, Plot and Autochthony in John Cowper Powys', in *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays*, ed. by Denis Lane (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), pp. 193-213.

⁹ Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 13-15.

¹⁰ Andrew Radford, *Mary Butts And British Neo-Romanticism: The Enchantment of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xiii.

¹¹ For Dorothy Richardson, the novel was noteworthy insofar as it 'ma[de] a break in the usually complete collaboration of reader with what is read'. See *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson*, ed. by Janet Fouli (London: Cecil Woolf, 2008), p. 23.

This “straining” consciousness has, of course, long been noted.¹² In this chapter, however, I want to identify the ways in which this ostensibly ironic, and recognisably modernist, form is cross-fertilised with modes of writing drawn from romance-inspired, and even popular, forms of rural writing. We should recall Powys’s protestations against “artistic” pretensions, here. To Dorothy Richardson, for example, he writes ‘I don’t think I value at the highest level the “work of art” type of book’ (LDR, 20). To his brother, Llewelyn: ‘I sympathise with the old ladies who say “life is so awful that I want something different when I read”’ (LL, II: 137). There is a consciousness at work here that will take us beyond mere emulation even as it precludes complete irony and, we have seen, Jerome McGann responds by transforming Powys’s novels into ‘staged performance[s] of the act of writing’.¹³ This is significant, however, as Powys’s use of romance has largely been understood in light of its mystical and spiritual portent, as Leonard Woolf’s dismissal might suggest. Chris Baldick’s reading of *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), for example, observes that ‘we risk “romanticizing” romance if we cast it as an underground movement of imaginative liberation for its own sake’, and argues that, instead,

[i]t is preferable to see [romance] as a parallel fictional realm in which the social complexities of realism are set aside the better to isolate (often literally, to place upon an island) certain moral or spiritual ideals and to put these to the test.¹⁴

As Katie Owens-Murphy has noted, however, there is also ‘an impulse in modernist narrative that revises romance conventions by blending them with the quotidian’.¹⁵ In *Wolf Solent*, in fact, Wolf’s own ‘moral or spiritual ideals’ are very often ‘put to the test’ precisely through Powys’s eye for social detail and hidden complexity: as Becket

¹² See, for instance, the essays collected in *John Cowper Powys’s Wolf Solent: Critical Studies*, ed. by Belinda Humfrey (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990).

¹³ Jerome McGann, “‘The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction’: Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys, and the Subjective Correlative”, *Modernism/Modernity*, 13:2 (2006), 309-323 (321).

¹⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, x: 1910-1940, The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 218.

¹⁵ Katie Owens-Murphy, ‘Modernism and the Persistence of Romance’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 34:4 (2011), 48-62 (48).

argues, the novel can be read, productively, as an ‘exploration of the relation of surface appearance to underlying truths’.¹⁶ This is to prove more than the ‘something different’ that Powys describes when he ventriloquises his imagined (and gendered) audience of ‘old ladies’, even if it might appropriate the tone and tenor of avowedly escapist fiction.

One such ‘surface appearance’ is, of course, Wolf’s sense that he is a returning ‘native-born’ to whom the countryside offers ‘some inexplicable prophetic greeting’, and in this Powys establishes his novel’s interest in exploring and dramatising a very particular—and discernibly modern—quest for origins (WS, 38). In one sense this quest is fundamentally pastoral: Wolf’s urbanite desires and anxieties are expanded upon and explored in a rural margin that offers the possibility of recuperation and regeneration. But Powys’s revisioning *of* this pastoral motif, through his conscious deployment of both irony and romance, is worthy of note. As Cheryl Hindrichs observes, modernist writing’s ‘multifarious and wide-ranging engagement with [...] landscape’ produces ‘characters’ [whose] interactions with pastoral, hybrid, and metropolitan landscapes frame central questions about identity in modernity’.¹⁷ This is very much the case in *Wolf Solent*, in which Solent’s regenerative possibilities of a regional, rural culture are entangled with the more overt, pastoral fantasies of a character who imagines himself as a ‘returned native-born’, passing from ‘the sphere of his mother’s energetic ambitions into the more relaxed world, rich and soft and vaporous as the airs that hung over [...] mossy ditches, that had been the native land of [his father]’ (WS, 18). As I will suggest later, this gendering of regional spaces is Wolf’s more than it is Powys’s; for now, however, the example indicates the intensely personal transformation of the Dorset countryside that Solent’s “straining” consciousness allows. This subjective and symbolic rendering of pastoral is at the heart of *Wolf Solent* and, as Owens-Murphy observes, the emphasis on narrative and subjectivity that we associate with modernist writing becomes productively disruptive

¹⁶ Fiona Becket, ‘James Joyce, Climate Change and the Threat to our “Natural Substance”’, in *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce*, ed. by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin (Cork: Cork UP, 2014), pp. 21-37 (p. 32).

¹⁷ Cheryl Hindrichs, “Falling out of a picture”: the Australian landscape in D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*’, *D. H. Lawrence Review*, 36:2 (2011), pp. 43-71 (p. 43).

when it is applied to romance, which ‘typically relies on sequence, climax and external adventure for effect’.¹⁸ What is described as Wolf’s ‘mythology’, as we will see, has ‘no outlet in any sort of action’, yet it speaks of a desire to connect, meaningfully, with the place and people he lives with (WS, 20).

The result is a distinctive form of regional, rural writing and, if this is to be acknowledged, then Powys’s invocation of romance’s ‘imaginative liberation’ needs to be more thoughtfully attended to. On the one hand, a novel like *Wolf Solent* finds Powys, as a letter to Richardson suggests, indulging in his own (aesthetic) pleasures: ‘in *Wolf* I undertook [...] to let myself go *to the limit* in my love of weird abnormal characters and in romantic sensuality - but in addition to this to [...] bring in many of my secretest resources of pleasure’ (LDR, 19). As I have suggested, however, in indulging in the ‘liberation’ afforded by romance—which Ian Duncan describes as ‘the essential principle of fiction: its *difference* from a record of “reality”, of “everyday life”’—Powys is not simply lapsing into literary escapism, nor ironically undercutting fantasy and storytelling.¹⁹ Another letter to Richardson suggests how a particular form of writing is at stake, as Powys expands upon his position as a writer residing in New York, but whose pen is nevertheless filled with the ‘ink-blood of his home’:

Ive [sic] lived over here for 25 years, lady, did you know that? For a quarter of a century. No one knows the *nuances* of America better than I do - none as well! But do you think I’ll write about it? Sideways I always must - for I must always see England like a day-dream, a brown study, an onanistic (forgive me!) ecstasy.

(LDR, 26)

Wolf’s perspective is one such device for presenting England ‘sideways’, of course, with Wiseman observing how the passage ‘reveals the imaginative license that Powys consciously applies in *Wolf Solent* and the other Wessex novels’: ‘his recreation of the landscapes of his childhood is also a ‘sideways’ projection of his impressions of the

¹⁸ Owens-Murphy, p. 51.

¹⁹ Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 2.

US'.²⁰ The important qualification to make regarding the novel's "straining" consciousness, I would suggest, is that romance and fantasy are not simply to be undermined, but to be expanded in a writing that substitutes what one critic describes as 'modernist critical and ironic sharpshooters' for a more ambivalently pleasurable self-indulgence.²¹

The early portions of this chapter, accordingly, detail Powys's own distinctive form of modernist romance, emphasising the ways in which Wolf's desire for rural belonging springs from particular modern contexts, which Powys uses to subject certain forms and discourses of pastoral and natural belonging to scrutiny. Indeed, as what is described repeatedly as Wolf's 'fancy' is located within a stylised, but intensely detailed, picture of rural community, the novel works to separate the chaff of Wolf's 'fancy' from the more substantial grain that is the cultural and communal forms of attachment discerned in this rural locale (WS, 68, 73, 101). Wolf's "straining" perspective becomes, in this figuring, not simply an ironic device, but a dramatisation of Wolf's various attempts to ground himself, attempts that will be subjected, variously, to scrutiny, rejection, and celebration.

Ultimately, this chapter turns increasingly to this latter mode, emphasising how the novel does not simply dismiss Wolf's desires for pastoral harmony and rural attachment, but uses them to proliferate a highly stylised form of writing in which the condition of wonder itself is instructive. As Owens-Murphy notes, 'the quest itself provides the very meaning and fulfilment' that modernist romance characters yearn for: 'romance is a powerful myth that is life-denying when couched in the past, yet life-affirming when reinvented for the present'.²² Developing out of this, as we will see, is another form of sensuousness, in which 'onanistic' indulgence gives way to the perceived pleasures of contact with, and awareness of, an 'earth' in which the human is fundamentally implicated, which Powys remarks upon, particularly, in the

²⁰ Sam Wiseman, 'John Cowper Powys: Modernist Peripheries and the Re-Imagining of Place', *The Powys Journal*, 25 (2015), 164-184 (171).

²¹ Judith Paltin, "'An Infected Carrier of the Past": Modernist Nature as the Ground of Anti-Realism', *ISLE*, 20:4 (2013), 778 (794).

²² Owens-Murphy, p. 54; p. 59.

Autobiography: ‘Human sensations are Nature’s self-expression. They are the earth’s awareness of herself. They are like the blossoming of flowers—the only way in which the rooted life of the organism can realize itself and *be* itself’ (A, 238). This is a decidedly green and largely rural ‘Nature’, as we will see. Nevertheless, such insights animate Powys’s mythopoetic writing, putting Wolf into forms of “contact” with an elliptical ‘spirit’ of Dorset that reclaims non-human forms of agency and action, emphasising natural history as the persistent and material ground in which the imagination, at both personal and cultural levels, might operate (WS, 328).

I: Psychological Pastoral

Powys’s letter to Richardson, in fact, offers a pertinent starting point. While the novel has often been read as a rather straightforward example of an anti-modern quest—‘Trading London for Dorset, Powys pits Wolf’s imaginative spiritual biography against the instrumental rationality of modernity’—the dramatisation of this is, I would suggest, more than an expression of the caustic reaction to the perceived ‘psychic vulgarity’ of urban living that we saw in *The Meaning of Culture* (MC, 124).²³ This is not to say that Powys is not concerned with ‘the instrumental rationality of modernity’, of course, but to reclaim the stylised framing in which *Wolf Solent* couches this theme:

But when people accuse me of being an aesthetic affected poseur because of my suppressed out-spurting ferocity of malice against radios movies autos sky-scrappers etc etc they lack the wit to see what a person who for the first 25 years (counting from 5 say) lived entirely in romantic books varied by shocks of misery & fear at school and mounting & receding (in alternation) waves of mysticism & sensuality, would inevitably feel in America - Just war á outrance - and this malice-dance of course (a sort of Indian war-dance against modernity) supplies I can tell you, O wise Miriam, a diabolically formidable sort of scoriac, lavaish [sic] jet-pump that spits & spits and rolls its smoke out and makes of lecturing aye! such a wicked pleasure. (LDR, 26)

²³ Hart, p. 96.

Such ‘wicked pleasure’ suggests the overstatement that is at work, the transformation—via ‘romantic books’—of scepticism regarding technological modernity into a form that oscillates between excessive conflict, *Attaque á outrance*, and ‘onanistic’ pleasure. Readers familiar with *Wolf Solent* will no doubt recognise the phrase ‘malice-dance’, for it is this same ‘malice-dance’, a ‘torrent of *wild, indecent* invectives upon every aspect of modern civilization’, that loses Wolf his position as a teacher of history ‘at a small institution in the city of London’ (WS, 14; emphasis added). As such ‘indecenty’ suggests, however the posturing of Powys’s lectures gives way, in the fictions, to developing ambivalence. We might recall Powys’s antipathy towards the advertisements of the ‘new York subway tunnel’, and particularly the urbanite figures who ‘[stare] helplessly at the[m]’, in *The Meaning of Culture* (MC, 26). For the second paragraph of *Wolf Solent* suggests how different cultures and spaces are to be more creatively mixed in this novel:

A bluebottle fly buzzed up and down above [Wolf’s] Head, every now and then settling on one of the coloured advertisements of seaside resorts—Weymouth, Swanage, Lulworth, and Poole—cleaning its front legs upon the masts of painted ships or upon the sands of impossibly cerulean waters.

(WS, 13)

The escape to the country that Powys imagines in *The Meaning of Culture*—where Powys instructs ‘city-dwellers [...] to hasten into the country at least once a week’ (MC, 149)—is already cautiously framed, here, as the ‘impossible’ promises of the advertisement and the ‘painted’ ships suggest. The rather light hearted comparison of Wolf with the fly—Solent’s ‘fellow traveller’ (WS, 21)—reveals how Wolf’s own escape from ‘every aspect of modern civilization’ (WS, 14) is comically doubled by an insect that, equally, seeks ‘some invisible atom of sustenance’ as it departs the train carriage with ‘indignant humming’ to venture ‘into the unfamiliar air-fields of Dorsetshire’ (WS, 21). As this suggests, Wolf is as much a tourist to this ‘unfamiliar’ region as he is a ‘return[ing] native-born’; accordingly, he brings with him the accompanying preconceptions of the urbanite for whom the English countryside offers pleasurable and pastoral retreat (WS, 38).

In this spirit, the travelling Solent indulges in ‘an orgy of concentrated thought’ that both recalls Powys’s ‘onanistic’ pleasures and introduces us to what Becket describes as Wolf’s ‘symbolic language’ (WS, 13).²⁴ It is in the terms of this imaginary, with its pastorally-inflected motif of escape and leisure, that the novel presents this ‘return’ journey: ‘somehow the outburst that had ended his scholastic career had released certain latent instincts in him which now turned, with a fling of rebellious satisfaction, to the wavering image of his sinister begetter’ (WS, 18). Powys locates this ‘rebellious’ streak, tellingly, in Wolf’s ‘mythology’, a ‘secret sensation in his own mind’, upon which depends his ‘profoundest personal pride—what might be called his dominant *life-illusion*’ (WS, 20).

At the start of the novel, this is couched in the dualistic, and reductive, moral terms that frame Wolf’s return to Dorset as a kind of romance-inspired quest, his ‘secret practice’ being ‘accompanied by an arrogant mental idea [...] that he was taking part in some occult cosmic struggle [...] between what he liked to think of as “good” and what he liked to think of as “evil”’ (WS, 20). The transformation of Powys’s own ‘wicked pleasure’ into a quest for escape and release is thus at the heart of *Wolf Solent*’s dramatisation of this return to ‘native’ pastures.

To some readers, this will appear wilfully idiosyncratic. However, as Katie Owens-Murphy notes, romance, in its traditional form, is often predicated upon ‘heroes with extraordinary capabilities’; it is Powys’s modernist qualification to have his hero, a thirty-five year old history teacher, characterised instead by a psychic ‘mythology’ that has ‘no outlet in any sort of action’ (WS, 20).²⁵ Solent harbours a ‘contempt that was actually *malicious* in its pride for all the human phenomena of worldly success’ (WS, 20), a point that frames his association of city and country with his mother and father, respectively:

In his childhood his mother had often rallied him about [his ‘sinking into his soul’] in her lighthearted way, and had applied to these trances, or these fits of absent-

²⁴ Becket, p. 31.

²⁵ Owens-Murphy, p. 49.

mindedness, an amusing but rather indecent nursery name. His father, on the other hand, had encouraged him in these moods, taking them gravely, and treating him, when under their spell, as if he were a sort of infant magician.

(WS, 19)

Rather than indicating Powys's desire to gender certain spaces, or even to associate the countryside uncritically with a more 'relaxed' and sympathetic way of life, then, these introductory observations serve to highlight the symbolic constellation that will produce Wolf's particular psychogeography.

This emphasis on Wolf's interpretation of his own journey indicates the novel's modern framing of romance; indeed, as Owens-Murphy notes, 'the broadening of narrative action to include interior modes of understanding [...] functions subversively in romance, which typically relies on sequence, climax, and external adventure for its effect'.²⁶ Put more bluntly, Wolf is telling himself a story, one that maps certain narratives and desires onto his physical journey from London to Ramsgard. The result is a novel written from Wolf's perspective, as Powys "strains" the people and landscape of rural Dorset through Wolf's urbanite imagination. The novel's opening sentence, for example, introduces the pastoral theme of departure from urban centre to rural periphery, and links this, implicitly, with Wolf's own interiority:

From Waterloo Station to the small country town of Ramsgard in Dorset is a journey of not more than three or four hours, but having by good luck found a compartment to himself, Wolf Solent was able to indulge in such an orgy of concentrated thought, that these three or four hours lengthened themselves out into something beyond all human measurement.

(WS, 13)

The shift from measurable to psychological time indicates Powys's sensitivity to modernist technique and standpoint. Here, I want to note the way in which this opening chapter takes a pastoral motif of rural escape and uses it to ground the novel's later exploration of rural community and landscape within a series of contexts

²⁶ Owens-Murphy, p. 51.

that are cultural, historical and, for Wolf, personal. As Wolf understands it, he is not only returning to ‘native’ pastures but ‘pass[ing] from the sphere of his mother’s energetic ambitions into the more relaxed world [...] that had been the native land of [his father,] the man in the Ramsgard cemetery’, so that his homecoming coincides with an escape from a discernibly urban modernity, a return to ‘native’ ground and restful belonging, albeit one which the novel’s subsequent exploration of Dorset will turn on its head (WS, 18).

If the pretext of Wolf’s journey is his acceptance of a ‘new post, as literary assistant to the Squire of King’s Barton’ (WS, 14), the desire for a more fulfilling life lived away from ‘modern civilization’—or at least from the disaffection that Wolf perceives in ‘the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners’—is the major psychological impetus, and one which aligns the novel with the range of intellectual and cultural commentary, from the 1920s and 1930s, that located the English countryside as a site of potential national and cultural regeneration (WS, 15).²⁷ It is in this vein that Wolf revels in ‘the sweet airs of an unusually relaxed March morning’, as they waft through his railway carriage window, carrying ‘fragrances of young green shoots, of wet muddy ditches, of hazel-copses full of damp moss, and of primroses on warm grassy hedge-banks’ (WS, 13). It is tempting to invoke the beginning of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), with its declaration of April’s cruelty, here; for certainly, Wolf’s continued stay in Dorset will reveal the anti-pastoral realities that cut against these images of a March morning’s bountiful regeneration and reveal his prejudicial sense of modern, *urban* culture as something of a pastoral

²⁷ We have already seen H. V. Morton’s argument that the English countryside offered a ‘common racial heritage’ to those who would seek it, in *In Search of England* (London: Methuen, 1927) published in the same year as *Wolf Solent* (p. viii). Stanley Baldwin, England’s Prime Minister at the time, had in a 1924 speech similarly claimed that ‘England is the country, and the country is England’, and, in terms recalling Powys’s list of supposedly poetical objects, linked ‘the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the cornrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone’ with ‘the very depths of our nature [...] These are the things that make England’. See Baldwin, *On England and other Addresses* (London: Philip Allan, 1926), pp. 6-7. For a discussion of the relationship between modernist writing of the early 1900’s and discourse concerning the English countryside, see McCarthy, particularly pp. 115-156.

hangover.²⁸ Powys does not, however, merely wish to ironise Wolf's desire for recuperative or regenerative experience. The novel's careful framing of Wolf's pastoral scheme is one way in which the more egregious and utopian myths of rural living—its social and familial stability, meaningful and often harmonious relationships with the land, leisure and ease—are explored and, in many cases, downgraded to the status of *partial* truths, but Powys, as we will see later, is certainly invested in the possibility that certain aspects of rural experience might provide a fruitful comparison to the worst excesses of his contemporary moment.

A series of important images which arise in *Wolf Solent's* opening chapter suggest how this might be the case. One central image is that of a man seen by Solent at Waterloo Station. For Wolf, this man's face becomes a synecdochal token of 'the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners'; its strategic re-appearance within Solent's symbolic narrative, throughout the novel, thus heralds his increasing awareness that country life by no means guarantees the carefree escape that he had anticipated (WS, 15). Wolf's recollection of the face, from the isolation of his train carriage, begins to indicate the novel's characteristic form of romance-inspired mythopoeia. So too, it indicates the novel's recasting of pastoral motif within its modern moment:

The inert despair upon the face that this figure had turned towards him came between him now and a hillside covered with budding beeches. The face was repeated many times among those great curving masses of emerald-clear foliage. It was an English face; and it was also a Chinese face, a Russian face, an Indian face. It had the variableness of that Protean wine of the priestess Babuc. It was just the face of a man, of a mortal man, against whom Providence had grown as malignant as a mad dog. Wolf knew at once that no conceivable social readjustments or ameliorative revolutions could ever atone for it - could ever make up for the fact that it *had* been as it had been!

(WS, 15)

²⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), pp. 53-78.

An image of specifically urban despair is projected outwards, here, and transformed into a universal malaise; as Becket suggests, ‘the faces of, respectively, imperialist, revolutionary, and subjugated human subjects share the bad destiny of a world exhausted of resistant, revolutionary potential’.²⁹ Certainly, *Wolf Solent* will glimpse something of this ‘resistant, revolutionary potential’ in later descriptions of rural rituals such as the Ramsgard horse-fair, in which Wolf is swept up in a ‘pushing, jostling, heterogeneous crowd’ that produces ‘magnetic currents of sympathy between the persons looking on and the persons showing off’ rather than, as imaged here, ‘inert despair’ (WS, 187-188). As McCarthy argues, those modernist writers participating in the ‘ramshackle cultural construction’ that is the 1920’s discourse of rural regeneration were not engaged in simple pastoral escapism; the rural elements of novels such as Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) and Ford Madox Ford’s *The Last Post* (1928) are, for McCarthy, ‘stitch[ed] directly to contemporary debates about England’s present and future’, so that the writing of ‘nature is not escapist pastoralism, but is instead engaged cultural conflict, redefining the naturalized order of the social formation’.³⁰ What I want to observe here, however, is that *Wolf Solent* leaves any rigorous or critical comparison of rural and urban life to the reader; its emphasis, instead, lies on proliferating this kind of imaginative vignette to produce a characteristic form of modernist romance.

This is not, in itself, thoughtless, nor is it calculated to delude, though considering Powys’s “charlatan” posturing, and the status of romance in the early twentieth century—Gillian Beer notes, for instance, ‘the lack of intellectual power which some later writers have held against the romance’—it is perhaps easy to see why critics such as Vernon Young were able to label Powys’s fictions as the products of an ‘Immense Inane’.³¹ As Becket observes, however, Solent’s ‘self-projection’ is couched upon ‘the dynamic recurrence of natural forms, and throughout the novel his experiences will be understood in terms of this symbolic language’.³² What the

²⁹ Becket, p. 32.

³⁰ McCarthy, p. 117; p. 121.

³¹ Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 15. Vernon Young, ‘The Immense Inane’, *The American Scholar*, 55:1 (1986), 248-258.

³² Becket, p. 31.

novel's use of, and framing of, romance thus invites is a very particular kind of readerly attention:

The narrator establishes [Wolf] as, variously, embedded in and at a remove from his world in ways which, strategically located at the start of this novel, force us to focus on the functions of aesthetic distance [...] in the context of a narrative which enacts the redemptive power of myth and nature.³³

The 'redemptive power of myth and nature', then, is at the heart of Solent's "quest", though the narrative's effect is not simply to celebrate an imagined power, but also to examine its various manifestations. While Wolf is busy contemplating the destitute face from the Waterloo steps, the image of despair that he "sees" repeated in a 'hillside covered with budding beeches' is in turn obscured by 'a powerful motor lorry [...] leaving a trail of dust behind it' (WS, 15). This gives Wolf's thoughts 'a new direction':

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 victimized, like a smooth-bellied, vivisected frog. He saw it scooped and gouged and scraped and harrowed. He saw it netted in a quivering entanglement of vibrations, heaving and shuddering under the weight of iron and stone. (WS, 15-16)

Wolf's response to this image draws on recognisable pastoral themes in an indication of his own anxieties: 'where, in such a vivisected frog's-belly of a world, would there be a place left for a person to think any single thought that was leisurely and easy?' (WS, 16). Yet the logic of the broader figure also indicates a shift, at the level of the

³³ Becket, p. 30.

novel, from pastoral as ‘a loose area of content’, as described by Terry Gifford—that is, ‘any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban’—to a writing of interconnected natures that instead begins to emphasise the physical (and imagined) effects of an instrumentally reductive modernity upon the living bodies of ‘English’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Russian’, ‘Indian’, and finally, non-human subjects alike.³⁴ Powys’s dramatisation of Wolf’s quest acquires, here, an ethical imperative, one that prevents us from too readily emphasising the merely ironic function of the novel’s framing of rural escape. For the monolithic ‘Apparition of Modern Invention’ is, as much as anything else, a symbol of the invasive and destructive power that Wolf *and* Powys associate with a reductively instrumental culture. It is against this, ultimately, that Powys is to develop forms of imaginative attention that will seek ‘the earth’s awareness of herself’ (A, 238).

The strength and totality of this anxiety is remarkable, but it is not unique amongst literature of the period. Compare, for example, the following passage, from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), in which Lawrence has Mellors reflect bitterly on a similar image of planetary destruction:

“[W]hen I feel the human world is doomed, has doomed itself by its own mingy beastliness—then I feel the colonies aren’t far enough. The moon wouldn’t be far enough, because even there you could look back and see the earth, dirty, beastly, unsavoury among all the stars: made foul by men. Then I feel I’ve swallowed gall, and it’s eating my inside out, and nowhere’s far enough away to get away. [...] [I]t’s a shame, what’s been done to people these last hundred years: men turned into nothing but labour-insects, and all their manhood taken away, and all their real life.³⁵

These planetary images exemplify a shared sense of instrumental rationality as a pernicious and pervasive force that extends beyond the meaningful division of country from city. Like Powys, Lawrence expresses a sense of anxiety and suffocation, of a modernity in which no amount of earthly or even extraplanetary

³⁴ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.

³⁵ D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, ed. by Michael Squires (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 220.

travel sufficiently distances the human from the perceived degradations of modern living, so that the pastoral motif of escape is itself transformed into a “vision” of stifling impossibility. For some critics, Powys’s emphasis on vivisection has appeared idiosyncratic; Lawrence’s emphasis on Tevershall’s pit workers, too, has been read as uncomfortably reductive in its transformation of working-class individuals to symbols of a modern malaise.³⁶ If specific prejudices against the mining industry or the laboratories of biological scientists are arguably reactionary or selective, however, their function as literary devices is to emphasise both authors’ sense that the worst excesses of modernity are manifested as a delimitation of cultural value along crudely economic or instrumentally reductive lines. Like Powys’s emphasis on the frog or the individual figure from the Waterloo steps, Mellors’s distaste for modernity is rooted in the observation that it is something ‘done to people’; and it is this sense, I take it, that Becket argues that ‘Powys, like Lawrence, develops the “metaphysical” novel out of an imperative to critique the deepest mores and prejudices of his historical moment’.³⁷ Modernity, in these novels, is not simply a “new”, or even singular, condition of being; it is, instead, a site of cultural and political struggle.

As Chris Baldick notes, however, *Wolf Solent*’s substance ‘lies in the hero’s prolonged bouts of brooding self-analysis, his mystical encounters with the landscape and vegetation of Dorset’; it might, accordingly, be placed amongst the ‘kind of romance [...] [that] typically adopts symbolic, allegorical, intuitive, and “mythic” methods of evocation and suggestion’.³⁸ Take, for example, another passage from the opening chapter:

³⁶ For Morag Shiach, for example, Connie’s overhearing of singing working-class children allows us ‘no access to what this sort of singing exercise might mean to these children, or to whether they might elsewhere do other sorts of singing. Rather, they are condemned to represent the corrosive effects of industrialisation on human intuition and creativity’. See Shiach, ‘Work and Selfhood in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, ed. by Anne Fernihough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 87-102 (p. 97).

³⁷ Becket, pp. 32-33.

³⁸ Baldick, p. 228.

As [Wolf] stared through the open window and watched each span of telegraph-wires sink slowly down till the next telegraph-post pulled them upwards with a jerk, he indulged in [...] the sensation of imagining himself to be a prehistoric giant who, with an effortless ease, ran along by the side of the train, leaping over hedges, ditches, lanes, and ponds, and easily rivalled, in natural-born silent speed, the noisy mechanism of all those pistons and cog-wheels!

He felt himself watching this other self, this leaping giant, with the positive satisfaction of a hooded snake, thrusting out a flickering forked tongue from coils that shimmered in the sun.

(WS, 16-17)

In comparison with the image of a ‘vivisected’ earth, we would be hard pushed to describe this moment as what McCarthy calls ‘engaged cultural conflict’. Nevertheless, these mythological transformations indicate Wolf’s desires for contact with a natural and ‘prehistoric’ power that might oppose a modern world of ‘noisy mechanism’. The emphasis on Wolf’s experience indicates the novel’s own prioritisation of subjective figure over philosophical or political critique. Rather than dismissing this, however, I want to suggest that acknowledging the productive tangents that a novel like *Wolf Solent* strikes across a more identifiably green modernism requires that we firstly distinguish between the metaphysical novel as Lawrence develops it—that is, as a form exemplary of a comparatively “high” philosophical modernism—and the form of modernist romance exemplified by *Wolf Solent*. Powys’s turn to ‘Providence’, in his figuring of the face on the Waterloo steps, for example, indicates his novel’s substitution of anger and sympathy for any rigorous analysis of the forces of social, economic, and cultural power that might permit and produce such injustices. Indeed, the figure of a ‘vivisected’ earth trades precisely on the consonance of “victimized” and “vivisected” in order to recast instrumental (de)valuation of human and nonhuman subjects as a powerfully felt, ethical affront. Observing this emphasis on affect, however, is not simply intended to highlight the comparative successes of a “major” modernist writer in relation to a “minor” contemporary, but instead to indicate *Wolf Solent*’s particular emphasis on Wolf’s (urbanite) hopes and desires, its transformation of these into a highly conscious and stylised form of writing. For it is through the careful framing of these subjective interpretations of landscape and rural community, rather than any rigorously critical

or analytical commentary upon an urban or instrumental modernity itself, that *Wolf Solent* establishes its exploration of various forms of regional and rural nostalgia. It is to this novel's development of modernist romance that we now turn.

II: Modernist Romance—an 'enchanted' country?

This discussion will take us quite far from the opening images of a 'vivisected' earth, which recede somewhat in the intervening chapters of *Wolf Solent*, even as they contextualise its exploration of rural life. It is my sense, however, that we need to acknowledge the playfulness and the imaginativeness of Powys's use of romance before we are to grapple with the mythopoetic forms of 'Nature' writing in which this image finds its continuing significance.

In the chapters that follow this psychologically-inflected "escape" from urban modernity, then, it is the relationship between a particular 'surface appearance' of an idyllic, rural community, grounded in harmonious relationships with the land and what Wolf perceives as 'Nature', and the anti-pastoral realities lingering beneath this surface, that occupies much of Powys's attention. Take, for example, an early moment, in which Wolf begins to reflect upon his journey to Dorset with a degree of disillusionment, contemplating that he might simply have been 'plunged [...] into another world of commonplace tedium, full of the same flat, conventional ambitions' that he associates with the city. (WS 38). Here it is necessary to quote, at length, a passage in which this thesis is rejected by means of an elliptical invocation of an 'enchanted [...] country':

It couldn't be so! It couldn't . . . It couldn't . . . with this enchanted springtime stirring in all these leaves and grasses

What a country this was!

To his right, as they drove along, the ground sloped upwards - cornfield after cornfield of young green shoots - to the great main ridge between Dorset and Somerset [...] To his left the Vale of Blackmore beckoned to him out of its meadows

- meadows that were full of faint grassy odours which carried a vague taste of river-mud in their savour because of the nearness of the banks of the Lunt. From Shaftesbury, on the north, to the isolated eminence of Melbury bub, to the south, that valley stretched away, whispering, so it seemed, some inexplicable prophetic greeting to its returned native-born. (WS, 38)

The invocation of local place-names, and the emphasis upon ‘young green shoots’ and ‘faint grassy odours’ is typical of the novel’s wistful invocation of rural landscapes, but the phrase, “so it seemed” is, I would suggest, crucial. For it is through oscillation between the two extreme poles of Wolf’s psychogeography—that of rural idyll and urban nightmare—that *Wolf Solent* works to winnow the chaff of Wolf’s ‘fancy’ from the more productive grain of rural regeneration that it later locates in Dorset’s cultural and material strata. Wolf’s anticipation and desire is emphasised precisely because his extended ‘plunge’ into this country provides Powys’s keener eye for social and natural detail with plenty of material to work with; and, as we will see, it is the shuttling back-and-forth between Wolf’s ‘symbolic language’ and the novel’s rather lively and stylised representation of these broader realities that permits and produces such exploration. The metaphors of surfaces, depths, and plunges—Wolf readies himself for his Dorset adventure, in an early moment, ‘as though he were tightening his muscles for a plunge into very treacherous waters’—are sustained throughout the novel, so that Dorset’s capacity to challenge the idyllic surface appearance associated with Wolf’s ‘enchanted’ landscape should not be overlooked (WS, 32-33).

Wolf’s arrival at the village of Blacksod, which is nestled, we might note, in a ‘richly-green valley’, offers a further example (WS, 67). Wolf is greeted by a ‘lively agglomeration of West-country trade’ in which a particular vision of local industry is established:

The town of Blacksod stands in the midst of a richly-green valley, at the point where the Dorsetshire Blackmore Vale, following the loamy banks of the River Lunt, carries its umbrageous fertility into the great Somersetshire plain. Blacksod is not only the centre of a large agricultural district, it is the energetic and bustling emporium of many small but enterprising factories. Cheeses are made here and also shoes.

Sausages are made here and also leather gloves. Iron-mongers, saddlers, shops dealing in every sort of farm-implement and farm-produce, abound in the streets of Blacksod side by side with haberdashers, grocers, fishmongers; and up and down its narrow pavements farmers and labourers jostle with factory-hands and burgesses.

(WS, 67-68)

This passage is characterised by a more descriptive narrative voice that suggests Powys's tentative investment in a rural England based upon this 'lively agglomeration' of economic and social intercourse set against the region's 'umbrageous fertility'. This is not the novel's final word on rural community or country living, as we will see; it does, however, establish the surface appearance of that rural life beneath which Wolf, and the reader, are to "plunge". Note the conscious use of language: Wolf's love for the 'quaint names of these little toy houses' suggests the reductive miniaturisation that is at work in this passage, just as the 'wretched sham-Gothic ornamentation' anticipates the novel's development of its own sham-gothic subplot, in which Wolf suspects his employer, Urquhart, of an erotically-motivated disturbance of his predecessor's grave (WS, 68-69). The figuring of Urquhart as 'a serious antagonist [...] who embodied a depth of actual evil', at least 'in that mysterious mythopoetic world in which [Wolf's] imagination insisted on moving', indicates Powys's more extravagant (and ultimately comic) uses of Wolf's romance-inspired consciousness (WS, 47). But here, the effects of Powys's method of 'strain[ing]' produce a comparatively benign image of gardens 'where daffodils nodded with a splendid negligence, as if ready in their royal largesse to do what they could for the patients[,] clerks and humble shop-assistants who had weeded the earth about their proud stems' (WS, 68).

Such sentimental and poeticised language marks the novel's move into forms of romantic figuring. Again, the reader becomes consciously aware that Wolf is involved in telling himself a story, so that the effects of aesthetic distance are once more recalled and scrutinised. Watching rural workers in a Dorset pub—'worthy men, with their work behind them, [who] seemed to have eluded by some secret pressure of their united force the splash and beat of nature's chaotic waves'—for instance, Wolf is struck by the sensation of 'his whole life gather[ing] itself together with lovely inevitableness, as if it were a well-composed story that he himself, long ago and time

out of mind, had actually composed' (WS, 343). As the description of 'nature's chaotic waves' suggests, there is something a little *too* orderly in Wolf's images of rural 'Nature', of a well 'weeded [...] earth' populated by 'splendid' daffodils; that Powys introduces this 'story' by noting that it involves the occlusion of '[e]verything disturbing and confusing', further alerts readers to the selectiveness of Wolf's vision and, indeed, to the aesthetic in which it is portrayed (WS, 343).

The opening chapter, again, alerts the reader to the fact that much of Wolf's story seems to be curiously composed in advance. Here, Solent's anxiety that the 'new reality' he is to find in Dorset might '[smash] up [his] whole secret life' prompts an elliptical stream of consciousness:

'But perhaps [this Dorset-based reality] won't be like a rock or stone . . . perhaps it won't be like a tank or a lorry or an aeroplane'.

He clasped his bony fingers tightly together. 'Some girl who'll let me make love to her . . . "white as a peeled willow-wand" . . . make love to her in the middle of a hazel wood . . . green moss . . . primroses . . . moschatel . . . whiteness'. He unclasped his fingers, and then clasped them again, this time with the left hand above the right hand. (WS, 21)

That the novel locates the 'reality' that will challenge Wolf's pastoral fantasy in the women with whom he pursues romantic relationships rather than in the hard matter of 'rock or stone' or the technological figures of 'lorry' and 'aeroplane', is suggestive, for it is the social and interpersonal realities of Dorset, above all, that refuse to accommodate the narrative structures that Wolf projects onto his returning journey. Equally important, however, is that Wolf is led into this clichéd field of images drawn from a decidedly rural 'Nature' ('hazel wood', 'green moss') on the back of his own (mis)quotation of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) (where '[i]n addition to a white frock, every woman and girl carried in her right hand a peeled willow wand').³⁹ The point reminds us that Wolf's story is also a form of misreading, a deferral to

³⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 38.

expectations—perhaps shared by the reader—which a close reading of Hardy’s fictions will hardly bear out.

This play with readerly expectation suggests something of Powysian humour. We might look no further than John Torp, Blacksod’s stonemason, to see how Powys comically dissolves a very particular form of nostalgia. As David Gervais observes, ‘hard manual work [...] becomes an intrinsic part of “Englishness” after Wordsworth’, in its role of ‘a community’s chief means of finding a cultural identity for itself’.⁴⁰ For George Sturt, another detailed chronicler of village life most famous, perhaps, for his appearance in F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson’s *Culture and Environment* (1933), the figure of the rural workman became a symbol of an ‘adaptation’ to ‘land and climate’ that was perceived to have largely vanished even by the time of *The Wheelwright’s Shop* (1923):

[M]en, unlettered, often taciturn, sure of themselves, muscular, not easily tired, [...] in a sort of way an epitome of the indomitable adaptation of our breed to land and climate. As a wild animal species to its habitat, so these workmen had fitted themselves to the local conditions of life and death.⁴¹

Metaphors of ‘adaptation’ and ‘habitats’ suggest the way in which rural community was often understood to be inherently, “natural”, or at least, more “natural” than the supposedly enervating conditions of the modern city. Yet, compare this ‘muscular’ ‘epitome’ of the rural ‘breed’ with Blacksod’s ‘monument maker’: a ‘plump, lethargic man, with a whimsical eye’, ‘obese’ and rising from the dinner table only ‘with an effort’ (WS, 72). The gentle comedy arising as Wolf reflects on the stonemason’s ‘lethargic’ process is characteristic of the novel’s undercutting of this particular form of ideology: ‘Wolf regarded the upright yellow slab, upon the top of which was a vigorous “Here lies,” and at the foot of which was an even more vigorous “John Torp,

⁴⁰ David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of “Englishness” in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 4.

⁴¹ George Sturt, *The Wheelwright’s Shop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 32.

Monument-Maker.” “You haven’t got very far, Mr. Torp,” he remarked drily’ (WS, 72). Vigorous self-promotion overtakes vigorous labour as the defining characteristic of Powys’s stonemason: as this suggests, Wolf has hardly left the ‘conventional ambitions’ that he associates with London behind.

Gifford notes the ‘appetite for rural poetry, non-fiction and novels around the turn of the century’, and indeed, it is characteristic of Powys’s ‘onanistic’ mode of writing to indulge this readerly and writerly ‘appetite’ for a language in which the ‘over-cluttered’ atmosphere of urban living gives way, however briefly, to nodding daffodils, even as it begins to frame this perspective within varying layers of irony.⁴² For Wolf, rural living is curiously detached from its means of production. Where Wolf ‘[imagines] himself as living in one of these [Blacksod houses]’—‘There would be nothing artistic or over-cluttered there, to prevent every delicate vibration of air and sky from reaching the skin of his very soul’—and ‘trie[s] to *fancy* what it would be like to sit at the bow-window of any one of these, drinking tea and eating bread and honey’, for example, we see how Wolf is positioned as consumer of his own fantasy (WS, 69). Indeed, Solent’s selective reading of these scenes is to allow Powys to reclaim linguistic and aesthetic forms that speak of ‘romance and sentiment’ in full consciousness (MC, 44).

The love affair with Gerda Torp, daughter of this lethargic stonemason, demonstrates Powys’s creativity with rural romance and narrative framing. When Wolf meets Gerda, Powys is careful to recall the terms of Wolf’s earlier fantasising: ‘Gerda certainly couldn’t be called a “peeled willow-wand”, for her limbs were rounded and voluptuous, just as her face had something of that lethargic sulkiness that is seen sometimes in ancient Greek sculpture’ (WS, 75). So too, he again emphasises the heightening effects of Wolf’s ‘fancy’, which arises as he muses upon Gerda’s beauty in the Three Peewits pub:

⁴² Gifford, p. 72.

He permitted his fancy to run riot with the loveliness of Gerda Torp. How remarkable that she had never once opened her lips! And yet in her silence she had compelled both the room and that yard to serve as mere frames to her personality. (WS, 73)

Later, Wolf will bitterly observe that ‘men of his type make their girls into anything’ (WS, 427), but here, this insight is still clouded by the haze of The Three Peewits’ ale. Powys uses Wolf’s wandering consciousness as the occasion for a romantically inflated prose, so that the transformation of Gerda into an *objet d’art* is effected through an appropriately florid prose describing a ‘beauty so overpowering, so absolute in its flawlessness’ and, suggestively, ‘beauty that [...] seemed to destroy in a moment all ordinary human relations’ (WS, 73; 70). Note the conscious heightening of Solent’s mood as he leaves the pub:

The country people seemed to be doing their shopping as if it were some special *fête*. Parsons, squires, farmers, villagers—all were receiving obsequious and yet quizzical welcome from the sly shopkeepers and their irresponsible assistants. The image of Gerda Torp moved with him as he drifted slowly through this animated scene. Her sweetness flowed through his senses and flowed out around him, heightening his interest in everything he looked at, making everything seem rich and mellow, as if it were seen through a diffused golden light, like that of the pictures of Claude Lorraine.

And all the while over the slate roofs the great grey clouds rushed upon their arbitrary way. His spirit, drunk with the sweetness of Gerda and the fumes of the Three Peewits’ ale, rose in exultation to follow those clouds. (WS, 74)

Wolf’s pastoral fantasy, as it pertains both to rural community and Gerda herself, is again sent up, but the irony is once more less than scathing, so that the objectifying and misogynistic tendencies of Wolf’s language are passed off as the ramblings of a doubly ‘drunk’ individual. Indeed, the careful attention to the humorous incongruence between Wolf’s elevated (and elevating) language, and the pub in which he sits, suggests the fond reworking that Powys substitutes for more scathing forms of irony: ‘Drugged and dazed with the Three Peewits’ ale and with these amorous contemplations, Wolf sat on beneath that picture of Queen Victoria in a species of erotic trance’ (WS, 74). Where Chris Baldick suggests that the novel’s ‘underlying

realist design is confirmed by its concluding note of disillusionment and resigned acceptance', it is with the caveat that 'the story is told in an often inflated romantic style and always from the hero's point of view'.⁴³ However, the 'inflated romantic style' that, for Baldick, is largely incidental is, at least in the novel's treatment of Wolf's love affairs, more intrinsically and confidently integrated with its framing of romance and its winnowing of Solent's preconceptions. Powys's invocation of Claude Lorraine, with its suggestion of the abstracting Claude glass, for example, further suggests the indulgence in a form of writing that is as distorting as it is heightening. In such moments, Powys is establishing his own version of rural fantasy through Wolf's "straining" consciousness, one that this novel will variously develop and complicate.

It does so, most markedly, in the chapter, 'Rounded with a Sleep'. The chapter details one of Wolf and Gerda's country excursions, and is structured around two major examples of Powys's mythopoetic writing: the first is a lengthy, and imagined dialogue between Wolf and the skull of his father, which we will come to in time; the second, an equally fantastic rumination upon Dorset's landscape that sees Wolf imagining that the sleeping Gerda is caught up in some 'legendary encounter [...] [with] the crafty super-human desire of some earth-god', manifested in the form of Poll's Camp Hill (WS, 326). As the scene unfolds, this 'queer dalliance' expands to incorporate not only his life, but his 'true-love', Christie Malakite (WS, 468). The result is a particularly stylised dramatisation of extramarital desire:

It was a queer dalliance of the mind that he indulged in just then; for he felt that this airy wraith, that was Christie Malakite, was in some way the child of that mystical plain down there, that "chessboard" of King Arthur; whereas the girl at his feet was in league with whatever more remote and more heathen powers had dominated this embattled hill.

(WS, 327)

The novel's love triangle recalls Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), as Terry Wright has noted: '[I]ike Jude, [Wolf] finds himself torn between two very different women, the delectable Gerda, "a very healthy young animal" associated with the smell of pigs,

⁴³ Baldick, p. 209.

who satisfies his physical needs, and the cerebral Christie, with her “delicate profile””.⁴⁴ This is perhaps to overlook the centrality of language here, however. For some readers, the symbolic and mythologising language in which the scene is couched might further evidence Powys’s wilful idiosyncrasy; but the way in which landscape, history, and character are incorporated into Wolf’s parsing of the Dorset landscape brings us back to this novel’s particular blend of modernist romance, which now draws upon the ‘mystical’ meaningfulness of Dorset’s terrain in order to transform the quotidian details of interpersonal relationships into mythic narrative.

The central insight of modernist writing that Carol Cantrell locates in ‘modern art[‘s] [...] attempt [...] to dramatize the involvement of perceiver within what is perceived’ is hereby refracted, albeit through a romance-inspired aesthetic.⁴⁵ The result is a shifting tone that can be both puckish and clumsy, a feature that makes reading and interpreting *Wolf Solent* difficult. The broadly comic end to the chapter, for example, which sees Wolf ‘sigh[ing] and pick[ing] up his hat and oak-stick’—“I must wake Gerda and be off,” he said to himself. “I shall be late as it is”—evidently allows the quotidian to deflate Wolf’s pretensions, but it is not that Powys is entirely unserious. An earlier moment in which Wolf lies in bed with Gerda, whom he has recently married, transforms the landscape into a more implicit, and even tragic, symbol of sexual and personal distance:

[Wolf thought] of the vast tracts of unknown country that every human consciousness includes in its scope. 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. [...] [W]hat those thoughts of [Gerda’s] had been, that he had interrupted by his return, he knew no better now than when first he had entered her room and had blown out her candle.

(WS, 291)

⁴⁴ Terry R. Wright, ‘Hardy’s Heirs: D. H. Lawrence and John Cowper Powys’, in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 465-478 (p. 474).

⁴⁵ Carol H. Cantrell, “‘The Locus of Compossibility’: Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place”, *ISLE*, 5:2 (1998), 25-40 (26).

The poetic conceit familiar from such poetry as Donne's 'To His Mistress Going to Bed', in which the lover's body is transformed into '[...] my America! My new-found-land / My kingdom, safest when with one man manned' (ll. 27-28), acquires an inverse, modernist charge.⁴⁶ For the metaphor now points to the 'far-extending continent' that is the other's consciousness, a land from which both Wolf and the reader remain debarred. Wolf's fantastic "vision" of his wife in league with the 'heathen' powers of Poll's Camp conceals a more quotidian observation; and, as Owens-Murphy observes, 'soured love replaces courtly love' in 'modernism's adaptation of romance [...] which necessarily incorporates elements of realism into its framework'.⁴⁷ The point is not simply the blend of mythic extravagance and quotidian observation, then, but the way that the novel works to ground Wolf's fantasies of rural courtship in a more realistic portrait of interpersonal friction. Indeed, where Wolf '[begins] to feel obscurely piqued by the girl's remoteness and inaccessibility'—remember that Gerda is *asleep*—his spiteful resolve to meet imagined slight with imagined slight reveals more quotidian grounds for their marital problems than those 'heathen' powers that Wolf imagines: 'If she draws away from me, I can draw away from her!' (WS, 326-327).

Before turning to the way in which this form of writing becomes engaged with the stratifications of Dorset's landscape and its traditional rural culture, I want to observe a further point about these shifts in mood and tenor. While Powys undoubtedly finds an 'onanistic' pleasure in many of these imaginative episodes, his reimagining of rural life does not entirely lose sight of the 'vivisected' earth with which it began. Note, for instance, a moment in which the region's slaughterhouse makes its sinister presence in this rural landscape felt as Wolf indulges in a country stroll with Selena Gault:

They walked side by side now, with such swinging steps that it was not long before they were beyond the houses and out into what was almost open country. [...]

'What's *that!*' he exclaimed, pointing to a ramshackle group of sheds that seemed fenced off from the road with some unnatural and sinister precaution.

⁴⁶ See John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1971).

⁴⁷ Owens-Murphy, p. 53.

(WS, 29)

Gault's reply—"it's the slaughter-house! You've only to take the shadiest, quietest road to find 'em in any town!"—further exemplifies this novel's attention to surfaces and depths, and to the shadier aspects of Dorset's 'open country'. These repeated turns to the slaughterhouse suggest how it is as central to the rural economy of these towns and villages as it is geographically peripheral to the settlements themselves (WS, 97, 615-616). The further we "plunge" into this world, the less its surface appearances beguile us with their images of 'natural' harmony between a town and its 'richly-green valley' (WS, 67).

Indeed, while the slaughterhouse, for Wolf, speaks of something 'unnatural', for Torp, it is merely an extension of those 'local conditions of life and death' described by Sturt, as becomes apparent when the question of animal welfare is raised, obliquely, as a commitment to fractious regional divisions rather than any recognition of non-human integrity: 'I warrant this meat were well fed and well killed, as you might say', Torp offers: "'Taint always so wi' they Darset farmers' (WS, 96). This ironic appeal to a shared language ('as you might say') further establishes the gulf between Solent's and Torp's rural worlds. It is not, however, that Wolf is simply a squeamish urbanite: Gault, born and bred in these pastures, has renounced her appetite for the consumption of flesh on similar ethical grounds: "'Damn it!" [Wolf] said to himself. "The woman's right"' (WS, 97). Wolf's imagination, in this regard, is to prove crucial:

'They're killing something in there,' he thought. And then, for the infinitesimal part of a second, there arose within him an awareness of blinding pain, followed by thick darkness smeared with out-rushing blood. As this sank away, there ensued a murky dizziness in his brain, accompanied by a shocking sense that both his father's skull and [Selena Gault's] arm were appealing him to do something that he lacked the courage to do. His legs had turned into immovable lead, as happens in nightmares.

(WS, 615)

As this suggests, Powys's 'country-based fantasy'—if this is what we decide to call it—falls in productive and disruptive places. The transformation of Wolf's legs into 'immovable lead' suggests how the gait of the story that Wolf tells himself on his

pleasurable, countryside walks is frequently arrested, replaced with the stuff of ‘nightmares’. That Wolf reflects upon the slaughter of non-human animals as an injustice in which he ‘[lacks] the courage’ to intervene, rather than as an expression of wider cultural or social prejudices, indicates the novel’s at-times blinkering commitment to Wolf’s anxious, moralising struggles. But beyond this, the attempt to increase awareness of the underbelly of rural life through an emphasis on the ‘blinding pain’ and ‘out-rushing blood’ of the non-human subject is suggestive of the way in which *Wolf Solent*’s use of fantasy and the imagination begins to revision received notions and narratives of rural England. We might recall Powys’s use of the image of a subjugated and ‘vivisected’ frog, here. For as Solent observes of Gault, who similarly ‘think[s] herself into the nerves of animals in slaughterhouses’: ‘the more people become *aware* of what goes on, the fewer living things will be tortured’ (WS, 480). The novel is not simply a nostalgic call to return to the past, as we will see momentarily, but an invitation to explore the hidden truths that might be concealed by the pleasant and alluring fantasies of rural regeneration.

III: Narrating Origins

This unrestrained—yet carefully framed—imaginativeness is to become crucial in this novel’s dramatising of Wolf’s ‘quest’ to rediscover his origins, to take up the mantle of a ‘returned native-born’ seeking satisfaction, spiritual and otherwise, in an ‘enchanted’ country (WS, 38). For Powys is to develop a mythopoeic form—what Hart describes as a ‘regional fantasia’—in which it is not only the imaginativeness of the writing, but the imaginativeness of his characters, as they seek to *create* meaningful narratives of belonging in excess of mere ‘fancy’, that is foregrounded. Wolf’s first action upon arriving in Dorset, tellingly, is to seek the grave of his father. Once there, Wolf is separated from the ‘up-turned skull of his begetter’, Powys reminds us, by the material of Dorset itself. These ‘few feet of Dorsetshire clay’ and the ‘half-inch of brittle West Country elm-wood’ are ‘like so much transparent glass’ as Wolf’s ‘imagination work[s] freely’:

He looked down into William Solent's empty eye-sockets, and the empty eye-sockets looked back at him. Steadily, patiently, indifferently they looked back; and between the head without a nose looking up and the head with so prominent a nose looking down there passed a sardonic wordless dialogue. 'So be it,' the son said to himself. 'I won't forget. Whether there are plantains [on the grave] or whether there aren't plantains, the universe shan't fool me.' 'Fool me; fool me,' echoed the fleshless skull from below. (WS, 30)

The novel's intense interest in surfaces and depths is linked explicitly, here, to Wolf's 'imagination', his commitment to memory and the work of establishing a narrative of structure, continuity, and inheritance in which both familial and rural forms of belonging can be explored. For McCarthy, 'the insight to grasp', insofar as 'localism and rural retreat' is concerned, 'is that local belonging is always culturally mediated and depends not on some natural blood relation but on rituals and cultural practices and particular political constellations', and this insight, as I want to suggest, is very much diffused through Powys's figuring of his theme of a returning 'native'.⁴⁸

As with the other examples of Wolf's 'fancy', however, these scenes demand an attentive reader. Wolf's "dialogue" with his father's imagined skull again emphasises the way in which his narrative of the 'returned native-born' is precisely that: a story, albeit one framed around the question of genealogical or even blood relations that are imagined to link him meaningfully to the region (WS, 38). Radford notes that in the work of Wessex writers such as Powys, 'inquiry into regional tradition' often 'manifest[s] [...] an undaunted quest for ghostly "conversations"; imaginative empathy animates the defunct and quickens the association between "then" and "now"'.⁴⁹ In this episode, Powys literalises these ghostly conversations, producing a consciously fantastic moment of writing that dramatises the impulses and the dangers inherent in the attempt to root oneself in the land. The imaginative license of the writing indicates the partiality of the imagination's 'animating' capacity, here: the echo-chamber provided by the skull of Wolf's 'sinister begetter' voices only the

⁴⁸ McCarthy, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁹ Radford, p. 9.

possibility of foolishness that might be courted in any attempt to establish a “dialogue” with an absent past (WS, 18).

The matter of familial belonging is fundamental to Wolf’s desire to connect with Dorset and the past, but, as Powys’s punning attention to the question of “descent” suggests, such ‘native’ belonging is not as straightforward as Wolf would like to imagine:

As it happened [Wolf’s] new post, as literary assistant to the Squire of King’s Barton, brought him to the very scene of these disturbing memories; for it was from a respectable position as History Master in Ramsgard School that his father had *descended*, by a series of mysterious *headlong plunges*, until he lay dead in the cemetery of that town, a byword of scandalous depravity.

(WS, 14; emphases added)

There are ‘disturbing memories’ as well as positive associations to Wolf’s supposedly ‘native’ character. Indeed, Wolf is returning to ‘the very region where the grand disaster of his mother’s life had occurred’ (WS, 15). Wolf’s attempt to reconstruct this narrative will be partial; like the reader, he will have to rely upon second-hand observations, so that Mr. Malakite’s suggestion that he and Wolf’s father were ‘intimate friends’ is to be held against Gault’s assertion that the ‘old man was one of the most evil influences in [Wolf’s] father’s life’ (WS, 204).

Wolf’s father’s infidelity is not the only ‘scandal’. Wolf discovers, too, that Mattie’s adopted daughter, Olwen, is ‘actually the incestuous child of old Malakite, the bookseller, and of some vanished sister of Christie’s’ (WS, 192). On the one hand, these ‘vanished’ individuals—including Christie’s mother, who now lies in Australia, ‘dead’, as Gault observes (WS, 201)—mark the gaps in the historical narrative from which ‘scandal’, gossip, and legend spring. It is not only Urquhart, producer of a scurrilous ‘Dorset chronicle’ (WS, 40) who has ‘*his* version’ of this ‘scandal’, as Gault notes, but ‘all the neighbourhood’: ‘it’s been the great scandal of the country’ (WS, 204). On the other hand, they point the reader towards manifestations of more pernicious social forces: Wolf’s mother, like Christie’s, has presumably fled from

Dorset to escape both her husband and the more negative aspects of familial association (WS, 15). Indeed, the history of Wolf's father gives the lie to Gerda's more straightforward narrative of social standing: "'Tisn't where a gentleman dies [...] that makes the difference. Tis where he's born' (WS, 165). From a certain perspective, Gerda is correct; but only once we acknowledge that familial belonging is just as likely to implicate Wolf, Mattie, or Olwen in scandalmongering and pernicious, country gossip as it is to root them meaningfully in the land. Where twentieth-century intellectuals such as I. A. Richards reflected upon the supposedly "organic" community, it was often in the light of a perceived degradation of vehicles of 'tradition' including 'the family and the community'.⁵⁰ Far from manifesting a similar anxiety, *Wolf Solent* instead explodes any comfortable, socially conservative myth of rural living by adding sexual, religious, and personal scandal to its West-country palette.

If *The Meaning of Culture* finds Powys compelled to instruct his readers to 'make a casual cult of enjoying Nature' (MC, 150), then we might note that 'Nature', in these examples, is as problematic a ground for belonging and identity as family. As Lord Carfax observes, the eclectic range of sexualities portrayed in *Wolf Solent* can all be understood as 'natural' forms of desire: 'I'm all in favour of honest bawdry myself [...] Natural or unnatural, its nature' (WS, 609). Even so, the reader is still minded to distinguish between the implied sexuality of Urquhart's 'harmless dotage' and the forms of abuse that are exemplified in the story of the Malakites (WS, 628). Much of the novel's emphasis, of course, is on Wolf's transformation of rural scandal—which, the novel implies, is an inescapable element of any human society—into the fantastic matter of his own romance. Hence his final, disillusioned recognition that 'to the very core of life, things were more involved, more complicated', than his romance-inspired morality of "good" and "evil" allows (WS, 631). Crucially, however, the inclusion of other voices is not only integral to this scourging of romance's reductive morality, but to Powys's sophisticated reading of these ostensibly traditional forms of inheritance.

⁵⁰ I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Routledge, 1929), p. 321.

When Wolf guiltily reads a section of Christie Malakite's own novel manuscript, entitled *Slate*, for example, Powys finds a further perspective on 'tradition':

“Shame? She felt nothing of the kind! Human tradition meant little to her. Sacred guilt. Forbidden thresholds. Just custom! Just old moss-covered milestones of custom! But the silence that followed when his footsteps died away? Drops; one, two, three, four . . . four drops. Drops of acid on the grooves of a waxed pattern. A girl's excited senses rousing desire in old age.

(WS, 485)

In its decoupling of her sister's (and possibly her own) sexual abuse from the 'shame' of 'custom' and 'tradition', Christie's narrative hints at a disturbing possibility: that the reason that Christie 'actually defended that abominable old wretch', when interviewed by Selena Gault, lies in her own 'desire', a willingness to transgress 'forbidden thresholds' that are sexual as well as grammatical (WS, 203). It is perhaps Christie, more than Wolf, who embodies Michael North's modern subject, who 'sees as mere convention what had hitherto been unnoticed and unquestioned contexts of meaning'.⁵¹ We have to remember, however, that *Slate* is a piece of fundamentally *imaginative* writing; to take its biological veracity as a given is, therefore, to risk conflating Christie's own (sexual) fantasy with reality, as does Wolf, whose sophistication as a reader we already have cause to doubt. In any case, the novel provides only a brief excerpt from Christie's manuscript, so that the difficulty—and, crucially, the inviting possibility—of producing a narrative from contingent and provisional evidence is foregrounded.

Christie's overt function as a literary device is thus to introduce modernistic difficulties into Wolf's narrative of country romance, as her indictment of such monologic fantasising suggests:

⁵¹ Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 182.

Her eyes flashed. ‘Everything that happens’, she cried passionately, ‘is only something to be fixed up in your own mind. Once you’ve got it arranged *there*, the whole thing’s settled . . . all is well. What you never seem to realize, for all your talk about “good” and “evil”, is that events are something outside any one person’s mind. *Nothing’s finished* . . . until you take in the feelings of everyone concerned!

(WS, 466)

Slate also briefly inverts the novel’s gendered perspective upon rural Dorset:

“To live so as to regret nothing!” It must have been a young man who said that. A man, anyway. Remorse as man’s prerogative! Nature. It was in Nature that girls hid themselves and covered their heads. Nature has no remorse. Nature has no “substance” behind her thought.

(WS, 486)

These short excerpts from Christie’s own “modernist” writing continue Powys’s essentialising association of femininity with ‘Nature’, but here, the effect is intended to cut against gendered ‘prerogative[s]’, to push back the imposed ‘shame’ of rural scandal through the imagined capacity of an amoral ‘Nature’ to dissolve pernicious cultural constructions. The idea that ‘Nature has no remorse’, no ‘substance’ behind its ‘thought’, its processes, is powerful: though Powys would not harness this fully or consistently until *Porius* (1951), as we will see later. Here, however, these brief but powerful sojourns outside of Wolf’s “straining” consciousness remind us of the necessity of separating Powys’s and Wolf’s voices, as well as the novel’s detailed and ambivalent exploration of ‘native’ belonging, its sense of the difficult and often abusive forms of relationship that arise from, and sometimes constitute, familial relationships to place and region.

As I have suggested, these shifts in tone and tenor—note, for example, how far the treatment of animal slaughter or the Malakites brings us from the more comic emphasis on Torp’s lethargy—are often puckish, and occasionally clumsy. However, they help us to locate, I think, the primary emphasis of a novel like *Wolf Solent*. It is not, that is, that this novel makes any direct critical or political intervention in the forces permitting the oppression and abuse that Powys isolates in his treatment of the Malakites; the pernicious gossip that surrounds non-heteronormative sexuality in this

rural community; or indeed, the treatment of non-human animals. Instead, *Wolf Solent* works towards the creation of a detailed (and largely sympathetically drawn) social *milieu* against which Wolf's (and the reader's) cruder hypocrisies and fancies concerning rural life can be thrown into relief, even as Powys's own writing works to reclaim the stylised and fanciful features of rural romance, of England seen 'sideways'. Indeed, it is hardly incidental that the workhouse in which the elder Solent died, when Wolf reaches it, is described as being 'rather less gloomy than such erections usually are, owing to the fact that some indulgent authority had permitted its façade to be overgrown with Virginia creeper' (WS 28). For it is through the establishment of such facades, coupled with suggestive allusion to what might lie beneath them, that *Wolf Solent* brings rural fantasy and rural reality into a productive and characteristic contingency.

To return to Urquhart's history of Dorset. The task is described to Wolf in terms of a new historiography, one that will set individual events against a 'continuous' backdrop of rural life:

"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 forever being made and forever being obliterated in the ebb and flow of events; and the chronicle of them should be continuous, not episodic".

(WS, 45; emphasis added)

This might as well be a commentary on Powys's own technique. Indeed, where much of *A Glastonbury Romance* will embody this narrative principle at a formal level, *Wolf Solent* instead sets its titular character within this 'ebb and flow' of 'human impression' and challenges Solent—and the reader—with parsing the "reality" behind Ramsgard and Blacksod's comfortable social façade.

We must note, in this respect, that Urquhart's emphasis is on *narrative* continuity, so that it is the 'chronicle' itself—established upon hypothetical terms ('as if it were possible...')—that is 'continuous'. For the point is not, I think, that *Wolf Solent*

attempts to locate any authentic or continuous narrative of ‘native’, and specifically English, belonging, but instead that it dramatises this idea of narrative, this desire to locate oneself and one’s identity. This is to be subjected, of course, to scrutiny. Take, for example, a moment in which Wolf alights on a “productive” mode of establishing this continuous ‘chronicle’:

[Wolf] had got on the track now of accounting for certain local cases of misbehaviour, on the grounds of libidinous customs reverting to very remote times. He was, in fact at this moment gathering all the material he could find about the famous Cerne Giant, whose phallic shamelessness seemed by no means confined to its harmless representation upon a chalk hill.

(WS, 292)

The attempt to account for public misdemeanours of ‘phallic shamelessness’ on the grounds of mythic ‘custom’ establishes a comic (mis)reading of James George Frazer and Jessie Weston, through which the bawdy incidents of local ‘misbehaviour’ (we might infer that this is indecent exposure) are imagined as expressing mythical essence. Urquhart, certainly, invests in the possibility that his book might have devilish powers: where Wolf objects, for example, that it is Urquhart’s name, but his own soul, between the pages of this salacious text, the Squire reacts with a ‘chuckling-fit’: ‘So you’ve got a soul, have you [...]? Or you had before it strayed into my book?’ (WS, 422). Such moments find Urquhart ‘idealiz[ing] his confounded peculiarities’, as Carfax describes it, perhaps (WS, 609). The point is how far Wolf has come, here, from Urquhart’s own desire for *facts*: ‘Order it as you please. My *facts*, my little *facts*, are the main thing—that future generations should have all the biting, pricking, itching, salty little facts about our “wold Dorset” that can be put together’ (WS, 422). The shift from the ‘facts’, or events, that Wolf finds in such works as the mysterious ‘Evershot Letters’, ‘privately printed and full of allusions to the Brambledown case’, to the method of ‘accounting’ for specific incidents on the basis of ancient custom, captures the novel’s awareness of the competing narratives and layers of ‘allusion’ through which any generation of ‘wold Dorset’ understands itself (WS, 63).

Much of this novel, indeed, is concerned with emphasising or blurring the distinction between these two ostensibly distinguishable categories of ‘little facts’ on the one hand and ‘order’, or narrative, on the other. Early on, for example, Wolf encounters a ‘grotesque little statue [...] representing the debonair ancestor of the Lovelaces whose name, though intimately associated with Ramsgard, had slipped into something legendary and remote’ (WS, 33). Like Wolf’s father or Christie’s sister, the Lovelaces have been transfigured into something ‘other’, acquiring a legendary “presence” that cannot readily be conflated with history or fact. This emphasis on what is lost or unavailable for historical recall is a necessary corrective to Wolf’s more flagrant abuses of narrative. The plantains that Selena Gault, the lover of Wolf’s deceased father, plucks from the elder Solent’s grave further dramatise the distorting transformation of historical event into cultural memory. ‘If she had come here regularly for all that time’, Wolf asks himself, ‘how could there be any plantains, or any clover, or any moss either, left upon his father’s grave?’ (WS, 30). Wolf’s question underestimates the ‘obliterating’ capacity of time and, indeed, ‘Nature’; unlike Urquhart’s instruction to write ‘*as if* it were possible to decipher [...] a palimpsest of successive strata’, it conflates persistence and memory with objective truth, passing over the effects of contingency and time upon narrative itself. The only surety in Powys’s rural community is the eventual absorption of any present into this overgrown and incompletely remembered past, as we sense when Wolf walks past the yard of Blacksod’s stonemason: ‘[i]t produced a queer impression, this crowd of anonymous tombstones, the owners and possessors whereof were even now cheerfully walking about the earth’ (WS, 69).

A further vision of rural continuity is established by means of a questionably overdrawn simile:

Long before he reached the outskirts of Ramsgard he was reminded of his approach to the famous West-country school by the various groups of straw-hatted boys—tall, reserved, disdainful—who seemed exploring, like young Norman invaders, these humble pasture-lands of the West Saxons. (WS, 127)

Again, it is semblance and fancy, more than any historical truth that establishes Wolf's sense of rural—even ancient—continuity. It is this facet of the novel, I think, that distinguishes it from a “merely” nostalgic invocation of rural England, precisely because its vision of rural England's stability is always subject to revision and qualification. The novel does not want to get back to an imagined past of traditional values now problematically degraded; it seeks, instead, to locate Wolf within an imagined and provisional Englishness that is palpably felt by Powys's characters, but which dissipates into ‘fancy’ and story as soon as any attempt is made to ground this in natural, or even historical, origins. This is a theme that we will see, particularly, in *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Porius*: the former of these novels, as Radford observes, foregrounds ‘a sense of “England” as a refuge for the errant, the unmoored, the nomadic and the heterogeneous; undercutting any desperate appeal to ethnic provenance, or collective “race memories”’; the latter, as we will see, unpacks the violent history of an island in order to foreground how, as one character observes, all of Britain's peoples are, from a certain perspective, invaders: ‘we *all* came here in the beginning like these Saeson—all foreigners and invaders, every tribe of us!’ (P, 331).⁵²

IV: ‘a queer and quite special sense of romance’

We have seen, up to this point, how Powys frames and contextualises his characters' ‘fancy’ so that narratives of tradition, belonging, and inheritance are subject to scrutiny and qualification. It is important to emphasise, however, that this is not the only reason why *Wolf Solent* embarks upon a modernist revisioning of rural romance. Even while Wolf and Urquhart's “plunges” into an imaginative form of historiography are framed as contingent and interpretive acts, Powys represents the imagination's attempt to “root” itself in the landscape as potentially beneficial in its own right. As Wiseman observes, Powys is ‘not inclined towards an essentialism of place, or the need for a counter-myth of rootedness’; yet myth, and the imagination,

⁵² Radford, p. 86.

recognised as precisely that, will prove crucial in this novel.⁵³ Just over the page from the comparison of West-country schoolboys with Norman invaders, in fact, we find a suggestive description of a ‘queer and quite special sense of romance’ in which a much more fleeting sense of relationship with a landscape’s history is dramatised:

[Wolf] had never approached any town, however insignificant [...] without experiencing a queer and quite special sense of romance. Was it that there was aroused in him some subtle memory of all the intangible sensations that his ancestors had felt, each one of them in his day, as, with so much of the unknown before them, they approached or left, in their West-country wandering, any of these historic places? Did, in fact, some floating ‘emanation’ of human regrets and human hopes hover inevitably about such marginal tracts - redolent of so many welcomes and so many farewells? (WS, 128)

The point is not the excavation of any reliable origin or ground for the English subject, but instead, the sense of wonder that Powys associates with this ‘queer and quite special sense of romance’ itself. If, as Owens-Murphy suggests, ‘the quest itself provides the very meaning and fulfilment’ that romance characters seek, then *Wolf Solent*, I would suggest, grasps something of this insight.⁵⁴ For its dramatisation of Wolf’s ‘fancy’ is not simply a scourging of mystery and wonder, but instead an emphasis of their imaginative contingency. That no positive answer to these rhetorical questions can reliably be given is precisely the point: as Radford observes of Powys’s treatment of Stonehenge in *A Glastonbury Romance*, what matters is curiosity itself, the ‘notion that “curiosity” itself boasts a numinous, transformative potency’.⁵⁵

Consider, for example, Wolf and Gerda’s first trip to Poll’s Camp:

‘Has *this* got any name?’ he remarked, as they clambered up the turfy slope of the grassy rampart.

‘Poll’s Camp,’ she answered. And then, after a pause:

⁵³ Wiseman, p. 45.

⁵⁴ Owens-Murphy, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Radford, p. 89.

‘When Poll his rain-cap has got on
They’ll get their drink at Dunderton!’

She repeated this in the peculiar sing-song drawl of a children’s game.

There was something in her intonation that struck Wolf as queerly touching. It didn’t harmonize with her ladylike attire. It suggested the simple finery of a thousand West-country fairs.

‘Poll-Poll-Poll,’ he repeated. And there came over him a deep wonder about the origin of this laborious piece of human toil. Were they Celts or Romans who actually, with their blunt, primitive spades, had changed the face of this hill? Was this silent, beautiful girl beside him the descendent of some Ionian soldier who had come in the train of the legionaries?

(WS, 99-100)

That Gerda does not entirely ‘harmonize’ with ‘her ladylike attire’ reminds us again that Wolf is a visitor as much as a ‘native’, and that his image of Dorset and its inhabitants is to be increasingly challenged (WS, 38). Indeed, it is Gerda who provides him with the language and knowledge upon which his later mythologising of woman and hill will draw, and upon whose ‘competent geographical skill [...] to guide him, over hedge and over ditch’, he relies (WS, 111). Wolf’s ‘deep wonder about the origin’ of the name of these ‘turf-covered earth-works’ however, persists beyond this ironic framing; moreover, it begins to point us towards the constellation of material and cultural fragments through which Wolf’s ‘quite special sense of romance’ is established and proliferated. The repetition of ‘Poll’ suggests how central language is to be, here, as a medium permitting the kind of ghostly conversations described by Radford, yet equally threatening to dissolve, at any moment, into the foolish echoing that reverberated from the elder Solent’s skull.

If we return to Wolf and Gerda’s picnic atop Poll’s Camp—which, we might recall, expands into the ‘fantastic dalliance’ by which Wolf imagines Gerda in ‘heathen’ union with the hill, and Christie as being ‘in some way the child of that mystical plain down there’—we can see how this plays out. Where Wolf attempts to analyse ‘the difference between the hill [...] and the landscape stretched out before him’ in what

the narrative suggests might be ‘a more rational manner’, we might note that his attempt to “read” Dorset’s palimpsest is also an attempt to justify his mythologising of Gerda and Christie:

‘It must be,’ he thought, ‘that this mass of earth is a far older portion of the planet’s surface than the plain beneath it. Even if it’s [sic] magnetism is purely chemical and free from anything that reverts to the old religions, it may very well exercise a definite effect upon human nerves! The plain must, within measurable years, have been covered by the sea. Where those elm-trees now grow there must have been shells and sand and swaying seaweeds and great sea-sponges and voyaging shoals of fish. And this recent emerging from the ocean cannot but have given a certain chastened quality, like the quality of old medieval pictures, to these “chessboard fields”’. (WS, 327)

The ‘chastened quality’ that Wolf discerns in the plain is clearly still inflected by the ‘platonic idea [...] of the mystery of all young girls’ that he associates with Christie (WS, 237), just as the ‘contact between the heathen soil and [the] sleeping figure [of Gerda]’ (WS, 326) repeats the ‘voluptuous thrill [...] full of honest and natural desire’ that Wolf feels in the presence of his wife: hence the consciousness of aesthetic distance, as the landscape acquires the ‘quality of old medieval pictures’ (WS, 237). We have seen the results of this already. What I want to note here, however, is the way in which this ‘fancy’ dramatises the desire to narrativise the historical layers peeled back by Powys’s writing. Like Urquhart with his ‘chronicle’, Wolf is engaged in an imaginative attempt to bring order and meaning to ‘a palimpsest of successive strata’; the result, once more, is to invite the reader to scrutinise the story that Wolf projects onto this ‘recent emerg[ence]’ of terrestrial Dorset from the sea. That Wolf compares the terrain to ‘old medieval pictures’ is to the point: like his earlier turn to those paintings of Claude Lorraine, we are immersed in an act of creation, Wolf’s own ‘sideways’ vision of the Dorset landscape.

The historical and material integrity of the landscape is simultaneously foregrounded, however. A terrestrial Dorset that has ‘recent[ly] emerg[ed] from the ocean’ suggests the contingency of Wolf’s “straining” consciousness, its attempt to project its own

meanings onto natural and anthropological histories. Powys's interest in parsing these stratifications manifests his participation in a broader modernist project; as René Dickinson has observed, for example, a text like Woolf's *Between the Acts* similarly represents rural landscape in a manner that reveals 'not a linear progression from point A to point B but a spatial field of both A and B'.⁵⁶ It also indicates a further debt to Hardy, whose writing, as Gillian Beer argues, preoccupies itself with 'the problem of finding a scale for the human [...], a scale that will be neither unrealistically grandiose, nor debilitatingly reductive'.⁵⁷ However, where Hardy's focus is often on the tragic incongruence between human desires and need and 'a sense that the laws of life are themselves flawed', Powys here emphasises, and indeed celebrates, his titular character's 'wonder' at these awe-inducing scales and forces.⁵⁸

As Wolf ponders upon 'the serfs of Arthur, or of Merlin the magician' from atop Poll's Camp, for example, and asks whether they had 'lean[t] here upon their spades and let their souls sink down and down, into motions of primal matter older than any gods?', he is conjuring a historical narrative that frames the human as a contingent and ephemeral participant in a 'primal' materiality that encompasses and enfolds it. There is a spectre of *The Meaning of Culture*'s 'non-human' and 'non-historical' landscapes with their 'chemic-cosmogonic' forces, (MC, 50) here, though in *Wolf Solent*, these challenging geological timescales are largely humanised, made homely, even, by Wolf's desire to recall languages ('Poll') and stories that reassert this 'historical' shape:

The earthworks of Poll's Camp were not as deeply dug or as loftily raised as many Roman-British ramparts in that portion of the West Country. They were less of a landmark than Cadbury Camp, for instance, away to the north-west. They were less imposing than Maiden Castle, away to the south. But such as they were, Wolf knew that the mysterious movements of King Arthur . . . *rex quondam rexque futurus* . . .

⁵⁶ René Dickinson, 'Writing the Land: *Between the Acts* as Ecocritical Text', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 81 (2012), 16-18 (16).

⁵⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 233.

⁵⁸ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, p. 222.

had more than once crossed and recrossed, in local legend, this promontory of grassy ridges. (WS, 323)

Dorset is presented as another kind of palimpsest, here, foregrounding the land's 'crossed and recrossed' entanglement in 'local legend'. The qualification of 'Roman-British' further underscores the novel's interest in the shifting and varied composition of British or English identity, which Wiseman describes as a form of 'temporal cosmopolitanism', a sense of 'diverse cultures intermingled within the palimpsest of the English landscape'.⁵⁹ We will revisit this in discussion of Powys's later novels. Here, the emphasis is instead on a cultural mapping of the landscape that has taken place both horizontally ('away to the north-west [...] away to the south') and vertically 'deeply dug [...] loftily raised', through both time and space. This is another means of "staging" what Radford describes as 'narratives of attachment between recent and remote', and we should note that its effect is to foreground the cultural relationships that produce 'landmarks' from the land itself as they manifest in the stories and legends that prompt Wolf's own persistent wonder.

It is here that the novel's interest in *culture*, and more particularly, in culture as a form of human meaningfulness that becomes intimately entangled with the land, comes to the fore. For critics such as Patrick Wright, these forms of interest constitute a particular form of regional nostalgia:

[N]ames—of villages, plants, landmarks, birds, stones, and the accoutrements of rural life [...] aren't used to describe a world so much as anxiously conjure one up. Things are *invoked* into being through a process of naming which is enacted in a deliberate and conscious assertion of itself. [...] It is as if the answer to urban modernity was for everyone to learn the names of the plants and places again.⁶⁰

It is easy to be dismissive of this 'deliberate and conscious' process when it is set as an imagined 'answer' to the perceived mores of 'urban modernity'. However, as

⁵⁹ See Wiseman, pp. 8-10.

⁶⁰ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 109-110.

McCarthy argues, we need to acknowledge ‘the shortcomings of terms like “sense of place” or “local” while at the same time insisting that these categories remain crucial for understanding modernist authors’ complex cultural negotiations of English identity after the war’.⁶¹ To write about the cultural stratifications of a unique region like Dorset does not necessarily equate to an argument that modernity’s issues can be solved through an appeal to localism; instead, it might be more productive to inquire after ‘work [that] rural nostalgia is doing in 1920s Britain’, and to ask what is at stake in the attention to rural culture itself.⁶²

Indeed, McCarthy’s insistence that ‘local belonging is always culturally mediated’ is recalled, here, and in passages from Powys’s discursive writing which further contextualise his interest in the ‘poetical’: ‘poetry hovers over everything that has been a background to human life [...] long enough for a certain organic identification to have grown up between the diurnal uses of our race and this or that fragment of material substance’ (MC, 50). These landscapes are humanised, and palpably so, yet these cultural and linguistic fragments with ‘poetical’ associations speak not of a disposable earth, but of a materiality in which the human is to find its own, local significances. The “growth” of culture is likened to ‘organic’ processes in Powys’s figuring, but the result is not intended to “naturalise” local belonging as much as it is to insist on the ‘Nature’ in which culture grounds itself (recall, for instance, Powys’s sense of culture as ‘a universal thing, a breaking down of the barriers of race, of class, of nation’) (MC, 4). It is in this spirit that *A Glastonbury Romance*, for example, describes the ‘curious Celtic syllables’ that ‘still cling’ to the ‘outlying farms and hamlets’ of the region, ‘syllables full of old mythological associations’ (GR, 1065). In *Wolf Solent*, similarly, Wolf and Christie will bond over their shared love of ‘philosophical phrases’, which is couched in terms that foreground language as shared cultural matter, freighted with a ‘weight of history’ that provides a particular ‘thrill’: ‘I think we’re thrilled by the weight of history that lies behind each one of these phrases’, Wolf suggests: ‘it isn’t just the word itself, or just its immediate meaning.

⁶¹ McCarthy, p. 30.

⁶² McCarthy, p. 195.

It's a long, trailing margin of human sensations, life by life, century by century' (WS, 354; emphasis added).

Powys would likely have approved of I.A. Richards' description of the 'spirituality' of language in *Practical Criticism* (1929), published in the same year as *Wolf Solent*, for Richards, too, sees language as constituting a 'link with the past': 'from the beginning civilization has been dependent upon speech, for words are our chief link with the past and with one another and the channel of our spiritual inheritance'.⁶³ What is important in Powys's turn to this theme, however, is the framing of human culture within its larger, material contexts, and the resultant sense of culture as a historically contingent materiality in its own right. As *The Meaning of Culture* further suggests, this is understood as but 'half' of a 'possible reality':

[T]hose who know anything of human nature know that it is by means of the condensation of mental images around some particular pivotal point that new life is given to things. Such a pivotal point is a name. A bird, a flower, a star, while it is unnamed, is for the human mind endowed with only half of its possible reality.

(MC, 162-163)

Powys's Wessex novels' interest in relationships between language, place, and culture grows out of such insights. From this perspective, for example, Wolf's 'deep wonder about the origins of [that] laborious piece of human toil', Poll's Camp, can also be read as an engagement with the entanglement of human and natural histories presented by Dorset's strata. This is the impulse that runs counter to Wolf's more pernicious and deluding 'fancy' for, as Powys frames it, human culture is a necessarily creative endeavour, producing attachment and meaningful connection at a level that is fundamentally imaginative. This, too, is a form of 'fancy', though it is one that Powys is much less inclined to ironise.

⁶³ Richards, pp. 320-321.

V: Wonder and the Non-human

Wiseman suggests that Powys's 'ritualistic use of names' acquires an 'anchor[ing]' effect, which works to ground his imaginative and atmospheric writing in a 'fictional-historical world (closely linked to Hardy's Wessex)'.⁶⁴ We might note that, where *A Glastonbury Romance* is focused on the open-ended and 'interminable' proliferation of such a 'fictional-historical' world, *Wolf Solent*'s subjective "straining" remains focused on the capacity for individual 'wonder' and attachment. This is established, as we have seen, through a 'quite special sense of romance', one that indicates Powys's sense that culture is capable of bridging past and present not because it offers any reliable ground for claims to native origin, but because it is a persistent phenomenon in its own right. When Wolf looks out across Poll's Camp and wonders '[h]ow many men [...] since the black cormorants and foolish guillemots screamed around these escarpments, have stood still, as I am doing now, and wrestled with the secret of this promontory?', he is linking his own mythologising of plain and hill with an impulse that is imagined as both quintessentially human and clearly gendered ('[h]ow many men...') (WS, 327). Yet, in an extension of the creative paradox that we discussed in this thesis's introduction, this manoeuvre is also to become a mark of imaginative engagement with a non-human vitality and integrity that comprises the other 'half' of reality.

With this in mind, we might return to the moment in which Wolf crests Poll's Camp, imagining its curves as manifestations of a sensuousness with which Gerda is to become associated. Even there, however, as Wolf's mind transforms Dorset's material strata into symbols for his own anxiety, he senses an agency that lies beyond human articulation:

Even if the old gods never existed, there's a power here that in some queer way . . . perhaps just chemically . . . is at once bewildering and hostile to me. [...]

⁶⁴ Wiseman, p. 10.

‘The spirit of this hill escapes me,’ he thought. ‘I have an inkling that it is even now watching me with definite malignity. But I can’t understand the nature of what it threatens. There are powers here . . . though, by God! they may be only chemical. But what is chemical? . . .’

(WS, 328)

Wolf Solent’s framing certainly subjects this hill’s ‘malignity’ to irony and humour, as we have seen. As this ‘heathen’ malignance dissipates into the chapter’s comparably quotidian closing observation—‘I shall be late as it is!’—however, what remains is this novel’s palpable sense of the land’s longevity and vitality, the multiple forms of identification, ‘chemical’ or otherwise, entangling human subject in both real and imagined histories. The ‘atmospheric’ innovations of Powysian fiction described by Wiseman are exemplified, here, as Solent senses an agency or ‘power’ that refuses to accommodate itself precisely to the figuring of his imagination.⁶⁵ Indeed, the elliptical invocation of the ‘chemical’ is crucial: for what remains as Wolf momentarily suspends his more interpretive mythologising is an open-ended emphasis on a fundamentally material agency that the novel will ultimately refuse to dissect.

Instead, *Wolf Solent* pursues this through the anthropomorphic terms of Wolf’s ‘normal attitude to life’:

It was a worship of all the separate, mysterious, living souls he approached, “souls” of grass, trees, animals, birds, fish; “souls” of planetary bodies and of the bodies of men and women; the “souls” even, of all manner of inanimate little things; the “souls” of all those strange, chemical groupings that give a living identity to houses, towns, places, countrysides...

(WS, 54; Powys’s ellipsis)

This turn to the ‘chemical groupings’ and ‘living identity’ surrounding ‘houses, towns, places, countrysides’ indicates the curious potency of *place*, which will be expanded upon in *A Glastonbury Romance*, a novel that seeks to present something of ‘a life [...] of a particular spot upon the earth’s surface’ (AR, 7). In both cases, however, Powys’s anthropomorphism is important: as the quotation marks around

⁶⁵ Wiseman, p. 9.

“souls” suggest, what is at stake is a language in which to capture the potency and affectivity of the region’s ‘living identity’. In *Wolf Solent*, this theme is expanded and explored through Wolf’s ‘habitual mysticism’, a form of wonder, and indeed, ‘worship’, animated by sensations of ‘chemical groupings’ in which the human and non-human forms are entangled.

It is in this spirit that Wolf’s thoughts are taken with ‘the importance of material objects—their mystical importance’, and turned towards a ‘terrestrial magnetism’ that outlasts and encloses any of the ‘strange new cult[s]’ or ‘sacred’ significances that Wolf imagines the land bore for its past inhabitants, those ‘Roman legionaries’ that once inhabited its contours (WS, 327). It is here, too, that Powys turns back to the fantastic and magical elements of myth and romance, in the search for a form of writing that might acknowledge, but not capture, an elliptical ‘life’ or ‘Spirit’ of Dorset. Wolf’s ‘long[ing] to fly across [the plains] in some impossible non-human shape’ indicates a more fanciful example, though the desire to transgress beyond the limits of human perspective (and language) is, we might note, rather explicitly linked with the power of storytelling itself (WS, 323). This is evident in Wolf’s response to Mattie’s adopted daughter, Olwen, who has ‘demanded a story’:

‘At the very moment,’ he began, ‘when we were all waiting for the cab to come, you and I saw an enormous swallow . . . the ancestor of all swallows . . . as big as a golden eagle, hovering close to the window.’ Olwen twisted her head round at this, in order to see the window.

‘Without a moment’s hesitation,’ he went on, ‘we opened the window together and got on the bird’s back.’

‘Leaving everyone, Wolf?’

‘Certainly. Leaving everyone! This great swallow carried us then over Poll’s Camp and over the Gwent Lanes toward Cadbury Camp. It let us get down off its back at Cadbury Camp . . . which really is Camelot . . . and you and I drank at Arthur’s Well there; and the effect of drinking the water was to turn us both into swallows, or into some strange birds like swallows. [...] And a lovely wind, blowing over the dark rain that is held in the hollows of old trees, ruffled our feathers; and we knew, being birds, the language of the wind; and it said to us: “The cuckoo flowers

have come out down by the Lunt!” And it said to us: “If you stop chattering, you silly birds, and listen, you will hear the earth murmuring to itself as it sweeps forward through space”’. (WS 583-584)

The fabular quality of Wolf’s tale indicates its ultimately moral designs, its desire to involve Olwen not only in the history of ‘local legend’ but in a form of quiet attention to an earth which is not vivisected, but instead ‘murmuring to itself as it sweeps forward through space’. As we have seen, Powys’s writing in *The Meaning of Culture* ultimately works towards a certain conception of *writing*, instructing its readers that ‘the best way to make the reading of books really valuable’ is to ‘[d]iscount shamelessly and unblushingly a writer’s ethical propaganda and concentrate your attention upon what he reveals to you of the life-motions of the earth’ (MC, 192). Here, in Wolf’s mythic story, it is this desire to connect imaginatively, even ethically, that is, crucially, emphasised. The story is, as far as *Wolf Solent*’s plot is concerned, peripheral, but its suggestiveness regarding the animistic and transformative powers that Powys associates most positively with storytelling is important, not least because it recalls that model of ‘awareness’ discussed in the *Autobiography*, whereby specifically *human* sensations become ‘the earth’s awareness of herself [...] the only way in which the rooted life of the organism can realize itself and *be* itself’ (A, 238). In these mythic forms, the human finds its ‘roots’ not in any essentialism of place, but in the materiality (‘organism’) of the earth itself.

The binaristic opposition that sets this mythic impulse against the ratiocinative forms of knowledge embodied in the ‘vivisected’ earth is, of course, historically (not to mention epistemologically) reductive. However, the point that should capture our attention, is the framing of storytelling and culture as a means of attending to, and grounding oneself within, a broader natural world that has agency and vitality in its own right, and not the relative paucity of the critical or philosophical scheme in which this is suspended. It is this desire that animates other examples of Wolf’s roving imagination. Take Wolf’s musing by the side of the River Lunt, for example:

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

unity could be achieved; for between the actual water before him now, into which he could thrust his hand, and the water of that tiny streamlet among the mid-Dorset hills from which it sprang, there was no spatial gap. The one flowed continuously into the other. They were as completely united as the head and tail of a snake! The more he stared at the Lunt the more he liked the Lunt. He liked its infinite variety; the extraordinary number of its curves and hollows and shelving lodges and pools and currents; the extraordinary variety of organic patterns in the roots and twigs and branches and land-plants and water-plants which diversified its course.

(WS, 109)

This attempt to ‘win’ a ‘coherent personality’ for the Lunt offers an attempt at mapping Dorset’s horizontal materiality, as opposed to its imaginative depths.⁶⁶ Powys’s writing is sensitive not only to Dorset’s cultural and historical stratifications, as we have seen, but to the natural forms that define the region. Again, as an ‘answer’ to urban modernity, the passage is limited, but as an example of writing we might note the way in which the somewhat anthropomorphic turn to ‘personality’—like the ‘spirit’ of Poll’s Camp Hill—invests in place or region as the basis for an ethical and cultural attempt to recognise, and connect with, other forms of vitality.

This is not quite a straightforward projection of human value onto rural ‘Natures’, since awareness of the ‘earth’ as an animised entity functions as a metaphor, a story. Where Wolf locates ‘the voice of [Dorset’s] green pastures’ within a strain of blackbird song, for instance, we might do well to recall the ‘inexplicable prophetic greeting’ that greeted both Wolf and reader on their arrival to Dorset:

‘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 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’.

(WS, 113)

⁶⁶ This is a sensibility that finds expression, decades later, in Alice Oswald’s book-length poem, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

It is, in fact, Gerda's whistling that Wolf reflects upon here, so that the human's capacity to locate 'the voice' of a region is hardly uncritically accepted. While Wolf has, earlier, mistaken her song for that of a real blackbird, he has by now already discerned its true source so that the equation of this whistling with the country's 'voice' is, at the very least, suspect. Gerda's song ostensibly makes the 'voice of [...] green pastures' audible, and the perspective of 'non-human powers achievable', but where Wolf moves beyond the terms of imagination and mystery into a less self-conscious mythologising, the reader is alerted to the 'sideways' vision that is the result. Indeed, the scene is structured around Wolf's pursuit of a fleeing Gerda, and turns on Powys's reduction of Wolf's resolve not to chase her *too* seriously—'She'll better enjoy being caught if she has had a good race'—into a rather comic misreading of both his and her agency (WS, 101).

For the reader, this further indicates the limits of the 'charmed circle of the individual's private consciousness' in which Wolf is always partially suspended (WS, 20). The result, as Becket suggests, is to refocus the reader's attention on the function of aesthetic distance, so that the desire to escape human perspective through the empathetic and creative powers of story and myth is expanded under qualification.⁶⁷ Like the other components of Wolf's quest for stable origins, the 'voice' of these 'green pastures' remains an alluring fantasy, one that is used to proliferate certain forms of writing that teeter between 'onanistic' self-indulgence and the pleasurable sensations of the 'earth [...] herself'. A moment in which Wolf is arrested by his own contemplation of a 'deserted lane', 'charged with a secret life of its own', serves as an example:

The hedges sheltered him from the wind. The spirit of the earth called out to him from the green shoots beneath his feet. Faint bird-notes kept sounding from unseen places. The cold sky prevented them from completing their songs; but the stoicism of life in those feathered hearts refused to be silenced.

His consciousness, as he stood there, seemed to stretch out to all the reborn life in the countryside. 'Good is stronger than Evil,' he thought, 'if you take it on its simplest

⁶⁷ Becket, p. 30.

terms and set yourself to forget the horror! It's mad to refuse to be happy because there's a poison in the world that bites into every nerve[?] [...]

His mind returned to the scene about him. 'What a world it is, a little overgrown path, especially in the spring, when it isn't choked up!' He tried to imagine what such a place must be to the rabbits, fieldmice, hedehogs, slow-worms, who doubtless inhabited it. 'Very much what Lenty Pond is to its frogs and minnows!' And then his mind, from visualizing those remote back-water worlds, turned once more to Redfern.

(WS, 506)

Wolf's musing upon good and evil and the turn to the 'reborn life in the countryside' suggests again how pervasive and often stifling his 'charmed circle' of consciousness might be. As with the elliptical 'chemistry' of Poll's Camp, however, the shift in the writing is from Wolf's own interpretation—where the birds are transformed into emblems of a vital 'stoicism' that recalls him to his own pleasure—to an attempt to 'visualize' a vitality that lies beyond it. Mystical and pastoral sentiments are invoked once more, though the prose ultimately works through these in order to foreground a very particular form of 'wonder', in which human observation and interpretation again meets with its own contingent and perspectival limitations. Much of the novel's mysticism is related to this desire to get beyond the terms of an explicitly *human* perspective, and in this example, particularly, the effect is to foreground the integrity of 'remote', non-human beings and 'worlds' existing alongside a comparatively human sense of this 'place'.

It is in light of these moments, I take it, that Powys's readers have been prompted to conflate Powys and Wolf's voices. For some, this is more of a sticking point than for others: Denis Lane, for instance, comments favourably on the way in which 'Wolf is endowed with Powys's acute sensitivity to natural sights'; Hart reacts with more discernible puzzlement to the way in which 'Wolf spends much of the novel philosophizing upon things like the unity between his "primitive life-feeling" and pollarded elms'.⁶⁸ But perhaps the focus on 'philosophizing' is itself suggestive, for as with Wolf's 'worship', here, the novel's emphasis is on the *pleasure* of immersion in 'those strange, chemical groupings that give a living identity to houses, towns, places,

⁶⁸ Denis Lane (ed.), 'The Elemental Image in *Wolf Solent*', in *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), pp. 55-70 (p. 68); Hart, p. 96.

countrysides', rather than on their philosophical or rational veracity. This is not to suggest that they are merely delusions: like the 'spirit of the earth itself' that Wolf hears in Dorset's rural nature, or the magnetic 'spirit' that he discerns atop Poll's Camp, the effect is to foreground the elliptical possibilities of Dorset's chemical and organic vitality, rather than to banish these components of 'living identity' to the realms of irrationality.

It is this insight, I would suggest, that ultimately revivifies the recognisably 'green' forms of 'Nature' with which the novel is often concerned:

It seemed to Wolf, as they [Solent and Gerda] plodded along side by side through that muddy lane, that the light-green buds of those aged willow-trunks were framed in a more appropriate setting under that cold forlorn sky than any sunshine could give to them. Later seasons would warm them and cherish them. November rains would turn them yellow and bring them down into the mud.

But [...] no other sky would be cold enough and motionless enough to actually *listen* to the rising of the green sap within them, in that infinitesimal flowing, flowing, flowing, that for non-human ears must have made strange, low gurglings and susurrations all day long.

At last they came to the bank of the River Lunt.

(WS, 106-107)

There are obvious turns in this passage to pastoral and to a Romantic foregrounding of organic 'Nature'. These 'flowing' and 'gurgling' susurrations of trees and sap are captured more strikingly and directly in *A Glastonbury Romance*, which reports a more direct translation of an ash tree's 'vegetative comment', in a language that 'would only have sounded in human ears like the gibberish: *wuther-quotle-glug*' (GR, 89). Where the fabular texture of the latter novel is overtly and self-consciously anthropomorphic, passages like this from *Wolf Solent* might be felt to lean too heavily on the kind of 'romance and sentiment' that Powys discussed in *The Meaning of Culture*. However, in both cases, the excesses of an outmoded, or even outlandish, form of writing are turned towards the vitality of Dorset's arboreal forms in an attempt to attune to the frequency of 'non-human ears', to inhabit a perspective that must remain beyond the human's knowledge.

This stops short, I would suggest, of ‘[the] kind of feigning of environmental consciousness that is so reverent toward nature that it risks setting it up as an “other” that only has meaning in terms of how it reveals humanity’s failings’ insofar as these ‘remote back-water worlds’ ultimately evade Woolf’s knowing.⁶⁹ Of course, we can acknowledge the risks that such writing runs while noting what is at stake: a form of rural romance in which ostensibly outmoded forms of writing are to be brought into creative constellation with modernist insights into the joy of subjective awareness. Take, for example, the way in which the Lunt becomes, for Woolf, a site of spiritual attachment to a discernibly organic ‘Nature’:

Woolf felt his soul invaded by that peculiar kind of melancholy which emanates, at the end of a spring day, from all the elements of earth and water. It is a sadness unlike all others, and has perhaps some mysterious connection with the swift, sudden recognition, by myriads and myriads of growing things, of the strange fatality that pursues all earthly life, whether clothed in flesh or clothed in vegetable fibre. [...] [I]t does not attain its most significant meaning until the pressure of the spring adds to these elemental wraiths the intense wistfulness of young new life.

(WS, 106)

This is an example of the kind of nature mysticism for which Powys is most (in)famous. The sentimental and somewhat moralising tone of the passage exemplifies the ‘romantic sensuality’ that Powys discussed with Richardson, as melancholia for shared organicism locates human and nonhuman, animal and ‘vegetable’, in a cyclical and seasonal form of continuity. If mythic cycles of vegetative regeneration fail in modernism’s canonical, urban forms, such as Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where ‘April is the cruellest month’, then the scenery of Dorset instead provides Solent with a recuperative experience that borders on religiosity, grounding the divine, quite literally, in the rural landscape and its natural forms (l. 1).

We might also recall the novel’s highly conscious use of magic and mysticism, as ever, framed in the terms of Woolf’s mythology. An extended episode based upon

⁶⁹ Kelly Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 5.

Wolf's symbolic language suggests how this functions. Here, Wolf is again standing beside the Lunt:

Between himself and that blue patch [of sky] there stretched now the great trunk of a bending willow, covered, as if by a liquid green mist, with its countless newly-budded twigs. The trunk seemed attracted down to the waters of the Lunt; and the waters of the Lunt seemed to rise a little, as they flowed on, in reciprocal attraction. And through the green buds of this bending trunk the patch of blue looked closer than ever. It was not any opening highway, not any ethereal road, as he had imagined at first. It was actually a pool of unfathomable blue water; a pool in space! As he looked at it now, those green willow-buds became the living moss around its edge; and a great yellowish fragment of sky that leaned towards it became a tawny-skinned centaur, who, bending down his human head from his animal body, quenched his thirst in its purity. A yellow man-beast drinking draughts of blue-water! (WS, 152)

The example is once more idiosyncratic and over-written, but I think we can recognise this *and* do better than suggesting that 'the reader is either carried away by Powys's mythopoetic imagination or forced to wonder, as Leonard Woolf suggests, whether his regional fantasia amounts to more than "sentimentalism, mysticism, and honest quackery"'.⁷⁰ Woolf's indictment of "mysticism" is not, of course, too far from the mark; as Baldick notes, romance writing of the 1920s can often be identified by the way that it 'irradiates its action with occult significance'.⁷¹ However, rather than dismissing this as 'country-based fantasy', with Raymond Williams, we might note that these mystical and mythopoetic figures also function as particularly stylised expressions of a modern consciousness for whom the question of a relationship with 'earthly life' and the non-human, more broadly, has acquired ethical, as well as personal, urgency.

In this context, it can be noted, example, how the imagery again turns towards the body of the earth itself:

⁷⁰ Quoted in Hart, p. 97.

⁷¹ Baldick, p. 228.

The brown earth was that tawny-skinned centaur; and the reason the world was all so green about him was because all living souls—the souls of grass-blades and tree-roots and river-reeds—shared, after their kind, in the drinking up of that blue immensity by the great mouth of clay! (WS, 152)

The earlier, nightmarish image of a ‘vivisected’ earth is replaced with Wolf’s ‘heavenly’ fantasy, as the invasive forms of ‘iron-clad motors like colossal beetles’ are substituted with the more mythic figure that is the centaur’s ‘man-beast’ figure, with its ‘human head’ and ‘animal body’. This, too, is a form of fantasy, a kind of organicist Rorschach test in which ‘living moss’ and ‘newly budded twigs’ frame Dorset’s landscape in an attempt to emphasise a vitalist logic that might be opposed to the instrumentality of the vivisectionist’s laboratory. As a historical or philosophical thesis, of course, the novel’s turn away from a ‘vivisected’ earth and towards these natural forms as they share in drinking ‘draughts of blue-water’ is reactionary and limited: so too, it is hard to resolve the shifts in tone and tenor between this use of the imagination and the more comic irony that attends to Wolf’s equally distorted ‘fancy’. The distinction between Powys’s writing and that of a metaphysical novelist such as, say, Lawrence, again comes into play: what matters in the novel is not so much the philosophical trajectory, but the tug and pull between nightmare and dream, subject and landscape, by which the ambivalent pleasure of imagining the vitality and integrity of perspectives other than the human might be thrown into relief. Like the desire to ground oneself genealogically or historically in the region of Dorset, this is a potent and pleasurable form of nostalgia, couched in Powys’s characteristically excessive, romance-inspired prose. But it also returns us to the question of curiosity and attention, and to the ‘numinous potency’ that, for Powys, is unleashed precisely as the human subject begins to ‘wonder’ about the historical and spatial composition of place.

Somewhere between the stories that Wolf tells himself, and the story that he tells to Olwen, lies the novel’s investment in the powers of imagination, storytelling, and myth as fundamentally human characteristics. This is exemplified in a passage in which Wolf and his companion, the Reverend Valley, look in on the figure of a solitary woman as she reads by candlelight:

[...] both men stood for a time looking at that unconscious reader. [...] The woman's face had nothing remarkable about it. The book she read was obviously, from its shape and appearance, a cheap story; but as Wolf stared in upon her, sitting there in that commonplace room at midnight, an indescribable sense of the drama of human life passed through him. For leagues and leagues in every direction the great pastoral fields lay quiet in their muffled dew-drenched aloofness. But there, by those two pointed flames, one isolated consciousness kept up the old familiar interest, in love, in birth, in death, all the turbulent chances of mortal events. That simple, pallid, spectacled head became for him at that moment a little island of warm human awareness in the midst of the vast non-human night.

(WS, 181)

The writing, here, is a far cry from the forms of irony which we might readily associate with more cosmopolitan and urban forms of modernism, so that the prose is operating to eulogise a form of 'warm human awareness' rather than undercut Wolf's nostalgia (how difficult it is, for example, to imagine Wolf being stirred by a similarly 'warm' sense of the human were this figure to be found reading by *electric* light). The novel's conscious, but not always scathing or critical, attention to a decidedly popular form of regional romance is again suggested, not only by Wolf's vision of 'pastoral' fields, but by the 'cheap story' that this figure reads. But the framing of this reading figure is equally important. The 'aloofness' of these fields and the darkness of this 'vast non-human night' constitute an anthropomorphised vision of those natural forces that, in Powys's writing, encompass and enclose the human, both locally and historically. What is discerned, here, is not any native origin or natural, blood relation, but instead a further, evocative image of continuity as an inherently *narrative*, and fundamentally *human*, characteristic, made from stories—'cheap' ones at that—which ground the human within a persisting and expansive natural history.

If Wolf's narrative of a returning *native* is subjected to scrutiny, then, the novel is nevertheless more sympathetic of the desire to connect, meaningfully, with Dorset's landscape and community. *Wolf Solent*, accordingly, oscillates between a playful revisioning of overt fancy and a more serious attention to the forms of attachment that culture, storytelling, and the imagination might foster. As Kelly Sultzbach observes,

‘Modern artists’ representations of country life inform a desire to reclaim a sensitivity to heritage and local place, which play their own significant role in motivating the modern aesthetic’.⁷² Powys’s novel might certainly be placed within this collective, albeit uncomfortably. The result is a text that answers Powys’s call for writing that might fly under the radars of a more critical modernist irony to salvage ‘those elements, at present slighted, of romance and sentiment’ by emphasising the personal and cultural work done by the imagination (MC, 44). It is to *A Glastonbury Romance*, a text in which the ‘onanistic’ excesses of *Wolf Solent* are transformed into a novel form that seeks and indulges in excess at all levels, to which we now turn.

Chapter Three: ‘A great modern novel consists of and ought to include just everything!’: ‘Interminable’ Creativity in *A Glastonbury Romance*

As Powys worked on his follow up to *Wolf Solent* (1929), *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), he wrote a letter to his brother, Llewelyn, in which he described his self-conception as a writer in provocative terms. ‘I am anyway no artist’, Powys declares, ‘but rather a Stonehenge Bard of Interminable Prose-Narrative [...] The Wanderer relegates Art to the minor place in his life!’ (LL, II; 126).¹ We have seen how romance, for Powys, is a literary tradition that could be developed and experimented with without jettisoning that ‘old childish thrill of *hearing a story* that he described to Dorothy Richardson’ and this experimentation, as the title might suggest, reaches its high-water mark in *A Glastonbury Romance* (LDR, 58). Indeed if, as Ian Duncan suggests, romance ‘plays its indispensable role as realism’s excess’, then such excessiveness is at the heart of Powys’s gargantuan novel in ways that suggest its literalisation of this principle.²

⁷² Sultzbach, p. 13.

¹ *Letters of John Cowper Powys to his Brother Llewelyn*, ed. by Malcolm Elwin, 2 vols (London: The Village Press, 1975), II, p. 126.

² Ian Duncan, ‘Realism / romance, Romantic / Victorian’, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013) <<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/2013-n64-ravon01452/1025675ar/>> [accessed 19/02/2017].

Take, for instance, a letter in which Powys expostulates on the necessity of cutting, at his publishers' behest, over 200,000 words from the manuscript of his 'interminable' novel:

I have in my mind accepted this situation, for if I am to continue living by writing romances, which is what I like to do, I must clip my sheep to suit my market. Perhaps it is the best way for me to work. Perhaps only by writing a vast mass can I write fully and freely, like a growing great tree — then let it be lopped [...] I've never been a moralist or a man of high principle in matters of art.

(LL, II, 128)

Powys's mixed metaphors indicate something of the complexities surrounding this modern romance. Conceiving his work as an organic process, unfolding 'interminabl[y]', and yet suffering, by necessity, the clippings and cuttings of a literary market, Powys locates the vitality of his writing within the act of textual production, those moments at which the possibility of freedom and fullness might be simultaneously entertained, rather than in the achieved artistic vision and order of the accomplished literary artefact. As we have seen, Powys is, as both he and some of his readers are often quick to point out, a far cry from the received figure of the "high" modernist; indeed, it is difficult to square, for example, the precision of Lily Briscoe's 'sudden intensity' in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the addition of a line 'in the centre' of her canvas—'it was done; it was finished'³—with the often unwieldy results of Powys's emphasis on 'interminable' process over product, not least because *A Glastonbury Romance* runs to over 1,100 pages in both its Macdonald and Penguin edition, the former of which contains a list of almost fifty 'Principal Characters in the Romance' (GR, xviii-xix). As I will argue in this chapter, however, Powys's 'interminable' mode of writing produces *A Glastonbury Romance*'s distinctive aesthetic, one which has important bearing not only on what Jed Esty has described as late modernism's 'anthropological turn', but particularly on his *oeuvre*'s development of an ecological imagination that would render something of a more-than-human world.⁴

³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 198.

⁴ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) p. 2.

Another letter—this time written to his friend, Louis Wilkinson—brings something of this into view. Here, Powys lays out the ‘digressive’ strategies of his ‘long romances’, outlining his interest in what he refers to as ‘story for its own sake’:

All (without any exception) of the talent, gift, eloquence [...] I possess is always in *digression*—never anything else. But of course I do painfully, laboriously, lengthily, build up (I speak of both my tracts *and* my long romances) a sort of foundation, and on top of that a sort of scaffolding, *both very simple*—including all the Main characters & where they live, or all the main theses, propositions & contentions & here they end! *Then* I let *the chance moment* have its way—have its ways with the characters, have its way with its ideas! In both cases I am absolutely irresponsible & unscrupulous &, at the best, Mediumistic, and at worst *both* silly and dull!

(LLW, 160)

As in Powys’s metaphoric likening of his writing to ‘a great growing tree’, the emphasis is on textual production as a ‘fully and freely’ developing *process*, subjected neither to ‘the teasing necessity of plot’, nor to the shaping hand of authorial didacticism, but instead to the vagaries of ‘the chance moment’.⁵ The letter is from 1944; and, ten years on from the publication of *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys’s model is no longer that of an interminable, organic process, but of senile forgetfulness: ‘O but I have begun—it’s Old Age!—[...] to digress & forget to reach the *Point!*’ (LLW, 160). Nevertheless, the novel and the letter similarly imply a conception of the writer as one who is beholden to neither ‘Art’ nor ‘the *Point*’, being primarily concerned with the expansion of a ‘scaffolding’ of ‘main characters’ and ‘theses, propositions & contentions’, all courting ‘silliness and dullness’, but not the

⁵ This attempt to evade, or at least obscure, the shaping hand of authorial intention might be considered alongside roughly contemporaneous writers. D.H. Lawrence’s insistence that the novelist should avoid ‘put[ting] his thumb in the pan’ might be recalled, as a further example of a writer for whom “life” becomes a central, yet elusive, term, though perhaps Yeats’s experiments with automatic writing are more thematically consistent with Powys’s own language of ‘clairvoyance’ and ‘insight’. See D. H. Lawrence, ‘Morality and the Novel’, in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169-176 (p. 173).

purposive realisation of any preconceived, narrative order. ‘I go rambling on in my own way’, Powys writes, ‘with my interminable Glastonbury book’ (LL, II, 119).

This, as Gillian Beer observes, is familiar as a component of romance, where there is a form of ‘infinite extension’ to be found: ‘the characteristic narrative device is that of “entrelacement”, interlacing stories so that nothing is ever finally abandoned or circumscribed’.⁶ For Jerome McGann, Powys’s sense of “Plot” therefore emerges[,] but only as “incidents” in a networks [sic] of *coincidentes*, all parts of the storytelling more or less localized, all subordinated to the vast set of unpredictable possibilities latent in the materials and awaiting discovery through the ceaseless act of writing itself.⁷ Multiple readers have noted this link between the novel’s size and its multivocal and polyphonic approach to narrative. Powys himself, in his ‘Author’s Review’ of *A Glastonbury Romance*, boasts that he has ‘the whole life of a community on [his] hands; with housewives, lawyers, doctors, chemists, innkeepers, procurresses, clergymen, servants, old-maids, beggars, madmen, children, poets, landowners, labourers, shop-keepers, an anarchist, dogs, catsd, fish, and an air-plane pilot . . .’ (AR, 8). As the ellipsis suggests, this list is hardly exhaustive; to this ‘whole life of a community’, for example, the textual world of *A Glastonbury Romance* will add the perspectives of numerous other human characters, not to mention those of beetles and ‘microscopic creature[s]’, trees that ‘might have witnessed at least a fifth portion of the historic life of Glastonbury’ (GR, 931, 813, 128). For Sam Wiseman, the resultant ‘novel forms a teeming mass of overlapping consciousnesses and perspectives, disorienting and disrupting the reader’s search for epistemological foundations’, a decision that has ramifications for Powys’s writing of the nonhuman, particularly, with *A Glastonbury Romance* ‘stress[ing] multiplicity and diversity: no figures are privileged above any others, and the human stories within the text are entwined with the myriad narratives that comprise an entire ecosystem’.⁸ This link between interconnection and anti-hierarchical structures as *narrative* principles on the

⁶ Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 21.

⁷ Jerome McGann, “The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction”: Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys, and the Subjective Correlative’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 13:2 (2006), 309-323 (319).

⁸ Sam Wiseman, *The Reimagining of Place in English Modernism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2015), p. 62.

one hand, and as qualities inherent to *ecological* systems on the other, will be important throughout, for it suggests how Powys's development of romance, and his development of an ecological consciousness, are intrinsically entwined, or indeed, interlaced.

Where Jed Esty observes that Powys has 'generally [been] read as a local colorist or a prolix Thomas Hardy', I will suggest, in this chapter, that situating *A Glastonbury Romance's* 'rambling' and 'prolix' approach to novelistic construction within the contexts of Powys's 'Author's Review' of the novel—written 'in the form of a Dialogue or of an Author's Catechism'—allows us to discern a form that is more, and more artful, than an incidental technical deficiency producing a minor version of Hardy-esque localism.⁹ The trajectory towards excess, at all levels, constitutes this text's characteristic manoeuvre. As Powys puts it in his 'Author's Review', his intention is to capture something of Glastonbury's 'whole being from zenith to nadir, and from circumference to centre' and, similarly, in a later text, *Dostoevsky* (1946), we find Powys asserting, in an equally provocative manner, that 'a great modern novel consists of and ought to include *just everything!*' (D, 184; emphasis added). Powys's 'interminable' process of writing begins to make sense, here: for if it is the 'whole being' of a spot, or place, or region, that one seeks to represent then, perhaps by necessity, selectivity will just not do. As Jeremy Hooker observes, 'there is a sense'—'since place is a ground of personal and historical experience'—'in which the literary concern with place comprehends *everything*', and it is this sense of 'place' that animates *A Glastonbury Romance's* 'interminable' strategies of excess and enlargement.¹⁰

As we will see, these are often consciously and playfully overwrought. The provocative construction of '*just everything*', for instance, begins to indicate Powys's awareness of the quixotic demand that he places upon his process of writing. The result, as we will see, is a series of increasingly extravagant contortions of syntax and perspective, in which the habitual scale and perspective of the realist novel is

⁹ Esty, p. 62.

¹⁰ Jeremy Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. vi.

stretched, upended, even undermined.¹¹ Inhabiting nonhuman points of view by transcribing ‘the language of trees’ (GR, 89), developing novelistic vantage points upon a materiality that encompasses his human characters and precedes them by ‘millions of years’ through an elastic approach to narrative perspective (GR, 398), Powys’s representation of what Wiseman describes as a ‘teeming nonhuman lifeworld’ conveying ‘a kind of proto-biocentrism [...] asserting the equivalent value of all life’ is to be established through fantastic, and often exaggerated, digressions from this novel’s human-focused plot.¹² This is pertinent to our ecocritically minded exploration of the novel, and indeed, expressive of his refiguring of ‘Nature’. ‘To be defined as “nature”’, for Val Plumwood, ‘is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the “environment” or invisible background conditions against which the “foreground” achievements of reason or culture [...] take place’.¹³ In this novel, as we will see, such distinctions between background and foreground, human and ‘nature’, are made increasingly difficult to maintain.

The ‘Author’s Review’ is crucial, here, for it explicitly develops these links between Powys’s ‘rambling’ or ‘prolix’ form of writing and his anchoring and centralising focus on place or locale. In response to his own question, ‘how can a spot, or region, or locality, be treated psychologically?’, for example, Powys describes a suggestively sprawling method of “selection”:

By describing it and analyzing it under the moods of the weather and under various chemical and spiritual influences and in regard to its flora and fauna and geological strata; and in regard to the historic changes that have come to its human inhabitants in connection with these things; and to its whole being from zenith to nadir, and from

¹¹ This is to develop Ian Duncan’s argument, in a landmark essay on *A Glastonbury Romance*, that Powys’s ‘innovation is a *quantitative* one, of sheer scale, in contrast to the qualitative shifts of grammar—signifying a rupture or discontinuity with tradition—that we associate with Modernist avant-gardes’. Powys’s ‘interminable’ strategies certainly inflect his grammar and syntax, as we will see. See ‘Supernatural Narration: *A Glastonbury Romance*, Modernity, and the Novel’, *Western Humanities Review*, 57:1 (2003), 78-93 (80).

¹² Wiseman, p. 63.

¹³ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 7.

circumference to centre.

(AR, 7)

When Powys writes that he has abandoned the central, singular consciousness of *Wolf Solent* in order to '[jump] about shamelessly and boldly from one person's thoughts to another's, using *the old-fashioned privilege of the ubiquitous author-god*', then, he is indicating the extent to which the novel's focus or centre has shifted, from an emphasis on the developing life of a central, human character, to a form in which it is place, as it develops through time, that becomes the novel's abiding subject: 'This particular night of the tenth of December was in reality one of the great turning points in the *life of Glastonbury*' (GR, 747). There is a tension, here, that is to prove crucial to our reading. For as much as Powys's attention to the relationships between 'flora and fauna and geological strata' and the 'historical changes' that have visited the region's human inhabitants suggests how an explicitly ecological sense of interaction and interconnection is to be incorporated into the writing, Powys is nevertheless adamant that the effect of such writing is to transform 'the spot itself [into] the real hero or heroine of the tale' (AR, 7). In one sense, then, the novel's excess is textual, even ecological, arising as Powys's 'interminable' writing pursues the rich and varied "psychology" of Glastonbury and its legendary soil, an open-ended loam of human and non-human matter, imaginative and cultural forms, and natural, physical forces, accumulating both over time and textually, by virtue of his own digressive strategies. Yet beyond this, there is also his consciousness of *imaginative* excess, a romance-inspired transgression of habitual novelistic hierarchies through which Glastonbury is not only understood materially, as a colloquy of physical and psychological forces interacting through time, but as a consciously literary device, a 'hero' or 'heroine'.

This is not quite the ecological principle in which 'no figures are privileged above any others', described by Wiseman, precisely because Powys's transformation of the 'spot itself' into 'the real hero or heroine' is at least partly conceived as an inversion of literary hierarchies as much as it is a complete dispersal of significance. We might usefully acknowledge Dana Phillips's distinction that 'poems and ecosystems are entirely different kinds of artefact. Poems are deliberately written, they don't just happen, and they must be deliberately read', and turn to a passage from the text itself,

here.¹⁴ Consider the tentative relationship between ecological insight and romance imaginativeness here, as Crow stares out ‘across the Bridge Perilous of the old romances’:

Below the mud of the Brue [River] there was a bed of clay; below the clay, the original granite of the planet’s skeleton; below the granite an ocean of liquid rock upon which the granite floated; below this again, black gulfs of hollow emptiness full of smouldering gases, and down below these—as the plummet of John’s mind dived and sank—this “down” became an “up”, and the liquid rock-basis of the “antipodes” of Glastonbury, like the root-sea of Dante’s Purgatorial Mount, fumed and seethed and bubbled. (GR, 358)

The conscious positioning atop scenery from ‘the old romances’, the extravagance of the allusion to Dante, the quite literal inversion of novelistic perspective: these indicate something of *A Glastonbury Romance*’s playfully exaggerated literary consciousness, which seeks not only to present an ecosystemic sense of interconnection and correspondence, but also to remind its readers of its conscious upending of received hierarchies that are, as much as anything else, literary. This is not primarily intended to underscore the fundamental importance of the bioregion to the human life contained therein, though this is to become an important effect of such writing. Rather, the emphasis is on transforming Glastonbury into the ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ of a literary text, a story, with all the accompanying ‘silliness’ that this might entail. As we will see, this is a radical form of experiment in its own right: indeed, if Powys is to capture something of Glastonbury’s ‘whole being’, he is to do so in a manner that draws our attention, as we will see, to the overt transgressions of human perspective that such imaginative license permits, all the while reminding us of the contingency, even inadequacy, of the resultant writing to the vast congeries of forces that comprises “Glastonbury” understood as a material reality. Internalising Squire Urquhart’s observation that ‘genuine continuity [...] would occupy several lifetimes in the telling’ (WS, 51), and opting instead for a ‘jumbled-up and squeezed together epitome of ‘life’s various dimensions’ (GR, xiv), Powys develops a novel

¹⁴ Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 141.

that fails to live up to its (impossible) goal, though as I want to show, one that fails creatively, productively, and in full consciousness of the implications this has for language's (in)capacity to bring the immense entanglement of forms and forces that constitute Glastonbury's 'whole being' to order (GR, 747).

I: 'How can a spot, or region, or locality, be treated psychologically?'

To begin to trace this use of language, and to answer the question posed in my subheading, we need to return to the 'Author's Review' of *A Glastonbury Romance*, written 'in the form of a Dialogue or of an Author's Catechism' and published in *The Modern Thinker* in March, 1932. The text is, as Charles Lock has noted, 'somewhat arch and mannered', and, as this might suggest, we need to take its advertorial designs seriously.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in the 'Review', Powys is at great pains to emphasise the way in which 'the main idea [of *A Glastonbury Romance*] is a life, not a theory or a speculation, and in this case the life of a particular spot upon the earth's surface' (AR, 7; emphasis added). The term, "life", of course, has a familiar context for students of modern literature. For there is a strand of modernist fiction that seeks—without losing sight of the difficulties of this attempt—to discern a perspective on "life" that might body forth the inner workings of the mind at their most trivial and evanescent. Virginia Woolf's insistence upon 'record[ing] the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall', on 'trac[ing] the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance', is perhaps exemplary.¹⁶ In emphasising that *A Glastonbury Romance*'s 'main idea' is to be 'the life [...] of a particular spot upon the earth's surface', Powys signals his intention to expand and perhaps even update the attempt: indeed, if Woolf turns to the 'dark places of psychology', then Powys, as we have seen, demands a 'psychological' treatment of Glastonbury itself, in which 'the moods of the weather' and 'chemical and spiritual influences' are to be

¹⁵ Charles Lock, 'Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55:3 (1986), 261-281 (272).

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, IV: 1925-1928, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 157-164 (p. 161).

‘describ[ed] and analyz[ed]’ alongside ‘flora and fauna and geological strata [...] and [the] historic changes that have come to its human inhabitants in connection with these things’ (AR, 7-8).

As this suggests, Powys is, in one sense, interested in figuring forms of constitutive relationship between individuals—human or nonhuman—and the conditions of the region in which they live. This is a potentially essentialising, but also a potentially ecological, insight. As Christina Alt observes:

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the study of nature underwent further expansion as a result of the growing interest in studying living organisms in action in their natural environment. Ethology, the study of animal behaviour, and ecology, the study of the interrelationships among organisms and between organisms and their environment, both emerged as scientific disciplines around the turn of the century.¹⁷

Understood in this context, Powys’s intention to describe a region ‘psychologically’ echoes something of ecology’s attention to the ‘interrelationships among organisms and between organisms and their environment’. When we find Sam Dekker, son of Glastonbury’s vicar, for instance, ‘staring fixedly [at a] bug on the wall’, we begin to see something of Powys’s interest in the effects of a particular ‘locality’ upon its inhabitants:

“Every locality,” he thought, “has its own midges, its own gnats, its own beetles, its own lice, its own bugs. They may resemble the others of their tribe; but they must be affected—few will dispute this—by the particular climatic conditions which exist around them[”].¹⁸

(GR, 931)

¹⁷ Christina Alt, p. 3.

¹⁸ For another modernist encounter with an insect on a wall, see Virginia Woolf, ‘The Mark on the Wall’, in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 77-83.

The reflexive turn to disputing opinions is, as we will see, crucial, for as this novel's commentators have variously noted, Powys's polyphonic and multivocal form frustrates our capacity to arrive at epistemological or even ontological "truths", biological or otherwise. Indeed, what Powys is chiefly concerned with, throughout *A Glastonbury Romance*, is a rather loose and contingent sense of 'interrelationship' such as we might discern in the extended description of Sam Dekker:

Sam had been born in Glastonbury. Glastonbury sights and sounds and smells, the psychic *eidola* that radiate forth from the surface of ancient inanimate substances, had surrounded him from his birth. Having concentrated his sluggish, earthy nature so steadily and so long upon birds and beasts and fishes, he must have accumulated an enormous mass of casually imprinted memories concerning his contact with the inorganic surroundings of these living creatures. By day and by night he must have touched—going up and down the fields, lanes, hillsides, valleys, fenlands, tow-paths, spinneys, rhynes—innumerable gates, weirs, walls, marsh tussocks, mole hills, pond rails, heaps of stones, fallen trees, moss-grown ruins, and all these touches and casual contacts must have established between his inmost being and the mystery of matter in these things, deep correspondencies which were ready to rush forth at any summons.

(GR, 936)

Powys's writing is not, at least in this example, analytically or scientifically precise; instead, it uses a form of open-ended suggestiveness to transgress the boundaries between the subject and its environment. The key word here is the slightly unwieldy "correspondencies", which begins to break down the distinction between forms of physical ('touched') and psychological ('memories') 'contact' by gathering them together into an accumulative 'mass'. Recognisably modernist themes arise, of course, in the transgression of boundaries between subject and object, character and setting: as Wiseman argues, Powys's writing is interested in the 'creation of worlds in which subject and environment; human and nonhuman life, and internal and external experience all commingle'.¹⁹ Indeed, if Woolf's 'life' is a 'luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from beginning of consciousness to the end', then Powys's 'psychic *eidola*', similarly, 'surround' Sam 'from his birth'.

¹⁹ Wiseman, p. 53.

Crucial, in Powys's writing, is the strategic imprecision of this "commingling" and the way it is enacted through strategies of suggestion, enlargement, and accumulation, rather than through a rigorously critical or philosophical intervention in these conceptual binaries. Hence the process of addition—localised in the list of Glastonbury's 'innumerable gates, weirs, walls, marsh tussocks...'—that characterises the whole passage, so that it works towards a rather nebulous and pluralised sense of correspondence, rather than attempting to isolate the mechanisms by which an individual might become 'affected [...] by the particular climatic conditions which exist around them'.

As in *Wolf Solent*, then, Powys's attention to the relationships between people and places is to be distinguished from 'any desperate appeal to ethnic provenance, or collective "race memories"'.²⁰ Yet, "memory" remains a crucial term, precisely because it is feeling, sentiment, and recollection, ultimately, which meaningfully grounds Powys's characters in the soil of this 'spot'. Take, for instance, Mat Dekker, Sam's father, Glastonbury's vicar, and a 'dedicated naturalist' (GR, 134), who here reflects upon his own intimacy with the region as he shares a walk with his son:

'Celandines were my father's favourite flower,' said Mat Dekker as they moved on again after one of these pauses. It always pleased him to think of his father when he was alone with his son and to speak of him. *It made him feel* that the three of them—three generations of Dekkers—were intimately bound together, and bound together too with that fecund Somersetshire soil. His piety in this classical sense was one of the massive single-hearted motives by which he lived. (GR, 129; emphasis added)

Mat Dekker's *feeling* of familial belonging is not established through an appeal to any supposedly inherent right, but instead through forms of attention and interest that produce meaningful and pleasurable forms of association: 'he always loved a long walk with Sam and there was not a field or a lane within several miles of their home

²⁰ Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 86.

where some rare plant or bird, or, as the Spring advanced, some butterfly did not arrest their attention' (GR, 127). Certainly, as these examples suggest, familial ancestry plays its part: an old ash tree, encountered by John and Mary Crow, for example, clearly takes on this specific 'role': 'the role the ash tree served was to bring them in the midst of their dalliance with incredible vividness the image of their grandfather. Both of them saw [him] clearly in their mind's eye [...]' (GR, 89). Significantly, however, Powys's sense of familial links to the soil are manifested in mental images and 'feeling[s]', strategies that suggest how his 'psychological' representation is interested in relationships more fleeting and ephemeral than would be implied by any sense of biological essence or inherent relationship to the soil.

Memory is, as *A Glastonbury Romance* reminds us, frequently unreliable; it makes an unstable basis for relationship with the 'soil'. We might return to John Crow, for instance, who will suddenly realise that his memory of a sexually-charged childhood game played with his cousin, Mary, is not quite accurate: 'By God! it was with Tom, and not with Mary, that he had played that wicked game, that day, at the bottom of the boat. How extraordinary that he should have mixed up those two like that in his mind!' (GR, 127). Thorough Powys's treatment of sexuality is beyond the scope of this project, but the episode nevertheless throws Andrew Radford's argument that 'John Crow senses England as a refuge for the heterogeneous, errant, unmoored, nomadic' into a new, and suggestive light, not least because Crow's sexuality remains elliptically suggestive throughout, a 'sequence of "other sides"' that is never defined or delimited (GR, 323-324).²¹ Glastonbury's psychology, in fact, is not to be analysed and interpreted, but instead to arise from a shifting composite of such personal associations and recollections. Tom Barter, for example, possesses memories that have no direct, 'practical' application:

Tom Barter's mind ceased suddenly to think in definite words. The "little river" and the "big river" at Northwold, the Bridge at Didlington, were more than words. Such memories as they held could not be put even by the practical, cynical, lecherous Tom,

²¹ Radford, p. 89.

into any human sentence.

(GR, 143)

Moving away from ‘definite words’ and ‘practical’ knowledge, Powys’s attention to memory is less concerned with establishing ethnic provenance than it is in immersing the reader in what Sam Dekker describes as the ‘revival of local memories’ (GR, 69). “Local” acquires a punning dual meaning, here, pointing us both towards the specificity of this spot or region, and also towards the contingency of the largely psychological relationships that Powys delineates.

If Powys substitutes the collection and accumulation of experiential matter over the pursuit of underlying truths enacted, often ironically, in *Wolf Solent*, however, it is not that he sees memory as trivial. Rather, such ‘psychological’ treatment of the region manifests Powys’s sensitivity to the constitutive relationships between ‘a given locality’ and the inner lives of his characters. Indeed, his writing recognises that, as Eric Prieto argues, ‘the very ability to be the kind of creature who has an identity [...] is inextricably bound up with the places in which we find ourselves’, even as it underscores the contingency of these forms of identity.²² So it is that a ‘tall elm tree’ overhanging the Abbey grounds, from Sam Dekker’s ‘earliest childhood’, has ‘been associated with certain turning-points of his life’ (GR, 387). Powys indicates how the shape of his characters’ lives is structured and rendered meaningful by such forms of association. When Sam appeals desperately to his lover, Nell Zoyland, for instance, he explicitly announces that he is speaking ‘of [...] places to remind [her] of things’: ‘have you forgotten that reed-hut on Splott’s Moor? Have you forgotten Hartlake Railway Bridge?’ (GR, 169).

The ‘life’ of Glastonbury thus comes to gesture towards certain facets of human world making, to processes of personal, and indeed, cultural association through which characters’ lives become entangled with the spot in which they live. So it is that Glastonbury is figured as a focal point for various forms of association, personal,

²² Eric Prieto, ‘Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy and Beyond’, in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Robert T. Tally Jr. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011), pp. 13-27 (p. 18).

cultural, and other. The grail itself has ‘impregnated the atmosphere of this particular spot [and] associated itself with every detail of its local history’ (GR, xii); Glastonbury’s roads are ‘full of human memories’, with ‘not a signpost or a milestone [...] but had gathered to itself some piteous encounter of heart-struck lovers, some long and woeful farewell’ (GR, 92). At a larger scale, there is the central figure of the ‘Glastonbury Legend’:

Christians had one name for this Power, the ancient heathen inhabitants of this place had another, and a quite different one. 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 none of them it had the same psychic effect. [...] Older than Christianity, older than the Druids, older than the gods of Norsemen or Romans, older than the gods of the neolithic men, this many-named mystery had been handed down to subsequent generations by three psychic channels; by the channel of popular renown, by the channel of inspired poetry, and by the channel of individual experience.

(GR, 125)

The ‘life’ of Glastonbury comes into focus as a jumbled collection of personal and cultural significances, as various ‘psychic’ channels imbue the region with composite and multiple meanings that change over time. Again, Powys’s writing collects and accumulates in a manner opposed to categorical definition. Hence, perhaps, the return of *Wolf Solent*’s elliptical ‘chemistry’, the emphasis on the historical persistence of a site at which matter, culture, and experience become ‘jumbled-up’ and ‘squeezed together’ in a manner that is somehow constitutive of a nebulous ‘power’.

In this way, the sense of a shifting, composite past that that we saw in *Wolf Solent* is extended, so that the ‘queer and quite special sense of romance’ experienced by Solent is not simply “strained” through one character’s consciousness, but is instead the subject of the novel itself: a Glastonbury *Romance* (WS, 178). The ‘Glastonbury Legend’, accordingly, becomes a device by which Powys widens his novelistic perspective so that it might incorporate a plurality of perspectives, voices, and forces, interacting and proliferating over time. Evidence of this process is frequently

unearthed. In ‘Carbonek’, for instance, Cordelia Geard ‘[wrestles] with a soil and with the growths of a soil that were more soaked in legends than any other hillside in Wessex’ (GR, 214); while, in “Geard of Glastonbury”, Mary Crow views the moon as a phenomenon that is ‘Unique, in all the universe of matter, if only by reason of the associations hung about it of twenty-five thousand years of human yearning’, musing: ‘Ruins! It was not only in ancient stone that baffled human hopes held up their broken outlines, their sad-skeleton patterns’ (GR, 278-279). Powys’s sense of the ‘poetical’ from *The Meaning of Culture*—as ‘something profoundly and emotionally humanized’ (MC, 48)—is recalled, here, as his attention to the region’s ‘psychology’ manifests an interest in relationships between natural material and cultural significance, a point we will return to in the following section.

Here, however, it serves to note that Powys is keen to emphasise the personal and subjective quality of these associations, even as they gather, nebulously, into a region’s defining ‘power’. When John Geard encounters a man and child who have become stranded on a rooftop during the flood that closes the novel, for example, Powys observes these ‘living spirits [...]— he and these two gesticulating figures— each one of them with a whole world of clear-cut feelings, images, memories’ (GR, 1108). Personal identity is in communion with larger, more cultural ‘psychic channels’, in Powys’s novel, but importantly, it is not reducible to them. Contrary to Esty’s suggestion that *A Glastonbury Romance* ‘demodernizes psychological insights, turning flickering sensory impressions and sexual passion alike into the diffuse epiphenomena of ancient, primordial forces’, Powys has a good deal of fun emphasising fleeting and incidental forms of psychological attachment.²³ When John Crow, recalling ‘memories of his childhood’, notes how ‘mingled with these came memories of the taste of certain species of unusual pink-coloured strawberries that grew in the walled garden [of his grandmother’s house]’, Powys is rather soberly emphasising the ways in which Glastonbury’s specific contours inflect and structure personal, as well as cultural, significances (GR, 25). When even the fish in the Dekkers’ aquarium, as John Geard looks at them, become ‘associated [...] very

²³ Esty, p. 69.

vividly with what [he] was feeling’, however, it is hard to implicate such observations in the pursuit of ‘ancient, primordial forces’ (GR, 285).

These playfully observed details are crucial precisely because they refocus our attention to Powys’s use of language. Like Bartholomew Jones, the Glastonbury antiquities dealer who ‘collect[s] his objects with a personal predilection all of his own, a predilection which, while neither very learned nor very aesthetic, had a certain pathos of choice peculiar to itself’, Powys’s writing accumulates a somewhat idiosyncratic jumble of memories and associations, emphasising a fleeting sense of ‘life’ and indeed, identity, that exists in a much more ambivalent relationship to Glastonbury’s ‘Legend’ than Esty allows. Consider the following description of another character, Paul Trent, who has suddenly recalled an earlier dream of a communist Glastonbury:

At this point Paul Trent’s excitement at the chance of realising a dream about which he’d thought night and day since he lost the fifth form essay on Freedom at Penzance by advocating free love, became so intense that he remembered the name of his first nurse; a name he’d forgotten for twenty years and had tried again and again to recall. The woman was called ‘Brocklehurst’; and now he repeated to himself this harmless name, several times over, the name of a thirty-year-old corpse buried near Ashbury Camp in Cornwall now serving as a Eureka of anarchistic joy upon the top of Chalice Hill. (GR, 720)

Such playfulness is not simply a mark of Powys’s ‘reckless disregard for gradations of prose style and narrative tone’, as Chris Baldick suggests; it also functions to foreground the contingency and provisionality of the ‘psychological’ relationships that Powys is interested in.²⁴ Throughout, Powys’s strategy is not to explain or even justify these forms of “correspondency”, to borrow the term used in description of Sam Dekker, but instead to revel in the textual production of these psychological ephemera. Much of this novel’s humour lies in its creative proliferation of such incidental relationships and ‘chance’ comparisons, and in this sense language is

²⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, X: 1910-1940, The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 232.

central both as the vehicle by which stories and narratives are brought into being and associated with a particular ‘spot’ (recall Sam Dekker’s speaking ‘of [...] places to remind [Nell Zoyland] of things’), and as the medium in which Powys’s own accumulation of Glastonbury memories is enacted. Indeed, as Wolf Solent’s awed repetition of ‘Poll-Poll-Poll’ from the top of Poll’s Camp hill is substituted with the more haphazard incantation of ‘Brocklehurst’, we sense that the half-ironic invocation of a ‘spirit of the hill’, presumed, in the earlier novel, to watch Solent ‘with definite malignity’ (WS, 328), has been substituted for a ‘harmless name [...] now serving as a Eureka of anarchistic joy upon the top of Chalice Hill’. There is little ‘practical’ worth in these ‘local memories’, as Powys acknowledges, but there is much personal ‘joy’, too.

Such observations begin to suggest how we limit Powys’s achievement if we understand his novels as participating in ‘kind of romance, whether we call it mystical, visionary, or apocalyptic, [that] typically adopts symbolic, allegorical, intuitive, and “mythic” methods of evocation and suggestion, irradiating its action with occult significance’.²⁵ This is not to suggest that such “irradiation” does not occur in *A Glastonbury Romance*, but to reclaim attention to an opposing manoeuvre—hardly ‘visionary’ or even ‘apocalyptic’ in its insight—by which Powys’s ‘interminable’ writing is permitted to reclaim details that are trivial from the perspective of narrative and plot but not, crucially, to the lives of the characters themselves. The relationship between the ‘ancient’ and ‘primordial’ forces described by Esty, and the ‘psychology’ of the town itself, is thus more ambivalent and open-ended than descriptions of Powys’s ‘irrepressible thirst for Significance’ would accommodate.²⁶ Indeed, between the ‘Legend’ of Glastonbury and the ‘harmless’ and impractical memories that Powys expands upon is the town’s more nebulous ‘personality’. For the vicar, Mat Dekker, the town’s inhabitants ‘don’t realise half enough the influence [they] have upon the personality of our town’; hence his question, posed to both Elizabeth Crow and, perhaps, the reader: ‘Don’t you feel [...] that Glastonbury has a most definite personality of its own?’ (GR, 519). The implied

²⁵ Baldick, p. 228.

²⁶ Esty, p. 63.

narrator, for his or her own part, concurs—‘Matt Dekker was right when he said that a town which has had so long an historic continuity as Glastonbury acquires a personality of its own’—and here we begin to see the more literal implications of Powys’s ‘psychological’ representation of place, region, or spot (GR, 540).

Significantly, however, what the novel asserts is true for the human subject—‘[th]e mystery of mysteries is Personality, a living Person; and there is that in Personality which is indetermined, unaccountable, changing at every second’—is also the case for the broader ‘personality’ of Glastonbury. Pressed to explain his use of the term in the ‘Author’s Review’, for instance, Powys rather cheerfully emphasises his unequivocally vague and evasive use of the term: ‘I cannot tell. But I know that it has one!’ (AR, 8). In Powys’s usage, the ‘personality’ or ‘psychology’ of the region remains a shifting and gestural term for a collection of incidental and personal significances that can hardly be extrapolated to any universal thesis, but which can, however, be transformed into the digressive ‘entrelacement’ of romance described by Beer. As Wiseman notes, for all Powys’s attention to ‘psychology’, he remains ambivalently engaged with *psychoanalysis*, being as ‘fascinated by the idea of the Oedipus complex’ as he is ‘deeply sceptical regarding psychoanalysis’ ability to fully comprehend the workings of the mind’.²⁷ There are links with Powys’s attitude towards vivisection, here, since both responses derive from his scepticism towards rationalising epistemologies that would claim to have exhausted their subject. Indeed, Wiseman quotes Powys’s disgruntled observation, in *A Philosophy of Solitude* (1933), that psychoanalysis ‘insists that we subject our most sacred feelings [...] to its particular set of ready-made categories’ (PS, 145-146).²⁸ There is, as I want to suggest, an ethical inflection to Powys’s treatment of the region’s ‘psychology’, since his emphasis on ‘mystery’ and impression, on the palpable emotional reality of these forms of association, is also a riposte to an “interviewer” whose language conveys a received notion of ‘a *mere* place, or region’, as something passive, in the background, and fundamentally disconnected from an active, human sphere.

²⁷ Wiseman, p. 68.

²⁸ See Wiseman, p. 69.

Powys's novel, then, is sensitive to the manifold ways in which 'people are defined to some extent by the places around them', since 'places become inveigled and intertwine with our identity, memories, and lives'.²⁹ His writing, in such instances, also becomes a performance of the way in which these associations cannot be confidently extrapolated into any essential or universal characteristic, other than the composite and incidental accumulation of significance itself. As Owen Evans observes to a character who has asked him if he believes 'in always struggling to find a meaning in life': 'It's not [...] in my nature [...] to . . . to take life . . . in that . . . way . . . at all. I find meanings everywhere' (GR, 107). There is a kind of 'anarchistic joy' that radiates from Powys's act of writing and creating these various forms of significance and psychological attachment, hence the lavish attention to incidental linguistic fragments and memories or associations that have no directly 'practical application', but which speak of an affectionate and imaginative engagement with the collection of forces and figures that comprise this 'spot'. If 'psychological' treatment of a region is beginning to appear more cautious and qualified than we might have expected, however, it is to Powys's more excessive mode of literary performance that I now want to turn.

II 'A Freak at a Fair'

Firstly, we might note a letter that offers a parallel example of Powys responding to his publishers' request that he cut the length of his *Glastonbury* manuscript. Here, contrary to his claim to Llewelyn that he has 'never been a moralist or a man of high principle in matters of art', he suggests to his brother, Theodore, that there are some reductions he will refuse to make:

My book is like a tall man (a Freak at a Fair) and I have to thin him, lean him, plane him, scrape him, gouge him, emaciate him, till—tho' still the tall man of the Fair—he'll be tottering from the weakness of mal-nutrition—in plain language half-starved.

²⁹ Jon Anderson, *Page and Place: Ongoing Compositions of Plot* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), p. 177.

But what I am obstinately refusing to do is to cut out any *characters* (though they want me to do that) for that *w'd* be worse than starving my tall Freak-Man—that *w'd* be cutting off his ears or nose [sic] or foot or arm. And this I *won't* do. & I shall say like Luther, AT WORMS, there stand I. I can do non other—and if it is *then* so big that the sale will be hurt—well it can't be helped for I am acting in a worldly enough way by scooping & gouging my Giant of the Fair—'Tallest Man ever fed on a milk diet!' in order to get the crowd to pay money to see him.³⁰

As ever, Powys's metaphors for composition are suggestive on multiple levels. Immediately striking is his sense of the novel as a form of literary *spectacle*, as a 'freak' whose popular attraction inheres in its unusual, even exaggerated or distorted, qualities. What critics have dismissed as mere prolixity or 'overwhelm[ing] [...] ecstatic flatulence',³¹ seen from this perspective, can be understood as a performative gambit, a strategy by which Powys might 'continue living by writing romances', as he put it to Llewelyn (LL, II, 128). Indeed, when Powys describes the necessity of cutting his manuscript for the 'English circulating libraries' and adds that he 'sympathise[s] with the old ladies who say "life is so awful that I want something different when I read"', he is expressing his awareness of romance as a popular—and indeed marketable—tradition, invoking the imaginative license that makes it, in Duncan's terms, 'the essential principle of fiction', the '*difference* from a record of "reality", of "everyday" life'.³² 'Psychological' treatment of Glastonbury, in this sense, does not simply mark Powys's engagement with a modernistic attention to dispersed and diffused consciousnesses, to what Wiseman describes as the 'commingl[ing]' of 'subject and environment; human and nonhuman life, and internal and external experience', but also, in its more exaggerated forms, to his distinctive revisioning of romance, his desire to transform Glastonbury into a 'hero' or 'heroine' of a story.³³

³⁰ Quoted in Penny Smith, 'The "Cave of the man-eating Mothers": its Location in *A Glastonbury Romance*', *The Powys Review*, 9 (1981/82), 10-17 (11).

³¹ Baldick, p. 232.

³² Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 2.

³³ Wiseman, p. 53.

With this in mind, we might note that Powys's implied narrator actively seeks out mystical, numinous, or supernatural forces for which no 'ready-made categories' of language exist, as in this example, from the opening paragraph of the chapter, 'Carbonek':

The day was one of those early Spring days that for some mysterious reason, very hard to analyse, are felt to be ill-omened and unpleasant. Something was certainly wrong with this day! All animal nerves felt it. All human nerves felt it. All living things were irritable, restless, disturbed [...].

(GR, 184)

As a comment upon 'mysterious' forces, the passage is straightforward enough; as a literary device introducing a chapter, however, it is also a blatant means of establishing narrative tension, an example of the particular manner in which Powys's fictions might be 'staged performance[s] of the act of writing'.³⁴ Esty suggests that this novel's 'weakness for metaphysical claptrap' goes some way to explaining its disappearance from the modernist canon, but as these examples begin to suggest, the metaphysical and the metafictional, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, are not so readily disentangled.³⁵ A moment in which Bartholomew Jones articulates a further sense that Glastonbury has a mysterious 'personality', a capacity to warn its inhabitants when trouble is afoot, further establishes Powys's playful and conscious invocation of the numinous:

'There do come to I, of nights, the shaky-shivers, as ye might say, when, as I lies awake in thik girt white ward, where thro' they cold windies be blowin' every draught of Heaven; and I do hear they ghosties come out of they Ruings, brother, and go whush, whush, whush over all the roofts, and I feel, for sure, that some girt change be coming over this town'.

(GR, 355)

Jones's sense that 'the planks and the stones of this town to feel [something] in their wet innards, when night be over they, and all be sleeping'—' 'tis in of stones and timber to know when changes be coming upon the earth'—finds a more comic, if

³⁴ McGann, "The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction", p. 321

³⁵ Esty, p. 62.

equally stylised, manner of bringing the town to life, one that we need to bear in mind as we read the more bombastic appeals to a ‘Glastonbury Legend’; indeed, as Duncan observes, the novel’s comedy takes it ‘very far from being the solemn monument of New Age bombast a brief account of it might suggest’.³⁶ The supernatural, here, is broadly comic, since Jones, like T.S. Eliot’s aptly named Madame Sosostriis, makes for a suspiciously non-committal clairvoyant: ‘I’m not saying it *will* be shortage of bread and the burying of human skeletons; but I’m not saying it *won’t* be they things. But something it will be’, one who peddles in truisms as much as ominous messages from the future: ‘as I were telling Mr. Twig, only this morning, there’s something going to happen in this here town ‘afore long’ (GR, 356, 399). The point is not quite that Jones or the implied narrator are simply figures of fun: certainly, much more portentous examples of the numinous and mystical abound in *A Glastonbury Romance*. What I want to note, however, is how central, and how consciously, these are linked with Powys’s attention to language, writing, and that ‘old childish thrill of hearing a story’ (LDR, 58).

Take, for instance, the character Owen Evans, who has engaged to write a “life” of Merlin, a ‘*Vita Merlini*’ containing ‘[e]verything that he could discover about Merlin [...] [s]craps and morsels and fragments, mythical, historical, natural, supernatural, so long as they had some bearing, however remote, upon the life of Merlin’ (GR, 247, 178; emphasis added). This is a powerful analogy for this novel’s method of composition. Powys’s attention to the ‘life’ of the spot that is Glastonbury, that is, similarly refuses to sort reality from fable, sustaining an approach to Glastonbury’s ‘personality’ or ‘psychology’ that is erratic and wide-ranging not only in its selection of the ‘scraps’, ‘morsels’, and ‘fragments’ that comprise the various associations enfolded into the landscape, but in its own shifting narrative tone. This is perhaps most evident in the striking ‘great nocturnal tourney’ of the chapter, “Nature Seems Dead” (GR, 757). There, Powys observes that ‘[t]he history of any ancient town is as much the history of its inhabitants’ nightly pillows as of any practical activity they perform by day’, further establishing his interest in the personal and cultural associations that have become enfolded into the town’s stratifications. (GR, 747).

³⁶ Duncan, ‘Supernatural Narration’, p. 81.

Beyond this, however, the chapter transforms these comparatively sober forms of ‘association’ into a lengthy dream sequence that pits the slumbering ‘Enemies of the [Grail] Legend’ against its ‘Lovers’ (GR, 747). We might look forward to Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* (1954) here, which begins with a similar attempt to figure a town and its community through the dreams and ‘nightly pillows’ of its inhabitants, for both writers seek to figure the relationships between a town and its community through the slumbering (un)consciousnesses of its inhabitants. Where Thomas, however, focuses upon the synaesthetic potential of the radio play—‘only you can hear and see [...] their dreams’; ‘from where you are, you can hear their dreams’³⁷—Powys emphasises the moment, and the difficulties, of the implied narrator’s textual production, invoking a romance-inspired oral narrative as he does so:

The psychic history of a place like Glastonbury is not an easy thing to write down in set terms, for not only does chance play an enormous part in it, but there are many forces at work for which human language has at present no fit terms.

(GR, 747)

The kinship between the creativity and the absurdity of the Powysian text is further suggested—later, for example, we will see, an attempt to describe ‘the language of trees’—as Powys stretches his modernistic interest in the town’s ‘psychology’ into the fantastic narrative digression of this ‘great nocturnal tourney’: ‘Backward and forward, for five thousand years, the great psychic pendulum has swung between belief in the Glastonbury Legend and disbelief’ (GR, 89, 757, 747). Powys’s shifting of tone and tenor—from the ludic to the mystical, incorporating most points in between—precludes us from distinguishing too readily between ostensibly serious-minded attempts to extend novelistic perspective to incorporate, for instance, the ‘telluric’ forces of the earth (GR, 453), which has ‘turned upon its axis, millions of years before [human events]’ (GR, 398), and, on the other hand, the more fantastic examples of ‘First Cause’ and the ‘countless supernumerary beings [...] whose

³⁷ Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London, Phoenix, 2000), p. 4.

meddlings and interferences with the affairs of earth have not received the philosophical attention they deserve' (GR, 359). This is a further instance of Powys's distaste for 'categorical mandates', since perspectives that are overtly fictitious and those which are merely beyond human remit are inhabited on the same narrative plane (GR, 961). The qualification that there are 'no *fit* terms' for these modes of writing is in this sense exact because it invites readerly inquiry into the adequacy of the text's language. Indeed, as the demand for 'just everything' pushes mimesis to its various limits, the result is a stylised romance that, to borrow Duncan's terminology, quite consciously 'plays its indispensable role as realism's excess'.

The mythopoeic writing we saw in *Wolf Solent* returns in this striking chapter, too, in the individual vignettes that Powys gathers together into this sequence of '[d]reams without any beginning, as they were without any end' (GR, 755). Persephone Spear, for instance, dreams of leaves erupting from her 'feet and her shoulders' as she stands 'stark naked in the centre of a group of silver-barked birch trees who were all, like herself, slim, naked girls with green leaves growing out of their heads' (GR, 757). Together, these figures begin to chant 'pure gibberish [...] doubtless recalled from some ancient childish jingle, repeated in one of those immemorial games that little girls love to play together' to a 'nameless tree' at the top of Wirral Hill, and here we might recall Gerda's song relating to the name of Poll's Camp Hill: 'When Poll his rain-cap has got on | They'll get their drink at Dunderton!' (GR, 758; WS, 99). Spear's own song runs as follows:

"Dominus-Glominus, sow your seed!
Sow your seed, sow your seed!
Glominus-Dominus, rain and dew!
Rain and dew!

(GR, 758)

The metamorphosis of woman into tree (and tree into woman) is placed alongside the transformation of Latin into childish 'gibberish', in a process culminating in 'bewildering' and 'misleading' 'confusion': 'in Persephone's own mind, as she dreamed this dream, there occurred one of those confused metamorphoses which so

often make dreams so bewildering and misleading—the confusion, namely, of this ambiguous tree with a Cross’ (GR, 758). Various forms of the sacrosanct, including, notably, songs recalling fertility rituals, thus become subject to Powys’s own ‘confused metamorphoses’, in ways recalling, perhaps, T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’,³⁸ in which a similar playground song of dancing around a ‘prickly pear’ (v: l. 1) becomes a grim reminder of the empty rituals playing out in ‘the dead land’ or ‘cactus land’ of modernity (III: ll. 1-2); indeed, Powys compares Spear’s song quite directly to a ‘harmless ring-of-roses dance’, albeit one with ‘words added to it that could hardly have been present in the original version’ (GR, 758). For Powys, the intermingling of the liturgical ‘Dominus’ with the childish ‘Glominus’ is no tragic abnegation of spiritual fullness, nor is it quite a straightforward ‘irradiation’ of the narrative with an occult or mystical significance. For there is also a revelling in personal ‘gibberish’, in language akin to Paul Trent’s repetition of ‘Brocklehurst!’ in its incredibly localised and contingent significance.

We should note, further, the way in which Powys’s implied narrator establishes the difficulty, even the impossibility of recording ‘the psychic history of a place like Glastonbury’, in this chapter, only to renew their commitment to this quixotic undertaking: ‘the issue of the struggle that went on tonight between the Enemies of the Legend and its Lovers would evade all but supernatural narration, however one might struggle to body it forth’ (GR, 747). The point is not, I would suggest, that Powys is establishing the necessity of a ‘supernatural narration’ adequate to any *genius loci*, but that such writing renders visible the (comic) difficulties of the implied narrator in his or her struggle to incorporate ‘just everything’: ‘What else could the soul of John Crow do when released in sleep [...] but join [...] all those other wandering spirits [...] *When I write down the word join*, I mean [...] a motion of his whole essential being, now his body was asleep’ (GR, 747-748; emphasis added). This is less a ‘thirst’ for spiritual or metaphysical ‘Significance’, as Esty suggests, or a ‘grop[ing]’ for ‘spiritual insight’, as Baldick argues, than it is a process of writing

³⁸ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, I: *Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), pp. 79-84.

that is not only fascinated, but *animated* by the various correspondences and connections—imagined or otherwise—between Glastonbury’s many forces and those (human) inhabitants that Powys’s ‘psychological’ treatment foregrounds.³⁹

We have come far from the ecological interconnectedness emphasised by Wiseman; equally, however, Baldick’s reading of a ‘rare type’ of romance of which ‘a few major examples from the Twenties and early Thirties’ exist is perhaps beginning to look a little prescriptive:

We risk ‘romanticizing’ romance if we cast it as an underground movement of imaginative liberation for its own sake. It is preferable to see it as a parallel fictional realm in which the social complexities of realism are set aside the better to isolate (often literally, to place upon an island) certain moral or spiritual ideals and to put these to the test.⁴⁰

It is this ‘imaginative liberation’, however, that Powys’s novel consciously and consistently foregrounds, hence the titular invocation of ‘Romance’. At least as much as any coherent moral or spiritual ‘ideal’, what is at stake, here, is fundamentally a question of language, narration, and perspective, emphasised by an act of writing in which the question of this novel’s adequacy or fitness to do justice to the vast array of elliptical forces that might link people and place, over time, is consciously foregrounded. When Powys asks himself how one might come to treat a region ‘psychologically’, then, the form of the self-interview in which he does so is important: for it is not only that Powys is conscious of the potential absurdity of the demand—as the contrived incredulity of Powys’s “interviewer” suggests—but that his self-publicising transforms this calculatedly provocative strategy into the novel’s ‘freak[ish]’ attractiveness. This is a very particular attitude towards the experimentalism of a comparably “high” modernism, one which seeks to reclaim artistic experimentation and virtuosity as a form of consciously excessive storytelling,

³⁹ Baldick, p. 232.

⁴⁰ Baldick, p. 228; p. 218.

an ‘old childish thrill of hearing a story’ made new, and strange, in light of its radically disruptive focus on Glastonbury itself as the ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ of the tale.

This is evident from the first chapter, ‘The Will’, which evidences Powys’s rewriting of a familiar narrative trope: the will reading. Here, the deceased rector, William Crow, has disinherited his son, Philip, in favour of the religious revivalist, John Geard. As Allan Hepburn notes, ‘[i]nheritance in the English and Irish traditions [of novel writing] inscribes sequence and consequence into narrative’, that is, it ‘implies transmission of property and thus creates the expectation of narrative sequence when possessions move from hand to hand’.⁴¹ As we have seen, however, ‘sequence’ and linear order are hardly maintained in Powys’s digressive and accumulative novel form, which thrives not only on the proliferation of perspectives and points of view, but on a lively and often playful challenging of the reader’s expectations, and this is to be set in motion from the events of this first chapter.

The will reading itself, as McGann notes, revisits the novelistic trope familiar from the Victorian triple-decker novel, not least in its gathering of a multitude of characters who are to hear of the transmission of an equally vast collection of properties and estates.⁴²

It really seemed interminable, the list of plots and parcels of good English ground, inhabited and uninhabited, which, in various portions of Norfolk, William Crow had inherited from his thrifty yeomen ancestors. Still it went on drawing itself out, this protracted list; and as yet no hint had appeared as to who was going to be the gainer by all this accumulation of properties, of which apparently the dead man had an undisputed right of free disposal. (GR, 49-50)

Here we have another ‘interminable’ document, though the description of the deceased’s ‘*apparently* [...] undisputed right’ signals the Powysian irony by which

⁴¹ Allan Hepburn (ed.), ‘Introduction: Inheritance and Disinheritance in the Novel’, in *Troubled Legacies: Narrative and Inheritance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 3-25 (p. 5; p. 3).

⁴² See McGann, ‘The Grand Heretics’, pp. 320-321.

the text scrutinises the various claims that Glastonbury's inhabitants stake to its soil. Rather than following the assembled human characters as they exit the rectory in the wake of the will's surprising conclusion, however, Powys allows his narrative perspective to linger on the now vacant household, extending the will reading as it is familiar from, say, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), by in effect adding a further "character", that of the house itself:

Both dining room and drawing-room and the hall and the passage outside these rooms were now left to themselves [...] Silent and alone the broad staircase fell into that trance of romantic melancholy which was its invariable mood when the hall lamp was first lit. The oil paintings upon its walls looked out from their gilt frames with that peculiar expression of indrawn expectancy—self-centred and yet patiently waiting—of which human passers-by catch only the psychic echo or shadow or after-taste, for a single flicker of a second, as if they had caught them off-guard.

(GR, 65)

This is a notable example of the kind of 'digression' in which Powys located his genius, and we might note that it serves, again, to bring setting and scene into a foreground that is usually reserved for human characters. For McGann, the 'fad[ing]' of the 'Porlockian world' of the will reading allows 'a magical, unobserved world [to rise] to view', though we should note that such 'magical' shifts have familiar, modernistic antecedents.⁴³ A similar, eerie unity, for instance, overtakes *To the Lighthouse's* (1927) Ramsay household—'nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness'; '[a]t length, desisting, all ceased together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to'—as Virginia Woolf moves from the temporality of domestic life to that of seasonal cycles and passing years: '[W]hat after all is one night? [...] [t]he winter holds a pack of them and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers'.⁴⁴ Indeed, we might compare this with Powys's 'darkened conservatory'—as it 'listen[s] to the placid sub-human breathings of heliotrope and lemon verbena'—precisely because anthropomorphism, in both

⁴³ McGann, p. 320

⁴⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 119-121.

cases, is a self-conscious trace of the human imagination caught in the paradoxical attempt to picture its own absence, to ‘body [...] forth’ that which it cannot possibly observe, or know. Powys’s digression, in this sense, begins to substitute place for person as the subject of the writing. The stylistic self-consciousness of Woolf’s overt experimentation with parenthesis and chapter breaks is absent from Powys’s chapter, of course, but Powys, too, can be said to transgress and subvert the received division between human foreground and nonhuman background.

The scene is thus set for a ghostly “argument” between the ‘husk[s]’ of the deceased rector, and his wife, whose spectral presences now manifest in the absent room in a striking foregrounding of what Duncan describes as romance’s ‘literalizing attention to *place*, to local countrysides seen as haunted by their passing historical difference’.⁴⁵ Note the lavish manner in which these ghostly “voices” are described:

The[ir] words were almost as faint as the sub-human breathings of the plants in the conservatory. They were like the creakings of chairs after people have left a room for hours. They were like the opening and shutting of a door in an empty house. They were like the groan of a dead branch in an unfrequented shrubbery at the edge of a forsaken garden. They were like the whistle of the wind in a ruined clock-tower, a clock-tower without bell or balustrade, bare to the rainy sky, white with the droppings of jack-daws and starlings, forgetful of its past, without a future save that of anonymous dissolution. They were like words murmured in a ruined court where water from broken cisterns drips disconsolately upon darkening stones, while one shapeless idol talks to another shapeless idol as the night falls. They were like the murmurs of forgotten worm-eaten boards, lying under a dark, swift stream, boards that once were the mossy spokes of some old water-mill and in their day have caught the gleam of many a morning sun but now are hardly noticeable even to swimming water-rats. (GR, 65-66)

⁴⁵ Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance*, p. 14.

Full quotation further underscores the fact that *A Glastonbury Romance*'s textual excess is not simply a matter of its physical size or even of its fantastic narrative devices, but also a stylistic feature functioning at the level of syntax and grammar. Indeed, the human's contemplation of its own passing transience is transformed into an intensely lively act of writing, here, in which the mood of 'romantic melancholy', as Powys piles clause upon clause, becomes the subject of the writing at least as much as its effect. This is not only a prolix example of romance-inspired writing, but a conscious, and indeed, modernistic rewriting of the form's imaginative attention to 'haunted' landscapes. Glastonbury, here, is not simply a region, or even a collective of forces, to be mimetically represented, but the 'hero' or 'heroine' of the story being told.

It is in this sense that Powys conceives his novel as a 'plunge' into fictive worlds (GR, x). Describing himself as a 'born book-worm turned novelist or fabulist' in the preface to the 1955 reissue of *A Glastonbury Romance*,⁴⁶ Powys imagines the 'mood' in which he wrote the novel:

[In writing *A Glastonbury Romance*] I had to plunge [...] into discovering or inventing the sort of Picture of life that fascinated and enthralled me the most; a Picture of Life for which I was unconsciously indebted to books, that is to say to a certain selection of favourite books. What, in writing *A Glastonbury Romance*, I derived from any sort of calculated and deliberate observation of real life is completely negligible. (GR, x-xi)

This act of personal indulgence is recalled in Powys's description, in a letter to Louis Wilkinson, of his own 'maniacal Subjectivity and blind crazy shrinking from the *real world*' (LLW, 293). The familiar opposition by which Powys conceives his "charlatan" proceedings as the antithesis of any 'calculated and deliberate

⁴⁶ That Powys was a bookworm need hardly be taken on his own word alone; aside from references to Scott, his works include *One Hundred Best Books* (1916); *The Enjoyment of Literature* (1938) (*The Pleasures of Literature* in its English edition); book-length essays on both *Dostoievsky* (1946) and *Rabelais* (1948), as well as numerous collections of essays describing authors from Joyce to Whitman.

observation' protests a little too much, of course; yet examples such as the passage above suggest how his consciousness of romance as realism's excess is manifested in a self-conscious form of textual excess. Powys's psychic history of Glastonbury, of course, belies his 'blind crazy shrinking from the *real world*' precisely because it seeks to incorporate experiential and psychological factors—as reality—into its representation of Glastonbury. At the same time, however, it stretches and extends these into forms of 'supernatural narration' in which we become aware that 'Powys self-consciously draws our attention to the artifice and unreality of the fictional world we are inhabiting'.⁴⁷ The "difficulties" in which the implied narrator finds themselves, accordingly, are not so much a pained expression of the Wittgensteinian maxim that 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', or even a hand-wringing over the limits of (human) language, but a more ludic instance of the ways in which Powys's narrative artfully, and sometimes carelessly, seeks out that of which it cannot adequately speak.⁴⁸ In doing so, *A Glastonbury Romance* blurs the dividing line between controlled experiment and wilful absurdity, pushing back realist mimesis in a striking and playful reclamation of evanescent psychological detail, unseen and unnoticed portions of Glastonbury, and pure invention, alike.

III: '[M]aking the spot itself the real hero or heroine of the tale'

One side effect of this romance-inspired writing, then, is to emphasise the liminal and unseen spaces of a landscape that persists beyond the relative contingencies of human laws, timescales, and perspectives. As we have seen, the 'Author's Review', suggests that Powys's intention was to 'write a story about this spot, making the spot itself the real hero or heroine of the tale' (AR, 7). While earlier, and more earnest readings of this novel's 'spiritual atmosphere' suggested that *A Glastonbury Romance*'s 'multi-leveled universe [...] is constantly pointing back to man as the centre of everything'—'again and again we are reminded that the human mind is the creative

⁴⁷ Wiseman, p. 58.

⁴⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. F. P. Ramsey (London: Lund Humphries, 1960), p. 27.

organ giving purpose and meaning to life’—I want to note the ways in which Powys strategically undermines this received notion of human centrality precisely, even paradoxically, through such overt exercising of his own ‘creative organ’.⁴⁹

While this novel has largely been read as structured around a central conflict between the industrialist, Philip Crow, and the religious revivalist, John Geard, we pass over much of the text’s formal complexity if we treat it as an attempt to ‘reveal [...] a properly and natively English form of primitive resistance to modernity’ effected through the frustration of Crow’s aims to industrialise the town.⁵⁰ Indeed, for all that the ‘personality’ of the town can be seen as a shifting composite of human ‘psychic channels’ and the various material fragments—the ‘remains’ of ‘Roman Road[s]’, ‘ruined Abbey[s]’ and churches, not to mention Stonehenge—Powys’s expanded narrative perspective returns us to that Hardy-esque ‘problem of finding a scale for the human’ that I discussed in the previous chapter (GR, 406, 376).⁵¹ As Florence Marie notes, Powys’s emphasis on the palimpsest that is Glastonbury—‘its soil is composed of an accretion of ruins, of ruin on ruin, so that the human history of the area can be seen in a spatial form stretching back farther and farther into the ages’—also has the effect of foregrounding the ‘metaphysical meaning of ruin’, that is: ‘[t]he transience of man’s imposition on the landscape and his unavoidable demise’.⁵²

That a human character is referred to, on this novel’s first page, as a ‘microscopic biped’ begins to suggest the breadth and scale of the ‘more-than-human world’ that Powys imagines (GR, 21). As in *Wolf Solent*, characters work to understand their place within a landscape, and a temporality, that both precedes and outlasts them: John Crow recognises ‘the smell of East Anglia itself’ as a scent ‘that had come wandering over the water-meadows on afternoons like this, to the drowsy heads of

⁴⁹ John A. Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys’s Novels* (London: MacDonald, 1973), pp. 122-123.

⁵⁰ Esty, p. 69.

⁵¹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 233.

⁵² Florence Marie, ‘Hardyan Ruins in John Cowper Powys’s *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) and *Maiden Castle* (1936)’, *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 43 (2012) <<http://ebc.revues.org/1319>> [accessed 29/10/2015].

innumerable John Crows' (GR, 84); Mary Crow, looking up at the moon, wonders if 'there [is] something about it that every woman who has ever lived in Glastonbury must feel?', and reflects that this celestial body is 'Unique, in all the universe of matter, if only by reason of the associations hung about it of twenty-five thousand years of human yearning' (GR, 280).

Through and beyond such 'associations', Powys gradually and increasingly foregrounds the integrity of nonhuman materialities and the persistence of a material nature that precedes Glastonbury's anthropocentric 'personality' even as it becomes the conduit for it. The 'profoundly and emotionally humanized' forms of natural material described in *The Meaning of Culture* are found (MC, 49), of course, where Mary reflects upon the moon: 'Ruins! It was not only in ancient stone that baffled human hopes held up their broken outlines, their sad-skeleton patterns' (GR, 278). Yet the moon is also presented as being both 'a planetary fragment, broken off from the earth or from the sun' and the 'last-remaining fragment of some earlier stellar system, a system of material forms and shapes now altogether lost' (GR, 280). Similarly portentous appeals to the region's 'personality' manifest when John Crow encounters Stonehenge:

What the instinctive heart of John Crow recognized in this Body of Stones—both in those bearing-up and in those borne-up—was that they themselves, just as they were, had become, by the mute creative action of four thousand years, authentic Divine Beings. They were so old and great, these Stones, that they assumed godhead by their inherent natural right, gathered godhead up, as a lightning conductor gathers up electricity, and refused to delegate it to any mediator, any interpreter, to any priest!
(GR, 103)

'Mystery', here, is a human product, with divinity being figured as the result of 'creative action', albeit one that refuses to 'delegate' its meaningfulness to mediators or interpreters. Powys, however, is not only sensitive to what Urquhart described in *Wolf Solent* as 'human impression' (WS, 45), but desirous of perspectives that might 'body [...] forth' that which once again remains beyond human language. So it is that

the chapter, 'Stonehenge', finds John Crow's contemplation of the stonework's 'gathered' divinity overtaken by a desire to 'get some impression of this vast Erection from some subhuman observer, *unperverted by historic tradition*' (GR, 104; emphasis added). This sense of human association and meaningfulness as a kind of perversion is picked up by Powys's free indirect discourse, which entertains a speculative digression: '[w]hat would be the feelings of a sea gull, for example, voyaging thus far inland from Studland or from Lulworth in search of newly turned plough-lands, when it suddenly found itself confronted by this temple of the elements?' (GR, 104). The responses of foxes are mused upon, too, before Powys's narrative poses a final, rhetorical question: 'Did a power emanating from these stones attract all the adders and grass snakes and blindworms between Amesbury and Warminster, on certain enchanted summer evenings?' (GR, 104).

The colloquy of forces entertained here tips into the portentous language of mystical or even 'supernatural narration' that Powys elsewhere offers with humour and irony, perhaps, but note, too, that this is ambivalently rooted in an awareness of the provisional, and human, perspectives that this novel brings to bear on Salisbury Plain and Glastonbury. What Esty describes as Powys's combination of an 'infinitely detailed realism with an intensely animated mysticism' is creatively and disruptively turned towards the agency and integrity of non-human perspectives in such moments, as the imagined 'power' of Stonehenge is interspersed with close attention to the flight paths of seagulls 'in search of newly turned plough-lands' (GR, 104).⁵³ If the cultural, the natural, and the supernatural (as both an extension of, and a mystical or even magical departure from, natural forces) are collapsed here, as they so often are in a novel that merges categorisations and demarcations into 'a jumbled-up and squeezed-together epitome of life's various dimensions' (GR, xiv), then this novel's digressive, open-ended style also highlights the possibility of non-human significances that might not be captured until the novel has moved out and away from its customary human perspective and, indeed, the accompanying dimensions of human language and character-driven plot.

⁵³ Esty, p. 63.

As well as Stonehenge's 'godhead', however, Crow senses a challenging, impersonal force manifested in Powys's figuring of the 'wide Plain [...] cold and mute', which possesses an 'identity [...] indrawn upon itself, neither listening nor seeking articulation, lost in an interior world so much vaster and so much more important than the encounters of man with man' (GR, 96). Reminded of forces and temporalities that exceed him, Crow is struck by a sense that the 'encounters of man' are 'like the meetings of ants and beetles upon a twilit terrace that had thoughts and memories of its own altogether outside of such infinitesimal lives' (GR, 96). As this suggests, Powys's shifts of scale and perspective are involved in a gradual decentring of the human, through which something of the vitality of Glastonbury's persistent materialities can be brought into focus. For Lawrence Buell, 'imagining a place with any fullness requires at least a glimpse of its whole history [...] back through its many generations of inhabitation to its prehuman geologic past', and indeed, this sense of a 'prehuman' history further reminds us that the spot or region precedes and exceeds its local, human significances.⁵⁴ So it is that the 'prehistoric stalactites' in Wookey Hole Cave and the 'devotion to fossils' of the Glastonbury Museum's curator introduce an awareness of the town's geological past that is to occur at strategic intervals, further disrupting our sense of local, human scales (GR, 519, 559). In a more playful example, there is a scene in which Philip Crow and the child, Nelly Morgan, discuss 'history':

'If you was one of they Lake Village men, Mister, and I were talking to 'ee, would you have a girt stick with a sharp flint on 'un and thee-self all naked like, or maybe a few big dock-leaves round thee's waist?'

'You'd be glad enough I had a spear with a flint on top,' he remarked, 'if that cow over there were a sabre toothed-tiger or a mammoth.'

The little girl's eyes shone. 'Would 'ee go after it now with thik spear and rip its belly open for it?' she enquired with panting eagerness.

[...] 'Do you learn history at school, Nelly?' he enquired.

(GR, 727)

⁵⁴ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 74.

Imagination's crucial role in filling in the gaps in Powys's overview of Glastonbury's 'whole being' by taking it out and beyond provisional human perspective is suggested, here, as it is in the simile by which Sam Dekker is figured 'as if he were some prehistoric dinosaur, rending its way through a matted entanglement of monstrous moonlit vegetation' (GR, 308).

In this, *A Glastonbury Romance* exhibits pertinent similarities with modernist writers like Woolf, whose *Between the Acts* (1940) includes a character who reads H. G. Wells's *The Outline of History* (1920) and subsequently 'spen[ds] the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent [...] was all one' and thinking about 'the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon'.⁵⁵ As Holly Henry notes, Woolf 'viewed humans against the great geologic eras recorded in the fossil record'; for Bonnie Kime Scott, similarly, Woolf's writing exhibits 'different levels of expressions and levels of engagement with nature', including 'differences of scope (from cosmic to minute)' and 'time scale (evolutionary, primordial, prehistoric, or momentary)'.⁵⁶ We might extend these observations to *A Glastonbury Romance*, where similarly 'prehistoric' undertones and primordial forces are to be stirred up, particularly, by the flood that comes at this novel's close.

Manifesting as both localised catastrophe and anthropological motif, the worsening meteorological conditions of the flood precipitate 'the old recurrent struggle with the elements [...] that brings one age of human life into contact with another' (GR, 1066). Powys is invoking a notably post-Darwinian sense of 'life', here, one that equally inflects the writing of modernist contemporaries including Woolf and Eliot. As Gillian Beer notes:

Evolutionary theory had made a new myth of the past. Instead of the garden, the

⁵⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Holly Henry, 'Science and Technology', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Byrony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 254-266 (p. 254); Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 219.

swamp. Instead of fixed and perfect species, forms in flux. It also renewed the peculiar power of the sea as the first place of life. Most myth systems had given the sea a primary place in the formation of life; now scientific theory historicized this concept. The sea resists transformation. Yet the sea is never old; it is constantly renewing itself.⁵⁷

The flood, in this respect, is not simply a harbinger of destruction; its onrushing waters also bring forgotten evidence of past peoples, cultures, and stages of life to the surface. Encroaching waters ‘[awake] strange legends and wild half-forgotten memories along that coast’ (GR, 1064), prompting Powys’s narrative to record the ‘outlying farms and hamlets—in the strange region of sluices and weirs and dams and rhynes—[about which] so many curious Celtic syllables still cling, like the appellative *Gore*, for instance, syllables full of old mythological associations’ (GR, 1064-1065). As in *The Meaning of Culture* and *Wolf Solent*, such fragments of human language facilitate an expansion of our temporal perspective, recalling the human to its persistent grounding in a material universe that encompasses, and indeed, permits, its culture.

As these ‘strange region[s]’ imply, moreover, the sea is not only a device that dissolves rigid boundaries between past and present, but between terrestrial and ocean-based life, hence the ‘weeds of the terraqueous marshes’, ‘neutral children of the margin’, who are found within ‘a thousand unfrequented backwaters’ of Glastonbury’s margins (GR, 1064). The ‘many infinitesimal sea creatures, tiny sea animalculæ and microscopic salt-water beings’ carried by the floods, similarly, are to be ‘deposited in the rich loam of the Isle of Glastonbury’ (GR, 1065). The ‘forms in flux’ described by Beer are evidenced here. For Powys, as for Eliot in ‘The Dry Salvages’,⁵⁸ the sea’s intrusion prompts a ‘backward half look | Over the shoulder,

⁵⁷ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 17.

⁵⁸ See T. S. Eliot, ‘*Four Quartets*’, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), pp. 177-210.

towards the primitive terror' (II: ll. 54-55), undoing any historical model or narrative in which the past is:

[...] a mere sequence—
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past. (II: l. 38-41).

Indeed, if the 'brown god' of Eliot's river is 'forgotten' by both 'the builder of bridges' and 'the dwellers in cities' (I: ll. 2-7), then the industrialist Philip Crow, conduit for Powys's own 'nasty dig at the modern bridge builder', is quite explicitly reminded of the sea's power: 'torn from its shaft holes, this towering symbol of the power of Capital, of the power of Science, was now the sport of what looked like a mocking, mischievous, taunting cuckoo-spit out of Chaos itself!' (GR, 1076, 1107). The presentation of the flood is thoroughly ambivalent, though like Eliot, Powys's turn to the sea—and indeed, to a 'prehistoric' or 'primeval' Glastonbury more generally—is a rejection of progressivist narratives that might 'disown' the past such as Philip's 'vision of an earth-life dominated absolutely by Science, of a human race that had shaken off its fearful childhood and looked at things with a clear, unfiltered, unperverted eye', or of a humanity that moves 'On, on, on!—destroying the past, creating the future' (GR, 232, 233). The novel's wide-angle lens on human history substitutes 'continual struggle' for development out of a 'fearful childhood'. Even more so than in *Wolf Solent*, Powys in *A Glastonbury Romance* emphasises a landscape, and a temporality, in which past and present forms of life are brought into spatial constellations, and in which the past is materially, culturally, and biologically present in the contemporary moment. Indeed, that a shift in the human's habitual perspective has occurred is underscored by Crummie Geard's observation of the domestic detritus carried by the flood: 'she saw floating [...] bits of broken furniture, pieces of furniture that were not broken but were upside down and horribly disfigured [...] towel-horses and laundry baskets [...] wicker cradles, and pitiful wooden chairs with their legs in the air' (GR, 1093-1094).

Coming into view here is a further sense of ‘life’, one that is inflected by biological and material processes as much as it is by psychological and experiential processes. This, too, is post-Darwinian; hence the description of Geard, earlier in the novel, as he falls asleep at the bottom of Wookey Hole Caves, ‘alone with the metallic elements out of which all organic entities are formed’ (GR, 332). Powys is often read as a naïve worshipper of a transcendent and poeticised ‘Nature’, but such moments suggest a more insightful acknowledgement of a material ‘Nature’ in which the human is fundamentally implicated, beyond even the local and experiential forms of ‘association’ that *The Meaning of Culture* declares ‘poetical’.

In a radical inversion of his emphasis upon ‘the life of a particular spot upon the earth’s surface’, Powys draws, at numerous intervals, upon the earth itself for a sense of scale that will throw the locality of histories and associations into relief:

With the same speed with which it had turned upon its axis, millions of years before the event occurred which gave to the immemorial Grail of Glastonbury its new and Christian significance, the old earth turned now, carrying with it Wirral Hill, like the hump of a great sacred dromedary, and upon Wirral Hill these five male bipeds, each with his staff of office decently concealed, each with a wooden walking-stick, cut from the vegetable world, as an additional masculine prerogative, each with his orderly and rationally working skull full of one single thought.

(GR, 398)

The ‘twenty-five thousand years of human yearning’ sensed by Mary Crow is, from this perspective, a mere ‘new [...] significance’. Human characters are figured as both fundamentally implicated in a materiality that we might call “nature” (having cut walking sticks from the ‘vegetable world’, like those ‘Neolithic’ men with ‘sharp flint[s]’, and with the emphasis on the materiality of their ‘skull[s]’), and putatively distinguished from these forms by virtue of their ‘orderly and rationally working’ thoughts, their symbols of ‘office’. The implied narrator goes on to suggest, quite explicitly, that these characters have come to ‘[represent]—in Remorse, in Renunciation, in Roguery—everything that separates our race from nature’ (GR, 259). The point about Powys’s shifting of tone and voice is pertinent here. On a cursory reading, this separation from ‘nature’ might speak of a Cartesian dualism in which

human agency and rationality is perceived as distinguishing it from a mechanistic, natural world. Crucially, however, the observation is itself followed by a metaphor that frames these characters' position above and apart from the non-human world as an abnormally elevated, if not delusional, perspective: 'their three intelligences floated there, on that hilltop, above their clothed and crouching skeletons, *like wild demented birds that had escaped from all normal restraint*' (GR, 259; emphasis added). The human's position and scale within this landscape is, as Powys suggests, contingent upon its point of view.

So too, it is contingent upon its use of language. Powys's mixed metaphors are instructive in this regard: for all the 'old earth' becomes a 'sacred dromedary' bound to convey its human cargo, it is also a materiality that precedes human forms and human culture by 'millions of years'. Similarly, while these elevated characters may be 'separate[d] [...] from nature', they are nevertheless likened to 'wild [...] birds'. There is a productive messiness, here, one that precludes us from ordering and sorting the components of this textual (and material) world into clearly demarcated categories. That this is an entirely conscious extension of Powys's 'jumbled-up and squeezed together epitome of 'life's various dimensions' (GR, xiv) is suggested, too, by figures in which the relationships between language, perspective, and our sense of a more-than-human world are explicitly raised. In an earlier scene, another assortment of Glastonbury characters crest Wirral Hill:

The weather conditions had assumed a cloud-pattern, an air-pressure, a perspective of light and shadow, such as dwellers in Glastonbury recognized as more natural and normal than any other. Over the surface of the sky extended a feathery white film of vapour. The effect of this filmy screen upon the sun was to make it seem as if it shone through a roof of water.

(GR, 254)

The 'cloud-pattern' of the weather constitutes a very particular aesthetic, one that is nominally 'natural'—at least according to the town's inhabitants—and yet manifestly a function of semblance, appearance, and medium. The watery effect of the 'filmy screen' is more than incidental; as Charles Lock has argued, 'water, fluid, shapeless,

conforming only to the shape of its container, is the central element of *A Glastonbury Romance*, not only thematically and symbolically [...] but also compositionally, as medium'.⁵⁹ This is a localised anticipation of the flood's later dissolution of categorical boundaries. Hence the continued result of this 'screen', as it substitutes shape and outline with colour and gradient:

All were equally blurred and softened. Thus it came about that a moon-like circle of pallid whiteness looked forth upon a world from which every harsh projection, whether of stone, or wood, or metal, or horn, or scale, or feather, or bone, or rock, had been obliterated; a world of flowing curves and sliding shadows, a world of fluctuating shapes and melting contours. [...] Every shade, every richness, every variety of colour, lent itself to this colour-invasion of the kingdom of form.

Thus as these three men stood together at the foot of Glastonbury Tor the grass of the hillside seemed of an incredibly rich depth. It was like a mounting wave of palpable greenness into which, if you began to walk, your feet would sink down.

(GR, 254-255)

Such 'palpable greenness' recalls the use of a similar shade in *Wolf Solent*, where the titular character envisaged the 'brown earth' as a 'tawny-skinned centaur', and imagined that 'the reason the world was all so green about him was because all living souls—the souls of grass-blade and tree-roots and river-reeds—shared, after their own kind, the drinking up of that blue immensity by the great mouth of clay' (WS, 152). Here, however, Powys substitutes the mythopoeic figures of Wolf's aesthetic for a focused attention to weather conditions, atmospheric pressure, and perspective. We should note that these 'melting contours' capture, in miniature, what is, for Wiseman, a 'key narrative technique' of Powys's writing: 'the delineation of gradual progressions between realms or states, emphasising the sense of a continuum between them, rather than a fixed border'.⁶⁰ The point is not so much that we retrieve any definite sense of the interrelationship between these various human and non-human forms—'stone', 'wood', 'metal', 'horn', 'scale', 'feather', 'bone', and 'rock'—but rather that we note the sustained attention to perspective and medium as constitutive

⁵⁹ Lock, p 272.

⁶⁰ Wiseman, p. 55.

of our own acts of observation: as Powys notes, ‘the Tower upon Glastonbury Tor varies in appearance as much as any hill-erection in Wessex [...] due to the extraordinary variety of atmospheric changes which the climate of this district evokes’ (GR, 254).

It is in this sense, too, that Powys disperses his own narrative attention to ‘the particular spot upon the earth’s surface’ far enough and wide enough so that the term cannot, finally, be taken as a metonymic reference to the town’s human community (AR, 7). As Powys’s ‘interminable’ writing turns to increasingly marginal and marginalised perspectives, his novel allows for that facet of Glastonbury’s life that inheres, too, in forces that are ‘chemical’, ‘spiritual’, and cultural, and which are embodied in both the ‘geological strata’ of the landscape as much as the ‘historic changes that have come to its human inhabitants in connection with these things’ (AR, 7). So it is that the reported actions of human (and nonhuman) characters share space with attention to the earth’s telluric forces—‘Below the mud of the Brue there was a bed of clay; below the clay, the original granite of the planet’s skeleton; below the granite an ocean of liquid rock upon which the granite floated’ (GR, 358)—and with lavish descriptions of the wind:

The wind [...] flagged a little by the time it reached West Pennard. It dropped some of its tiny moss-spores, its infinitesimal lichen-scales, its fungus-odours, its oak-apple dust, its sterile bracken-pollen, its wisps of fluff from the bellies of Sedgemoor wild-fowl, its feathery husks from the rushes of Mark Moor, its salt-weed pungencies from the Bay of Bridgewater.

(GR, 780)

This ranging between the ‘infinitesimal’ and the sublime indicates the way in which a shifting, kaleidoscopic approach to scale and perspective is fundamental to this novel’s attempt to gesture towards Glastonbury’s ‘whole being’.

As Wiseman notes, these manoeuvres have the specific effect of ‘undermin[ing] the centrality of human concerns’.⁶¹ In addition to Powys’s yawning, prehistoric timescales, for instance, characters are continually recognising the contingency of their own importance, as when John Crow watches John Geard bathe the elderly Tittie Petherington in Chalice Well and imagines fleas, ‘frightened by the water, leaving her clothes and scurrying away across the slabs of the fountain where they would undoubtedly perish’ (GR, 705). These thoughts prompt a reflection upon his own ‘relative’ importance: ‘It’s relatively important that those vermin should escape starvation [...]. It’s relatively important that my life with Mary should be exquisitely happy. [...] God! what a mix-up it all is’ (GR, 706). Powys’s extended attention to ‘fluff’ and fleas suggests how his idiosyncratic approach to narrative selectivity works to refute received hierarchies of *narrative* importance, muddying the distinction between a passive, nonhuman setting and those active, human characters that demand narrative attention.

Powys’s expansion of syntax itself is, I would suggest, a device that precludes the kind of binaristic thinking that we saw Plumwood critique in this chapter’s introduction. Note, for example, the way in which *Wolf Solent*’s earlier attention to place names and regional ephemera is enacted, now, in Powys’s listing syntax, as if the writing itself were struggling to accommodate its author’s encyclopaedic pretensions:

[The wind] dropped fragments and morsels of its burden now, all along the path of its eastern flight. It dropped some at Pylle, some at Evercreech, some at Wanstrow and Witham Friary, some at Great Bradley Wood, some at Long Leat Park. Wisps of what it carried floated down at all those little villages called by the name of Deverill. At Kingston Deverill, at Monkton Deverill, at Hill Deverill and at Longbridge Deverill little fragments were wafted to the ground. The wind gathered more strength as it reached Old Willoughby Hedge and Chapel Field Barn. But it dropped some more of its burden at Two Mile Down and yet more of it among the ancient British Villages

⁶¹ Wisemanp, p. 63.

and the high hill-tumuli that surround Great Ridge and Stonehill Copse.

(GR, 780)

These passages further exemplify *A Glastonbury Romance*'s creative marriage of textual excess and extravagant inclusiveness, as well as Powys's particular response to Woolf's dictum that the modern novelist should 'record the atoms as they fall', which Powys here substitutes with 'moss-spores', 'lichen-scales', 'dust', 'fluff' and 'pollen'. It is not simply that cultural and personal inflections constitute this region's particular "character", or even that the land itself precedes and outlasts these human significances, but that Glastonbury's biotic fragments and material forces, too, contribute to the broader sense of 'life' that Powys's novel records and, therefore, to the demand for an ever-lengthening syntax and an ever-shifting narrative perspective. Powys's 'mix-up', in this sense, is beginning to come into view as a particularly strategic manner of representation, despite his attempts to stress a disinclination for artistic pretensions. In order to trace the ethical inflection that shapes such representations of non-human nature, I want to return to my opening suggestion that there are ecological and ethological perspectives, too, at work in Powys's attempt to treat a region 'psychologically', and to describe, as a means of closing our discussion, the curious form of naturalist romance that results.

IV: Naturalist Romance

As has perhaps become apparent, Powys's turn to the 'life' of Glastonbury is hardly scientifically precise, even as Powys draws upon post-Darwinian discourses, choosing to emphasise Glastonbury's jumbled and mixed knot of forces and figures through 'interminable' digression rather than systematic analysis. However, Powys's mixing of naturalist and novelistic discourses constitutes a further example of his lively experimentation with literary form, one in which the defining lines between human and nonhuman—in both a particular 'locality', and as they are represented in the novel—become similarly entangled.

We can see something of this in a crucial episode where the ‘dedicated naturalist[s]’ Sam and Mat Dekker stare at the ‘numberless medallions of deeply cut carvings’ found in the entrance to St. Mary’s Church:

Only trained experts in such matters can today interpret this dim, confused, obscure entanglement of animals, leaves, flowers, angels and impassioned human figures. Neither of the Dekkers was an expert of this kind, and to their simple naturalist eyes it was comfort enough to contemplate in that rich confusion of organic shapes a general impression of earth-life that resembled some sumptuous entanglement of moss and rubble and lichen, amid the twisted roots of old forest trees.

(GR, 320)

I want to suggest that the observation of these carvings elucidates Powys’s own response to the relationships between art and material nature, or at least ‘earth-life’. The Dekkers’ ‘simple naturalist eyes’ introduce us, here, to a comforting, if not particularly inquisitive, ‘impression’ of interaction and entanglement, a ‘rich confusion’ that focuses our attention on this novel’s proliferation of metaphors and figures of ‘criss-cross’ entanglement. This is quite far from the rigorous ‘*study* of interrelationships among organisms and between organisms and their environment’ that Alt associates with twentieth-century life sciences, though we should acknowledge the way in which these metaphors of disorderly and ‘sumptuous entanglement’ emphasise forms of connection and interaction which are sustained in this novel’s various metaphors of interaction and entanglement. For as this further suggests, it is through a creative use of language, rather than through a committed exposition of scientific principles, that Powys will seek to trouble the boundaries between human and non-human life.

However ‘dedicated’ the Dekkers, they remain quintessentially Victorian naturalists, to be distinguished from the developing expertise of twentieth-century ecology. As Alt notes, ‘the study of nature in Britain remained a largely amateur pursuit for much of the nineteenth century, and this amateurism impeded scientific organisation and innovation’.⁶² The Dekkers, comparatively, join a larger collective of “charlatan”

⁶² Alt, p. 22.

hobbyists in their embodiment of an accumulative enthusiasm that is distinctly Powysian in its outlook. Glastonbury's antiquities dealer, Bartholomew Jones, as we have seen, is 'not a modern virtuoso or a sophisticated connoisseur': instead, he 'collects his objects with a personal predilection all his own, a predilection which, while neither very learned nor very aesthetic, had a certain pathos of choice peculiar to itself' (GR, 345). The "historian" Evans, whom we have also already encountered as he puts together his '[s]craps and morsels and fragments, mythical, historical, natural, supernatural, so long as they had some bearing, however remote, upon the life of Merlin', offers a further example of the kind of wide-ranging but cheerful amateurism practised by the Dekkers 'in their secluded Rectory' (GR, 111). Mat, as I have noted, is Glastonbury's vicar; his living room at Whitelake Cottage, however, is 'more like the play-room of a whole family of young naturalists than a theologian's study, though on one side of the apartment there was a large gloomy bookcase full of standard Anglican works', further emphasising the non-vocational nature of their shared 'love' of 'gardening' and 'natural history' (GR, 285, 111). Indeed, it is their leisure time, rather than any systematic study, that has allowed the Dekkers to become familiar with Glastonbury's sights, sounds, and smells: '[Mat] always loved a long walk with Sam and there was not a field or a lane within several miles of their home where some rare plant or bird [...] did not arrest their attention' (GR, 127). That these characters pursue 'their *hobbies* as botanists, entomologists, geologists, ichthyologists, without cessation or interruption' further suggests the metafictional function of all these amateurish enthusiasts, for Powys, too, trades on passing himself off as anything but a 'modern virtuoso' (GR, 111-112; emphasis added).

More specifically, however, the Dekkers manifest an intensely personal and affective relationship with Glastonbury and its flora and fauna. As Scott Hess notes, 'environmental knowledge has always depended on specific forms of activity', and Powys, as we have seen, figures the Dekkers as characters whose experiences have inflected not only their attitudes towards Glastonbury's flora and fauna, but their sense of identity.⁶³ There is a further scene in which the Dekkers' naturalist

⁶³ Scott Hess, 'Imagining an Everyday Nature', *ISLE*, 17:1 (2010), 85-112 (87).

sentiments run against the opinions of Will Zoyland, ‘bastard son of [...] the great Somerset landowner’ (GR, 134). Visiting Zoyland, Mat Dekker catches a glimpse of a hunting rifle propped against the wall: ‘like the dedicated naturalist that he was, Mat Dekker hated to see any bird shot; and even though he had been told that in that low-lying ground kestrels had grown to be a nuisance, he still would have protested violently’ (GR, 134). The theme is briefly handled—though it is touched on at several intervals across this chapter, particularly as Sam accompanies Zoyland as he checks his traps (‘the idea of a wild otter caught in a trap by his bearded companion suddenly became unbearable’)—but I want to note the manner in which Powys represents the Dekkers, here, as amateur enthusiasts whose love of the region outpaces their thirst for scientific, or even religious, systems of order (GR,137).

With this in mind, we might briefly return to the *Autobiography* (1934), and to Powys’s descriptions of his father, Charles Francis Powys, whose amateur attention to flora and fauna suggests something of the Dekkers’ enthusiastic, if amateurish, spirit:

For all his contempt for science, and his preference for traditional pastoral lore, he was wont to utter such proud phrases as:

‘I am glad you have noticed that formation, my boy. It is Blue Lias’, or ‘Here is something, Johnny, that is worth seeing, a piece of Kimmeridge Clay!’

He would say this just as he would say ‘The Cormorant is the greediest of all birds’, or ‘My brother once stared into a tiger’s eyes till he put the brute out of countenance’.

(A, 51)

The elder Powys’s equation of natural science with exaggerated and embellished stories (‘my brother once stared into a tiger’s eyes till he put the brute out of countenance’) suggests how ‘organisation’, scientific or otherwise, is a necessarily ambivalent affair for his son, John Cowper. As Radford has shown, the later Wessex novel, *Maiden Castle* (1936) shares a similarly reserved attitude to archaeological expertise, despite its own ‘imaginative archaeology’, precisely because Powys sees links between expert and systematic excavations and vivisection as processes that similarly reduce ‘the lavish and wistful fertility of Nature’ to the kind of inert

laboratory specimen that we saw in *Wolf Solent* (MAC, 317).⁶⁴ There is a desire for ethical responsiveness to the non-human at work here, not least since Powys records his father's mix of geological accuracy and hand-me-down storytelling ('the Cormorant is the greediest of birds') as a form of attachment in its own right, as we have seen: 'Every phenomenon he referred to, whether animate or inanimate, became a sacrosanct thing [...] I think it materially increased his appreciation of any landscape he was traversing when he could gravely refer to "Purbeck Marble" [...]' (A, 51).

As this might suggest of *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys's strategy there is not to organise his human figures, 'flora and fauna', and 'geological strata', but to note the multiple ways in which they are entangled and enfolded together, both through time and in the present moment of his narration. Almost everything in Glastonbury, as Powys's narrator sees it, is knotted together in one way or another. Hence the 'criss-cross currents of [an] eventful April Fool's Day' (GR, 342); the amorous 'entanglement' of Nell Zoyland and Sam Dekker (GR, 116); the 'entanglement of bric-a-brac' within Bartholomew Jones's antique shop (GR, 345); or the 'masses of hazel-branches darkly clustering' in Wick Wood, 'hiding the fluttering chaffinches and blackcaps whose songs issued forth from their entanglement' (GR, 507-508). As this last example suggests, this novel's 'jumbled-up and squeezed together epitome of 'life's various dimensions' proceeds with careful attention to the 'flora and fauna' that was promised in Powys's 'Author's Review'.

A central example of how Powys refrains from drawing stable, dividing lines between Glastonbury's various inhabitants is the repeating figure of the 'Glastonbury aquarium' (GR, 623, 1020). Having noted the aquarium owned by the 'dedicated naturalist', Mat Dekker (GR, 134), Powys later adds that, 'above every community, above every town, there are invisible Powers hovering, as interested in the minnows, male and female, swimming about in that particular human aquarium, as Mat Dekker was in his fish' (GR, 622). The dividing line between supernatural narration and metafictional experiment is further eroded, here, as Powys imagines a community of

⁶⁴ Radford, pp. 102-103.

‘celestial naturalists’ hovering above the town (GR, 623), ‘those inquisitive naturalists that very old places, full of contorted human history, attract by a species of spontaneous selection’, or, further, ‘the elementals of Glastonbury—those naturalists that [have] hovered over the vaporous humours of three thousand years of criss-cross human tangles’ (GR, 613). As Lock argues, Powys’s description of these ‘celestial’ figures is not just a fantastic device, but ‘virtually a gloss on the technical assumptions of traditional “omniscient” narration’.⁶⁵ The effect for the reader is a refreshed consciousness of our own perspective upon the events of this novel:

At this particular moment of the fifteenth of August, that is to say at nine minutes and forty seconds past three o’clock, had any of these *super-mundane naturalists* been studying the physical and psychic movements of the Glastonbury aquarium, they would certainly have come to the conclusion that John Crow [... and] Angela Beere [...] were the two *water-creatures* whose amorous excitement was the most intense.

(GR, 623; emphases added)

As the passage suggests, Powys’s ‘criss-cross’ entanglements echo forms of ecosystemic interaction. Such figuring (‘water-creatures’, ‘*human aquarium*’) begins to establish significant and perhaps surprising parallels between human and non-human life, destabilising rigid distinctions between the life-forms inhabiting this bio-region (it is suggestive, in this sense, that Powys’s ‘whole life of a community’, described in the ‘Author’s Review’, includes ‘dogs, cats, fish’) (GR, 622; AR, 8). The implied narrator is crucial, here, for the consciously invoked voice of Glastonbury’s ‘present chronicler’, who passes comment upon these ‘celestial naturalists’, functions as a narrative device through which the contrived details of novelistic plot can be presented as the haphazard activities of human and nonhuman animals who are simply observed, “studied” (GR, 1051). So it is that Powys stresses how, ‘for the most part the inhabitants of a given locality—or aquarium—just go blindly on, unconsciously swimming about, following their affairs, obeying their necessities, pursuing the smaller fry, making their weed-nests or their mud-nurseries’ (GR, 622). The amorous activities of human characters are figured, here, as kinds of courtship

⁶⁵ Lock, p. 273.

ritual analogous to the activities of the ‘darting, silvery, rose-tinged aboriginals of our human-organism’ that Powys describes in the *Autobiography*, where he reflects upon the aquarium he kept as a child (A, 54-55). It is in a similar spirit that the subplot concerning the relationship between Sam Dekker and Nell Zoyland figures Sam as being ‘essentially a slow-moving, slow-witted, timid animal’, one who ‘little knew what superhuman Naturalists were watching him, as interested in his present antics (and not less sympathetic) as he himself had so often been over the aquarium in his father’s museum’ (GR, 305; 307). Powys’s sense of ecological interaction is crucial here, for it permits the reader to be placed in the position of a naturalist observer who is to understand Glastonbury’s human inhabitants in terms of their ethological activity, their shared inhabitation of a ‘given locality’.

Indeed, (human) characters are described not only as ‘anthropoid minnows’, but as ‘anthropoid mammal[s]’, ‘male bipeds’, ‘male animals’, or even ‘male beast[s]’ (GR, 834, 113, 398, 1037, 624). Descriptions of social bonds between characters such as Mat and Sam Dekker as an ‘animal-male link [...] hirsute flesh against hirsute flesh’ offer further appeals to creaturely forms of sociality, establishing a narrative perspective from which the human is hardly quantitatively distinct from other animals (GR, 917). When John Crow, Owen Evans, and Sam Dekker rest on Glastonbury Tor, for instance, Powys’s narrative switches to the kind of detailed observation that we might associate with keen, naturalist eyes falling upon living organisms within their ecological environment: ‘[John Crow] seated himself by Sam’s side as he spoke and Mr. Evans sat down, too. The position of the three men when thus seated was as follows: John was nearest the Tor; [...] Mr Evans was nearest Chalice Hill; [...] While Sam had the middle place [...]’ (GR, 255). Hierarchies that we might associate more readily with nonhuman pack animals are hinted at, here. Tellingly, Crow sits in a manner that is reminiscent of the human’s post-Darwinian ancestry, with a ‘hunched up posture [...] [and] prodding the earth with his hazel-stick’ (GR, 256). Similarly post-Darwinian inflections colour the text’s language at various intervals: when Geard finds himself alone in Wookey Hole Cave, for example, the narrator observes how ‘he was alone with the metallic elements out of which all organic entities are formed’; Dave Spear less positively observes that Glastonbury’s entire populace is ‘a herd of

gibbering monkeys in a madhouse of inherited superstitions' (GR, 332, 268). Finally, when Tom Barter is murdered, we find John Crow making 'an *instinctive* movement to pursue the murderer' as Owen Evans and Cordelia Geard '[dash] back into the tower and [clamber], swift as a monkey, up the tall ladders inside' (GR, 1051; emphasis added). If Powys's 'psychological' narration tended to human forms of association with the landscape, this naturalist inflection reminds us that the human can also be understood ethologically, as an animal existing within its own locality or even ecological niche. Indeed, that 'angels' accompany 'impassioned human figures' and 'animals, leaves, [and] flowers' in the carving that prompts their 'general impression of earth-life' is suggestive: like the 'gloomy bookcase full of Anglican standard works' that the aquarium in the Dekkers' 'play-room' has pushed to one side, this neglect of figures of divine order suggests how Powys, like the vicar and his son, has abandoned a mechanistic sense of "natural" order and hierarchy for more ecologically-minded forms of representation. For all his distrust of scientific inquiry and the increasing professionalisation of twentieth-century life sciences, Powys quite consciously opposes such ecological interaction to theological forms of order.

We see this, too, as the Dekkers come to a pair of 'titanic trees [...] that might have witnessed at least a fifth portion of the long historic life of Glastonbury' (GR, 128). To 'the mind of the elder Dekker', these trees suggest 'thoughts quite unconnected with either Vikings or Druids'; Powys's narrative responds, in kind, with an expanded perspective that blends natural and human histories:

Against that great rough trunk many a gipsy donkey had rubbed its grey haunches and got comfort by it, many a stray heifer had butted with her wanton horns and eased her heart, squirrels had scampered and scratched there, and hung suspended, swaying their tails and scolding, wrens had built their large, green, mossy nests there, chaffinches had scraped and pecked at the lichen for their nests, so small, so elegant, in the nearby blackthorn bushes. Past that trunk and its great twin brother further down the lane had ridden men in armour, men in Elizabethan ruffles, men with cavalier ringlets, men in eighteenth-century wigs. Many of these no doubt jumped down from their horses, drawn by an indescribable, magnetic pull, and touched that indented bark with their travel-swollen bare hands. And to many it must have brought

luck of some sort, some healing wisdom, some wise decisions, some hints of how to deal with their mates, with their offspring, with the tumult of life!

(GR, 128-129)

There are multiple instances of ‘sumptuous entanglement’ between human and nonhuman forms jumbled together in this ‘tumult of life’. The expanded temporal perspectives of the novel once more emphasise the criss-crossing of various lives in both the present moment and through time. Indeed, the tree, which has seen ‘more wild November rains, more luminous August moons [...] than either Sam Dekker or his father had any notion of’, has a ‘vast planetary experience’ that Powys’s own narrative perspective will seek to mobilise (GR, 128). The tree’s significance, as such writing acknowledges, is multiple: it inheres in its existence as a ‘living creature’ in its own right, one which ‘appear[s] to be conversing’ with its neighbours, ‘far up above the rest of the vegetable world and where none but birds could play the eavesdropper’, and as a focal point—even a localised environment—for an increasing number of human and nonhuman lives (GR, 128). Note, finally, how central *language* is, here: the description of these cavaliers’ and courtiers’ ‘offspring’ and ‘mates’, for example, further establishing those surprising parallels between the nesting habits and courtship rituals of nonhuman animals and the human love affairs imagined.

As this consciousness of language suggests, such scientific perspectives are infused with an awareness of the forms of representation at hand. We have to distinguish, here, between ecological systems and the ‘criss-cross’ entrelacement of romance, precisely because Powys recognises that his writing, however interminable, can never adequately capture the fullness and spontaneity of natural systems. While the writing of the novel works to “plot” its narrative structure according to ecosystemic principles of interaction and entanglement, Powys also recognises that the Glastonbury ‘aquarium’ he is creating is itself a miniaturisation of larger ecological systems. In the *Autobiography*, for example, Powys observes that the construction of an aquarium ‘satisfied in some profound manner my desire to be God, or at least *a god*’: ‘there is undoubtedly something about watching the movements of these Beings, as they swim in and out of the stones and weeds from which *you have created their world*’ (A, 54-55). There is a creative tension, here, between the open-endedness of Powys’s roving

imagination, and the constructed and delimited character of the novel form itself, though this is to become productive.

Indeed, as Joshua Schuster argues, in a discussion that traces the birth of modern ecology to the use of field quadrats, ‘a modern, self-reflexive ecology begins when the frame is included in the landscape and the landscape is already recognized as a frame, even as we well know that ecology exceeds whatever square, box, or frame one would want to perceive it by’.⁶⁶ Powys, of course, makes no recourse to quadrats or to the field instruments of natural scientists. He does, however, have a series of romance-inspired instruments with which to emphasise his imaginative ‘framing’ of this Glastonbury ecology. Consider the following passage, for instance:

“It is extraordinary that we should ever have met!” These words, uttered [to Mary] by John [...] struck the attention of that solitary ash tree in Water-ditch Field with what in trees corresponds to human irony. Five times in its life of a hundred and thirty years had the ash tree of Water-ditch Field heard those words uttered by living organisms. An old horse had uttered them in its own fashion when it rubbed its nose against a young companion’s polished flanks. An eccentric fisherman had uttered them addressing an exceptionally large chub which he had caught and killed. A mad clergyman had uttered them about a gipsy girl who did not know of his existence. An old maiden lady had uttered them to the spirit of her only lover, dead fifty years before; and finally, but twelve months ago, William Crow himself had uttered them [...].

All this the ash tree noted; but its vegetative comment thereon would only have sounded in human ears like the gibberish: *wuther-quotle-glug*.

(GR, 89)

Again, a tree serves to extend the temporal horizons and scales of the narrative. And, again, nonhuman characters become witnesses to, and participants in, the ‘tumult of life’ that is hereby figured. Language is implicated in a genealogy of feeling brilliantly “witnessed” by the non-human world. Harald Fawkner makes the distinction that this ash tree of water-ditch field has ‘absorbed innumerable human

⁶⁶ Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), p. x.

thoughts —“absorbed”, that is, in the sense of being symbolically weighted rather than paranormally situated’, and argues that it is thus ‘something with a collective significance’.⁶⁷ Compared to the previous example of the oak trees, the lives that are interwoven around this arboreal presence are entangled by virtue of Powysian narrative and observed coincidence, rather than by the material practices of nesting and foraging taking place within the boughs of the oak. If nothing else, the figure emphasises Powys’s departure from objective ethological or ecological observation. This turn to the literary “frame” provided by romance and fable—note, for instance, the stock figures (‘an old horse’, ‘an eccentric fisherman’, ‘a mad clergyman’, ‘a gipsy girl’)—however, is crucial, for it is also the measure of a consciously literary language that is beginning to extend the terms of collective significance beyond a familiarly anthropocentric perspective. For Schuster, the ‘issues [of framing and selection] that mark ecology as a modern science [...] are also the same issues for thinking about the stakes of ecology within modernist art’.⁶⁸ Such consciousness of the act of representation is manifested, here, through Powys’s invocation of romance. For the novel is to develop a narrative that is willing to extend the anthropomorphic legacy of its literary traditionalism to Glastonbury’s non-human life, figuring these forms as participants in, and not simply as background to, the romance at hand.

That the tree is both a conduit for Powys’s anthropomorphic and romance-inspired writing, and a textual (‘*wuther-quotle-glug*’) reminder of the partiality instantiated by the human medium that is writing itself, is suggested by the narrative’s playful theorising that ‘the *language* of trees is even more remote from human intelligence than the *language* of beasts or of birds’ (GR, 89; emphases added). As in *Wolf Solent*, however, it is the consciousness with which Powys transgresses these thresholds that is important. Here, another pair of lovers find themselves ensconced under a fir and a holly tree. As these trees begin ‘creaking lamentably in the wind’, Powys offers an anthropomorphic analogy:

⁶⁷ Harald Fawkner, *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), p. 118.

⁶⁸ Schuster, p. ix.

As a matter of fact, although neither of these human lovers were aware of this, between that Scot fir and that ancient holly there had existed for a hundred years a strange attraction. Night by night, since the days when the author of Faust lay dying in Weimar and those two embryo trees were in danger of being eaten by grubs, they had loved each other. [...] [A]cross this leafless unfrequented field these two evergreens could lift to each other their sub-human voices and cry their ancient vegetation-cry, clear and strong. (GR, 786)

Again, the story takes a creative digression away from the temporality of the human individual and into a fantastic, stylised vignette unfolding not in the moment of the present, but over ‘a hundred years’.⁶⁹ Clearly, we have moved away, in this example, from any ecological or naturalist sense of interaction and relationship and into an anthropomorphic literalisation of the term. Here, continuity between human and nonhuman is no longer a case of their mutual grounding in nature as reality, matter, but rather a case of their shared incorporation into the narrative, and the romance-inspired mood, of the writing. The point to note, however, is this novel’s rather unsystematic ranging between its modes of naturalist observation and naturalist romance, its use of anthropomorphic and naturalist figures to produce a fictional world in which human and nonhuman individual alike are amenable to the roving perspective of supposedly ubiquitous author-god who is both creator and observer of these surprising figures. If Powys describes, for example, the amorous ‘entanglement’ with Nell Zoyland that Sam Dekker fears mentioning to his father (GR, 116) as well as the more vegetative entanglements of ‘hazel branches darkly clustering around [...] blue spaces in the dark wood’ or ‘lithe clumps of elder, mingled with holly’ (GR, 508, 532) then this romantic entanglement of a pair of arboreal lovers conflates and confuses even these demarcations of human and ‘subhuman’ forms (GR, 508, 532).

⁶⁹ The reference to Goethe is perhaps not incidental. Consider, for example, Powys’s preface: ‘[...] the symbol of the Grail represents a lapping up of one perfect drop of noon-day happiness as Nietzsche in his poignant words would say, or as *Nature herself, according to the hint given us by Goethe, whispers to us in more voices than at present we are able to hear, or to understand when we do hear*’ (GR, xvi; emphasis added).

When Powys claims that he ‘had not then, and have not now, the remotest idea’ ‘whether [‘life’s various dimensions’] ever are condensed to this tune in *real life*’ he is, of course, being somewhat disingenuous; but he is also indicating the liberating function that he associates with the imagination itself (GR, xiv). *A Glastonbury Romance* provides a final, striking example of this ecological consciousness, as John Crow imagines the conversation that might occur as the human louse fleeing the submersed clothes of Tittie Petherington and discussed earlier reaches the shore and encounters a woodlouse:

‘All is strange to me,’ said the human louse to the wood louse. He spoke the lice language with its beautiful vowel-sounds to perfection.

‘On the contrary,’ said the wood louse, speaking the same ancient tongue but with a rude rural intonation, ‘*you* are the only strange thing here to me’. (GR, 706)

To many critics, perhaps, such anthropomorphic frivolity would not warrant serious attention, but this wonderful and broadly comic example further emphasises the unique manner in which Powys theorises encounters between human and non-human worlds. For Timothy Morton, representation of the non-human other requires awareness of the ‘strange stranger’: ‘This stranger isn’t just strange. She, or he, or it—can we tell? how?—is strangely strange. Their strangeness is itself strange. We can never absolutely figure them out’.⁷⁰ Powys’s figuring is a world away from the kind of ‘dark ecology’ professed by Morton—which ‘includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror’—yet it, too, makes its own acknowledgement of this strangeness of interlocking worlds, albeit through a dramatisation in which the gulfs that separate human and non-human are consciously paved over by fantastic imaginative license.⁷¹ The playful shifting of scale and perspective in this example is once again crucial, sustaining a narrative that reflects this ‘mix-up’ between human and nonhuman “characters”: the ‘lusty wood louse’, we might note, has curled into a ‘lead-coloured ball’ to avoid John Geard, who appears to the woodlouse as ‘an immense Brontosaurus’ (GR, 706). The ‘beauty’ of the louse’s ‘vowel sounds’ is, of course, an

⁷⁰ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 41.

⁷¹ Morton, p. 17.

irreverent and even mischievous expenditure of authorial license, but the close attention to perspectives that might become effaced in a more traditional, character-based plot—not only lice, but trees, ‘fluff’ and ‘pollen’, and at one point, a ‘microscopic parasite’ (GR, 813)—speaks of Powys’s intimation that the ‘Great Modern Novel’ is not accomplished until it has developed a form and language that might reclaim these marginal presences. The fabular anthropomorphism, in this sense, cuts both ways, comically sending up the importance of the regional heritage and dialect that is attended to throughout *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance* by miniaturising it and inviting us to see it from a different point of view, yet equally bringing the ‘beautiful vowel-sounds’ of ‘the lice language’ into focus as a ‘relatively important’ phenomenon in its own right. This ‘language’ is, of course, imagined—like the syllables, ‘*wuther-quotle-glug*’—but the sense of a ‘strange’ world that, like Salisbury Plain, is ‘neither listening nor seeking articulation’, but which the novel itself would be poorer for having neglected, is nevertheless palpable.

Baldick warns against “‘romanticizing” romance [by] casting it as an underground movement of imaginative liberation for its own sake’, but if Powys’s comments upon his own authorial practises are in this sense flawed then we might observe, quite fairly I think, that the novel’s bold and often shameless figuring of the non-human explodes the anthropocentricities of a more sober, realist form.⁷² As we have seen, *A Glastonbury Romance*’s use of figures in which forms of messy, yet lively entanglement replace the strictly ordered hierarchies that this novel associates with the ‘expert’ interpretations of both scripture and science, and, indeed, with those novels in which human individuals are the only ‘hero[es] or heroine[s] of the tale’, constitutes a distinctive aesthetic.⁷³ That the “‘historian” Owen Evans values his own ‘*Vita Merlini*’ precisely for its incorporation of details that have been neglected by other scholars is thus suggestive of *A Glastonbury Romance*’s literary practice, which seeks to satisfy the readers’ appetite for ‘just everything’ by developing a literary form in which each component is privileged as a significant moment in a process of writing that—like the ecological dimensions of life itself—might always exceed its

⁷² Baldick, p. 218.

⁷³ Wiseman, p. 55.

projected terminus. As Powys's personification of the text's manuscript suggests: 'I have got to the 300th page in my Glastonbury book which is exactly a quarter (if I have calculated my future voyage with a correct astrolabe of what it *will* be - for *I hope that it will confine itself* to 1200 pages)' (LL, II, 34; second emphasis added). The overspilling of such bounds, and the discovery of lively and enthralling subjects for "charlatan" writing in the direction of content that the realist novel might—often with good reason—neglect to tread represent both the strengths, and the weaknesses, of Powys's 'rambling' and 'prolix' manner of writing. For the novel is bloated, quixotic, but also an unceasingly creative attempt to figure a Glastonbury 'life' that extends from 'infinitesimal sea animalculæ', 'tiny moss-spores', 'microscopic parasite[s]' and even 'microscopic [human bipeds] to the blazing 'super-consciousness' of the Sun itself and 'the original granite of the planet's skeleton' (GR, 358). If the result, to some readers, is often unconvincing this is perhaps a risk that Powys consciously takes in this 'freak[ish]' novel. For if Powys is, as Esty argues, hereby 'adapt[ing] the heroic and encyclopedic modernist ambitions represented by Joyce's *Ulysses*', he is doing so in ways which place such 'ambitions' and indeed, the coherency and capacity of modernist "vision", under pressure.⁷⁴ There is no final line, no sense that 'it was done; it was finished', to be found in Powys's conception of the region's 'whole being' or in Powys's figuring of the artist. Indeed, in the 'Author's Review', we sense that the flood that constitutes the novel's denouement is, finally, an 'excuse' to save Powys from the many lifetimes of writing demanded by Squire Urquhart:

What ends [this novel] then? What excuse did you find for writing "Finis"?

The excuse found by God when *his* world got beyond his control.

What was that?

The Flood.

(AR, 9)

Chapter Four: 'Nature', Matter, and Planetary Community in *Porius*

⁷⁴ Esty, p. 64.

There is a moment in Powys's *Porius* (1951) in which Powys's Merlin figure, Myrddin Wyllt, offers what can be read as an oblique comment on those modernistic ideologies that perceived the "new" as a breach from, and even a destruction of, the past.¹ Recalling Powys's comments that his contemporary moment found interest in romancers such as Walter Scott 'atrophied' due to a preponderance of writers 'waylaid by the modern spirit',² the prophetic Wyllt "anticipates" Powys's complaint from the perspective of 499 AD:

[W]hen the age of Pisces is over and the age of Aquarius begins do you fancy that men *then*, men who can kill with balls of fire, men who can sail in ships of iron, men who can ride on horses of smoke, will give a *denarius* for a *Vita* of you or me, or an *obol* of brass to know what the Lady Gwendydd did or the Lady Nineue said, though all the forest *was* in arms around their tent?

(P, 106)

In one sense, the irony is a summation of the Powysian project, for his writing had always taken time to observe, and to take pleasure in, the multifarious ways in which the past impinges on the present. In *Porius*, however, this irony has acquired a sense of urgency. Wyllt's cynicism finds an echo in those earlier and received readings of Powys's literary trajectory as one of '[retreat] throughout our mid-century', an increasing movement towards 'that utopia resorted to by writers who are intimidated out of thought by the mounting contradictions of their time: a Golden Age in the remote past that can only be postulated if you refuse all evidence from history that does not displease you'.³ Yet Wyllt's word is not final; nor is his question rhetorical, as the reply from the Henog—the historian charged with recording this *Vita Merlini*—suggests:

[T]he future does not yet exist [...]. [T]hese struggles of mine [...] to sift and winnow the truth from the falsehood in the great gold mine of the infinite past are themselves

¹ A heavily bowdlerised version of the novel was first published in 1957; a complete edition, edited by Judith Bond and Morine Krissdóttir was published in 2007.

² John Cowper Powys, *100 Best Books* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1916), p. 42.

³ Vernon Young, 'The Immense Inane', *The American Scholar*, 55:1 (1986), 248-258 (255).

part of the mysterious power that out of the past [...] creates the as yet uncreated future! (P, 108)

Though conveyed in a typically idiosyncratic manner, this is the refutation that Powys offers to those of his critics for whom his writings evidence an increasing retreat from the realities—political or otherwise—of the present. Where Wyllt sees a future blighted by ‘ships of iron’ and ‘balls of fire’, Powys and the Henog hold up the instructive capacity of both history and legend—linked, if not directly conflated, by the Henog’s practice of storytelling—as modes of thoughtful engagement latent with the potential for change. *Porius* is in one sense an embodiment of Powys’s refutation to those critics for whom the production of a ‘Romance of the Dark Ages’ was necessarily an act of escapism; as we will see, its sense of historical perspective, its use of romance and fantasy, and particularly, its thematisation of “nature” as a site of possible cultural renewal speak directly to the war-torn years in which the novel had its genesis.⁴

As Jeremy Hooker and Richard Maxwell have observed, there is a sense in which *Porius* can be read as a pointedly political novel, indeed, for Maxwell, novels like *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) and *Porius* reveal how Powys ‘uses myths as a way to think about human predicaments within history’.⁵ An example is found in Powys’s essay, ‘Pair Dadeni or, the Cauldron of Rebirth’, collected in *Obstinate Cymric* (1947) but initially published in *Wales* magazine in 1946, which reflects upon the Second World War as an ‘unfathomable procession of life and death’ and, in this chapter, I want to argue that it is to a very particular sense of ‘life’, incorporating a sense of shared materiality that manifests particularly in this novel’s figuring of the earth, that *Porius* turns (OC, 86).⁶

⁴ This was the subtitle carried by the first edition, published by Macdonald.

⁵ Richard Maxwell, ‘The Lie of the Land, or, Plot and Autochthony in John Cowper Powys’, in *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays*, ed. by Denis Lane (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press), p. 193-213 (p. 211).

⁶ See *Wales*, 2 (1946), pp. 20-41.

In the essay, Wales and Welsh legend offers Powys a process of regeneration to which his cultural moment might look: ‘but now since the whole world has become a Cauldron of Death, what more natural than we in Wales should revert to our “Pair Dadeni” or “Cauldron of Rebirth”?’ (OC, 86). That the violence of the Second World War drove Powys to contemplate ‘Nature’ in a very particular light is suggested as Powys sums up his wartime tract, *Mortal Strife* (1942), to his friend, Louis Wilkinson, in terms that are elucidative of *Porius*’s general scheme: ‘there is a lot of talk about William James’s Pluralism & Multiverse, & also a lot of talk about Hitler’s world being Hegelian; and ours Pluralistic and even anarchistic—like Walt Whitman’s—and of course Nature plays her part’ (LLW, 86-87). This sense of contrast between fascistic monism and Allied pluralism gives us a point of entrance into the dark and winding forests of *Porius*: indeed, as Hooker has shown, one way of understanding the text is as ‘an anarchistic and libertarian response to tyranny, which, in Blakean fashion, links political tyranny [...] with authoritarian religious ideas’; David Goodway is even more forceful in his assertion that *Porius* is Powys’s ‘most anarchist novel’.⁷ In what follows I stop short of claiming Powys as an anarchist, though his sense that ‘*all* Governments—as the wise Anarchists say—are *unpleasant*’ is crucial to interpreting this novel, as we shall see (LLW, 53). One character’s observation of Edeyrnion’s ruling classes is, as I want to suggest, elucidative of more than Powys’s ‘anarchistic’ scheme. That is, when Gwythyr suggests that ‘God gave the earth to us all, not to *them* only!’ (P, 331), he also anticipates the way in which *Porius* works to substitute the fractious and divided forms of cultural and national identity discernible in middle ages Edeyrnion and 1940s Europe with a renewed sense of material kinship, a form of communal identity based upon an open-ended sense of earthly cohabitation.

That Powys is impelled towards ‘Pluralistic’ forces by the spectre of fascism that hung over the continent during the years of *Porius*’s genesis is not unique; Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941)—which also attests that ‘nature takes her part’ (BA, 114)—similarly turns to a ‘rambling, capricious, but somehow unified whole’ in the face of

⁷ Jeremy Hooker, ‘Romancing at the Cave-Fire: The Unabridged *Porius*’, *Powys Journal*, 4 (1994), 216-231(222); David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, 2nd edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 165.

various forms of violence.⁸ Woolf is quick to incorporate reactionary forces that are both home grown and continental, militaristic and socio-political; a letter written by Powys to Wilkinson in 1940, comparing the Anglo-French war effort to Thomas Hughes's public school novel, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), suggests Powys's comparable sense of the Second World War as an unfortunate necessity: 'We are now *one flesh*, like man & woman, with France & it is 2 against 1, like Tom Brown & Friend East against the Bully Flashman' (LLW, 66-67). The comparison might be taken to imply Powys's own relative nationalism; as I want to suggest, however, *Porius's* broader attention to 'the power of fanaticism, whether spiritual or temporal, to pervert human nature and suppress the natural freedom of the soul', takes it beyond Powys's 'own brand of Jingoism'—at least as it is established in correspondence with Wilkinson—in ways that need acknowledging (LLW, 53). In an essay on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) published in *Obstinate Cymric*, Powys observed how Joyce's 'divine gift—I speak, of course, of the imagination—is used [...] to indicate the un-unified, refreshingly pluralistic, un-imprisoned anarchy concealed beneath the hypocritical broad-cloth of Law and Order' (OC, 31). In this chapter, I want to suggest that Powys's use of the 'imagination' is similar, attempting to discern, through its own creative and disruptive use of language, the ways in which human forms of 'Law and Order' might give way to the more 'natural' forms of 'freedom' he discerns in his correspondence. Powys's *Edeyrnion*, to be sure, is not an allegory for the European divisions and encroaching fascism that marked Powys's own moment, but the continued interest in the representation of a particular spot or locale offers a space in which pertinent issues can be dramatised and explored. Indeed, the move back into the Dark Ages is not simply a comparison of what Powys imagined as 'Hegelian' and 'Pluralistic' national cultures, but a more diffuse exploration of the relationship between the 'power' manifested in forms of human meaningfulness and the 'freedom' that Powys discerns in what he calls 'nature'.

As I want to show, then, Powys's attention to cultural relationships between people and places, his attitudes towards language, and his mythopoeic approach to a *writing*

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, v: 1936-1941, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 135.

of what he calls ‘Nature’ gather to a head in *Porius*, albeit with an important qualification that serves to distinguish this later text from the Wessex novels, *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*. If the earlier texts’ attitudes towards language and storytelling as facets of human world making were largely celebratory, then *Porius*’s close attention to the operations of ‘power’ that it discerns in both 499 AD and in Powys’s historical moment leads to an increased emphasis on the ways in which cultural forces might be co-opted into the authoritarian practices that *Porius* describes as ‘the maddest human insanities—like those of nationalism and war’ (P, 402). In this sense, *Porius* makes an instructive coda to the Wessex novels, since it revisits Powys’s central themes with an insistent political urgency that is perhaps less discernible elsewhere. As I will show, *Porius* thereby productively complicates the ideas of ‘natural freedom’, ‘human nature’, and indeed, ‘natural’ rebirth that are raised elliptically and suggestively in Powys’s discursive writing from this period. Powys’s frequent attention to the *Earth* returns at the chapter’s end, where I want to claim, specifically, that it is this figure of material coexistence that Powys ultimately holds against the political and cultural fractiousness of his own historical moment, as both a symbol of the ‘natural freedom’ that *might* precipitate new, cultural forms, and of the terrible destruction that might otherwise occur across both Edeyrnion and Europe.

I: ‘This ever receding landscape & mirage (reality & unreality!)’

As this suggests, I am continuing my claim that Powys is a more subtle and accomplished novelist than he is thinker, at least as this is recorded for posterity in the discursive writings. In this sense, it should be stated, early on, that my reading of *Porius* is selective, perhaps necessarily so, in its focus on language, nature, and culture, and that in this I go some way to concluding, with Norman Denny—whose reader’s letter, on behalf of The Bodley Head, Powys received in 1949—that

‘embedded in this mountain of verbiage there really is a book’.⁹ Regarding the ‘verbiage’ of *Porius*, however, it is once again necessary to make a distinction between prolixity as a largely incidental flaw—examples of which from *Porius*, to be sure, can be produced—and the way in which Powys’s writing seeks to construct a detailed, and often contradictory, textual world via the incorporation of digression, polyphony, and open-endedness. To paraphrase an early contemporary of Powys’s, I am in this sense going to be trusting the tale, perhaps more so than the teller, a point that returns us to the difficulties posed in reading this enormous novel, and indeed, the vexed relationship between Powys and a (late) modernism that strove increasingly to depart from straightforward authorial didacticism. *Porius*’s form is crucial, here: for the relationships between past and present that we have seen in earlier texts are inverted as Powys plunges backwards to the year of 499 AD, inviting us to draw active comparisons between forms of war and violence that have manifested throughout human history.

The point focuses our attention on some of the specific difficulties posed in reading *Porius*, and here, I think it is helpful to note Marina Mackay’s observation concerning ‘modernist difficulty’:

[T]he renascent modernism of the Second World War [...] [finds a] rehabilitation of modernist difficulty [...] indicated by the emergence of important work by both ageing high modernist writers (such as Woolf’s *Between the Acts* [1941], Eliot’s *Four Quartets* [1943], and Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* [1948]) and those writers of the following generation most influenced by them (such as Henry Green and Elizabeth Bowen).¹⁰

These writers might initially seem to make strange bedfellows for *Porius*, if not for Powys’s *oeuvre* as a whole; but I want to suggest that the length and form of this late text usefully refreshes our sense of those tensions that are inherent to Powys’s literary self-positioning with regard to his modernist contemporaries. For *Porius*’s

⁹ Quoted in Richard Perceval Graves, *The Brothers Powys* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 314.

¹⁰ Marina MacKay, *Modernism, War, and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 33.

“historical” perspective establishes its dual existence as both a book of Romance—an ostensibly popular (in aim, if not achievement) rewriting of Arthurian legend, with all the magic and swordplay that might entail—and as an idiosyncratically “difficult” novel concerned with the inner psychological states of over forty principal characters. The plot, as it exists, is again frequently waylaid by intense observation of ostensibly trivial details; the sustained deployment of Welsh terms—not always accurately—establishes a further difficulty for the majority of readers (this one included). On this last point we might note that we are hereby immediately estranged from language in ways that will allow Powys to draw our attention, as we will see, to language’s sometimes covert, ideological functions.

We will come to these momentarily, but first it serves to note an example from the opening chapter in which *Porius*’s more modernistic difficulties are exemplified.

All along the banks of this mother of rivers, Dyfrdwy, Divine Water, stretched the fertile communal clearings of his family’s domain. The furthest of these arable lands were visible to [Porius] now as dark ploughed-up patches of earth interspersed with stubble. The colour of this stubble under the afternoon’s diffused light, for between the sky and the earth hung a film of floating vapour, was a colour to which Porius, even if he had had all his wits about him, could have given no name. (P, 23)

Two paragraphs pertaining to the colours that this precise tint is *not* follow, and then, a mere—in terms of *Porius*’s pacing—four pages later, we encounter the following paragraph:

He shifted his position a little and looked north. Here he saw an undulating ridge of low mountains that rarely assumed any other colour than their own special tint of dark blue, a ridge that bore the name of Moel y Famau, the Mountain of the Mothers!
(P, 28)

One final quotation from over the page:

Why couldn’t he find ease [...] by thinking of Morfydd. Her breasts were small but her hair was long; and it now occurred to him that the reason why he was so

impressed by this particular colour in the sky was that under two conditions, under the condition of anger and the condition of weeping, there always occurred in the centre of her forehead, produced either by a suffusion of blood or a withdrawing of blood, a livid patch of just that precise tint.

(P, 29-30)

Full quotation hopefully underscores the glacial pace at which *Porius*'s psychological motifs unfold; indeed, it is not only *Porius*, but perhaps the reader, too, who is caught up in an 'accidental assembling of meaningless colours and shapes' (P, 33-34). Such writing is modernistic in its approach to evanescent, psychological details, to the relativity of meaningfulness, and to the purportedly arbitrary—but finely crafted—intermingling occurring between subject and environment. The pacing, the ostensibly careless unfolding of motifs in various, and often conflicting, ways, even the delayed syntactical construction of the final sentence quoted above: these are all fundamental features of the 'aesthetics of length' that Richard Maxwell refers to, and which we have seen throughout Powys's *oeuvre*.¹¹ That *Porius* lacks the anchoring and centralising notion of a focal point for *writing* that *A Glastonbury Romance* found in its titular town suggests will likely become apparent in what follows; but that *Porius*'s 'density of reference and description' is 'memorably off-putting' by no means indicates Powys's abandonment of his more strategic uses of density, difficulty, and multiple perspectives.¹² The manner in which *Porius* takes over seven pages to achieve an effect that a writer such as Woolf, as one of many possible examples, might achieve in a handful of sentences or clauses is characteristically Powysian, though to be sure I raise the contrast not to diminish Powys's achievement but to throw its specificity into relief. What is 'embedded' in such writing is a meaningfulness that the reader participates in, perhaps by necessity. For *Porius* is both a gruelling read and a rewarding one for those critics who note the loose unfolding of themes and ideas that occurs across the seven hundred and fifty pages of the reconstituted novel.

¹¹ Richard Maxwell, 'Two Canons: On the Meaning of Powys's Relation to Scott and His Turn to Historical Fiction', *Western Humanities Review*, 57:1 (2003), 103-110 (103).

¹² Maxwell, 'Two Canons', p. 103.

In the prefatory historical background given to *Porius*, we see that Powys understands his chosen year—499 AD—as a ‘critical moment of world history’, occurring within the contexts both of collapsing empire and of an uprooting of ‘customs, superstitions, cults, rituals, and religions’ (P, 17). ‘As we contemplate this historic background to the autumn of the last year of the fifth century’, Powys writes, ‘it is impossible not to think of the background of human life from which we today watch the first half of the twentieth century dissolve into its second half’ (P, 18). As Michael Ballin notes, Powys hereby ‘establishes a unifying link between the period of *Porius* and contemporary experience and is able to use Celtic myth both to distance contemporary horrors and to place them in the context of the previous experiences of mankind’; indeed, in *Obstinate Cymric*, Powys writes, ‘[n]ever since the Dark Ages [...] has the human race been plunged into such a gulf of misery and horror as the one it sees around it to-day’ (OC, 86).¹³ It is with such statements in mind, I take it, that the dust jacket of *Porius*’s 2007 reissue commends ‘a historical novel and a commentary on the nature of modern warfare’.¹⁴ The claim has some weight, of course: *Porius* was begun in 1942, and thus written during, and in the wake of, the Second World War; an abandoned earlier manuscript from late 1940—provisionally entitled ‘Edeyrnion’, after the region in which *Porius* takes place—finds Powys toying with the idea of setting a novel within the years of World War Two itself.¹⁵ By the time of *Porius*, however, Powys had decided to approach the question of ‘modern warfare’ less explicitly, and indeed, from a strikingly different temporal perspective, so that the term, “commentary”, is perhaps too strong for the allusive and suggestive mode that Powys adopts, and which will demand the reader’s conscious inquiry, throughout. There is, as Ballin suggests, an overriding sense that Powys is working to deepen ‘the reader’s consciousness of the nature of the historical process’, but note

¹³ Michael Ballin, ‘*Porius* and the Cauldron of Rebirth’, in *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays*, ed. by Denis Lane (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), pp. 214-235 (p. 216).

¹⁴ See John Cowper Powys, *Porius* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007).

¹⁵ See Morine Krissdóttir, *Descents of Memory: The Life of John Cowper Powys* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), pp. 350-351 for a discussion of ‘Edeyrnion’ and *Porius*’s genesis. The unfinished fragments of *Edeyrnion* are collected in *The Powys Journal*, 1 (1991), pp. 51-68.

that it is this ‘nature of the historical process’ itself, in *Porius*, that is to be subjected to scrutiny.¹⁶

That reader—and indeed, writer—are to become somewhat lost as *Porius* moves back into the distant past is suggested in Powys’s description of his ‘*Dark Ages* novel’ to Dorothy Richardson (LDR, 201). If, in one sense, *Porius* shares with the previous fictions the conviction that there is an undeniable connection between past and present, then Powys once again refuses to establish any straightforward or didactic historical analogy. Responding to Richardson’s question—‘I cannot believe you’ve been ten years in Wales. Isn’t it time, wouldn’t you like, to get back to England?’ (LDR, 207)—Powys replies in a lengthy postscript that makes clear how *Porius* incorporates the earlier texts’ strategies of ‘imaginative archaeology’ (LDR, 207).¹⁷ Approaching four pages in itself, the poetic formatting of this response is of specific interest (see Appendix), though for ease of reference, here, I quote the continuous prose that is transcribed in *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson* (2008):

No you see I’ve got a curious mania for antiquity in continuity in one spot of the earth’s surface if I can claim with *almost absolute certain certainty* a share by blood-heredity in this particular continuity it goes back to total Obscurity and Mythology fading away too slowly to be caught at any point for certain between reality & unreality and between history & legend. This ever receding landscape & mirage (reality & unreality!) I can pursue here as nowhere else so it would be a loss to me to leave it. I can now read Welsh easily enough to be thrilled by it both *old* and *new* Welsh for there’s far less difference here between old & new than anywhere else.

(LDR, 209)

That we have exchanged our foothold in the present for the distant, and potentially mystifying, reaches of the past, in *Porius*, is intimated in the form of the writing as much as in the writing itself, and in this sense the complexity of the relationship between Powys’s present historical moment and the imagined past of 499 AD is very

¹⁶ Ballin, p. 216.

¹⁷ See Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 7-17.

much at the heart of this late novel. The central notion of an imaginative *descent*—implied both denotatively and graphologically as Powys records an imagined process whereby continuity and heredity recede into ‘total obscurity | and | mythology’—offers a spatial embodiment of the aesthetic and conceptual practices at work in his novels. We have seen Maxwell’s argument that Powys ‘insists that the *genius loci* is a problematic creation’, since ‘the closer we get to it, the more we try to encounter it as a reality, the more its contradictions must be confronted’, and here, Powys’s postscript transforms this insight into an almost disposable poetry.¹⁸ That any clear or singular “origin” for this ‘blood-heredity’ or ‘particular continuity’, in *Porius*, is to be shrouded in myth, mirage, and unreality is thus to become politically apposite. For once more, the reader’s engagement with what lies ‘under the surface’, with the line between ‘reality & unreality’, is to be demanded by a text plumbing the ever ‘receding’ depths of history, legend.

This begins as Powys develops the various and complicated histories that are to impinge on the present moment of 499 AD. As Maxwell notes, the region of Ederynion is as much a historical palimpsest as Powys’s Glastonbury, revealing successive invasions and displacements: ‘The Brythons (celts) were transplanted there by the Romans. Before the Romans the Gwyddylaid (Scots) held sway, and before them the Ffichtiaid (Picts) and the Forest People (Iberians)’.¹⁹ As in the earlier novel, Powys captures this melting pot of cultures and forces through a gradual accumulation of writerly scaffolding, producing a polyphonic and anti-linear narrative that is anticipated by the historical note:

There had recently come, as the fifth century drew to its close, a curious lull in the more disturbing migratory movements of semi-barbarous races pushing one another westward across the rapidly collapsing framework of the Western Roman Empire whose centre was Rome herself. Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Central Goths, along with their barbarous heroes, customs, superstitions, cults, rituals, religions, and all their weird deities, were at this strange moment in European history jostling,

¹⁸ Maxwell, ‘The Lie of the Land’, p. 210.

¹⁹ Maxwell, ‘The Lie of the Land’, p. 202.

mingling, and contending, on tribal battlefields and in individual souls, with the old classical altars and their ghostly deities, now sinking into oblivion on the one hand; while the new Christian faith, on the other hand, commanding people to adore what they had been burning, and to burn what they had been adoring, swept forward with a reckless fanaticism that seemed to have the very spirit of the life force behind its unconquerable desperation. (P, 17)

Powys's sense of cultural relativity ('adore what they had been burning [...] burn what they had been adoring') is to be sustained throughout this novel; indeed, if there is an implied comparison of the Allied war effort with an attempt to stave off 'the more disturbing migratory movements of semi-barbarous races' then this is, as we will see, not intended to be read directly or allegorically.

While the 'jostling, mingling, and contending' cultures recall Glastonbury's 'three thousand years of criss-cross human tangles', what was imagined as a relatively benign 'commingling' from the temporal perspective of the Wessex novels is now to be explored as a site of violent displacement and aggression. Similar forces, of course, were present, obliquely, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, but in that novel, the 'fleeing hosts of wounded men with broken spears and torn banners and trails of blood and neighing horses' called to mind by Glastonbury's landscape had atmospheric, rather than political, effects:

The sky itself carried no token of such far-off events upon its corpse-cold vastness, but such ruinous disasters seemed to rush along beneath it in their viewless essences, wild-tossed fragments of forgotten flights, catastrophic overthrows, huge migrations of defeated peoples. And upon all these things the sky looked down with a ghastly complicity. Two small motor cars, one dog cart, and a queer-looking lorry with soldiers in it, were the only tangible vehicles that passed [John Crow] that evening as he went along; but the road seemed full of human memories. There was not a signpost or a milestone on that wayside but had gathered to itself some piteous encounter of heart-struck lovers, some long and woeful farewell, some imperishable remorse!

(GR, 92)

As this passage might suggest, Powys's changed historical perspective marks a shift away from the 'temporal cosmopolitanism' that Sam Wiseman discerns in the Wessex novels, in which 'layers of the past embedded within the landscape' are evoked and celebrated for their capacity to connect past and present: now, the violent contours of *Porius*'s 'aboriginal forest' are more clearly emphasised.²⁰ The temporal layering of the earlier novel is still present in *Porius*, though this later text is less minded to celebrate a rich and varied loam of Welsh soil than it is to foreground the more violent manifestations of story and memory. On the first page, for example:

The Mound on the way to the Fountain, with the Path of the Dead that led to it, had been an aboriginal burning-and-burying place; but the locality had been taken possession of several hundreds of years ago by a particularly ferocious clan of Gwyddy1-Ffichti, whose hold on the district had only been brought to an end a century ago by Porius's own tribe led by the great Brythonic Chieftain Cunedda.

(P, 21)

A succession of violent displacements is "written" into the material and cultural stratifications of Edeyrnion's landscape, so that the mound that 'had been an aboriginal burning and burying-place' and the regional names such as "the Path of the Dead" do not evoke a wondrously composite past so much as a series of cultural forces that impinge, violently, on the present. Indeed, if the 'soil' of Glastonbury was 'soaked in legends', then the 'contests' between Edeyrnion's various cultural and racial groups are instead figured as 'drench[ing] the land in blood' (P, 161). There is a shift in the attitude towards romance, here. As John McClure argues, 'romance, as a moment's reflection suggests, *requires* [...] a world at war—starkly divided, partially wild and mysterious, dramatically dangerous'.²¹ It is this requirement that Powys will now put to the test, and the hope of a less divided world, ultimately, that will sustain the novel.

If this series of successions begins to establish a recognisably linear history, then we should note that characters such as Gwythyr, the messenger of The Gaer (*Porius*'s

²⁰ Wiseman, p. 10.

²¹ John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 2-3.

Brythonic fortress) begin to disrupt any ideology that would align temporal precedence with a form of autochthonous or “native” belonging:

I tell you we *all* came here in the beginning like these Saeson—all foreigners and invaders, every tribe of us! And yet even among us *Cymry*—and don’t think I don’t feel it myself!—there’s this same *blood-hate* ready to explode!

(P, 331-332; emphasis added)

This affective force of ‘blood-hate’ is to become central, though for now, it hopefully suggests how Powys’s epistolary appeal to ‘blood-heredity’ is not the desperate appeal to racial essence for which it might be mistaken, but a marker of a much more partial, and indeed, personal, sense of involvement.

Here, Gwythyr’s term, ‘Cymry’, requires glossing. In *Porius*, this is a collective phrase that becomes ‘a sort of slang word for the unclassified men and women of Ynys Prydein, such as were neither Romanized rulers nor privileged Brythonic princes [...] nor yet unscrupulous invaders from the North Sea, nor yet uncivilized marauders of Gwyddyl-Ffichti descent’ (P, 444-445). As W.J. Keith notes, in ‘denoting a resident of Wales, [*Cymry*] is not necessarily a racial term’.²² It does, however, as Gwythyr observes, incorporate an appeal to cultural precedence, being ‘a word we use to mark the difference between us who have been in the country from the beginning and yet now have to serve others, and all these upstarts and invaders’ (P, 341). Certainly, *Porius* displays palpable sympathy for these Welsh remainders: to Brochvael, Porius’s uncle, *Cymry* is, ‘of all racial syllables in the wide world[,] the least aggressive and the most evasive’, carrying a ‘prehistoric [...] undertone of communal existence [...] unblighted by what Homer calls “the pitiless bronze of tearless war”’ (P, 445). Crucially, however, as Gwythyr recognises, having ‘been in the country from the beginning’ is itself a contingent quality based upon the point at which one’s historicising begins: ‘we *all* came here in the beginning like these Season—all foreigners and invaders, every tribe of us!’ (P, 331). Indeed, in a further extension of *Wolf Solent*’s and *A Glastonbury Romance*’s complication of myths of

²² W.J. Keith, *John Cowper Powys’s Porius: A Reader’s Companion*, (2009), p. 16. <<http://www.powys-lannion.net/Powys/Keith/companion.pdf>> [Accessed 13/03/2017].

origin, Gwythyr himself observes the contradiction arising in this casual usage of the word, 'Cymry', comparing the ostensibly 'aboriginal' character of this grouping with that of the *Cewri*, a race of 'legendary giants' that constitute 'the real prehistoric aboriginals of Wales' (P, 25). Gwythyr's provocative stance announces *Porius*'s continued interest in questions of relativity and perspective:

Foreigners? We were all foreigners once! Who are the true possessors of these woods and mountains [...]? You know as well as I do. *The Cewri!* And, if you go further back still, the wild beasts or the old gods! Nobody knows because nobody was there!

(P, 332)

The *Cymry* may claim to precede these 'invaders' and 'upstarts', but that by no means essentialises or naturalises their own claim to a land, which, as *Porius* reminds us, ultimately precedes them. As Maxwell sees it, the 'juxtaposition between *Cewri* and *Cymry* is a pointed one, and not just phonetically': 'there is a political side in which the *Cewri* are replaced by the *Cymri*; the "true possessors of these woods" by people who came after but who claim in their own right to be autochthonous aboriginals'.²³ Yet there is also a sense in which *Porius* goes back 'further [...] still', so that it is not just the *Cymry*, but the human itself that is a late upstart whose political, cultural, and legal "right" to the land is to be questioned not only by the competing claims of the *Cewri*, but by the persistence of a primordial force detected, too, in the land, and particularly the 'aboriginal forest' that populates it (P, 21).

We have seen Lawrence Buell suggest that 'imagining a place with any fullness requires at least a glimpse of its whole history [...] back through its many generations of inhabitation to its prehuman geologic past'.²⁴ While Powys certainly offers us a 'glimpse' of this 'prehuman' history in *Porius*, he nevertheless reminds us that 'imagining a place with [...] fullness' is a fantasy, one that requires populating a geological record with imagined, human observers. The work of establishing a stable and knowable origin in the land is itself, as Powys implies, an act of mythic revision; the *Cewri*, accordingly, are Powys's fantastic dramatisation of these desperate appeals

²³ Maxwell, p. 209.

²⁴ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 74.

to mythic origin. Indeed, as Maxwell suggests, ‘a story about giants is a whopper’: ‘[g]iants are that version of the autochthonous in which the connection between the lie of the land and the lie of exaggeration is most obvious and most unavoidable’.²⁵

This novel’s ostensibly linear history thus becomes increasingly fraught as the political work done by linear historical narratives becomes increasingly visible. Indeed, the theme is raised, explicitly, by the inclusion of the Henog, a ‘Christian historian’ (P, 94) who, as Porius sees it, has developed ‘some damned newfangled trick [...] of describing the precise details of an occurrence without the display of the faintest feeling one way or the other, in fact with a sort of diabolical neutrality’ (P, 99). Porius’s distrust of this ‘damned newfangled trick’, this ‘diabolical’ neutrality stems, we infer, from the limits of his own perspective: as we will see, Powys’s titular character bears his own cultural prejudices. Speaking more broadly, however, the Henog functions as a metafictional device that draws attention to the necessity of active and sceptical inquiry on the part of *Porius*’s reader with regard to Powys’s incorporation of mythical and “historical” details. Parallels between the Henog’s “history” and Powys’s own practice are indicated, for example, when we learn that the ‘final touch of [the Henog’s] art’ is that he ‘tells [his] tales slowly’ (P, 96); the Henog’s own sense of a ‘true historian’ is even more explicit: ‘A true historian records fact and fable with philosophic indiscrimination. Who is he to decide between them? He leaves posterity to do that’ (P, 388). Powys’s dislike of authorial didacticism is linked with this sense of historiography: as Beverley Southgate has shown, Powys’s writing ‘has implications for *consensus* and definitions of “truth”’; and through his fictional treatment of such matters, Powys stimulates further thought about re-defining history’s nature and purpose’.²⁶ The Henog’s statement is not, in this light, intended to undermine history, but to pluralise it and recognise its contingency, emphasising the inadequacy of any singular “history” as a representational mode. Indeed, even the ‘posterity’ that the Henog invokes is to become suspect in this novel, insofar as ostensibly ‘neutral’ observations—such as the

²⁵ Maxwell, p. 202.

²⁶ Beverley Southgate, *A New Type of History: Fictional Proposals for Dealing with the Past* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 54.

ordered succession of *Cewri*, forest people, Gwyddyl-Ffichti, and Brythons—risk fanning the flames of cultural and racial prejudice by conflating arbitrary events—who precedes who—with “natural” or essential intention. The geological and telluric forces of “natural” history come first, Powys insists—or, as Gwythyr puts it in his reflection upon Edeyrnion’s ruling classes, ‘God gave the earth to us all, not to *them* only!’ (P, 331). As in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys’s intention is not to sift and sort the various historical claims made for this landscape, but to draw our attention to a materiality that precedes them, but in which they are nevertheless fundamentally implicated. Every human claim that follows is, accordingly, to be viewed with suspicion, not least those that are framed in that most misleading of media: language.

II: Language, Power, Identity

As we have seen already, Powys frequently treats the act of naming as one of imaginative creation or world-making, a procedure through which cultural significances are produced and sustained. In *The Meaning of Culture*, for example, Powys argues that ‘it is by means of the condensation of mental images around some particular pivotal point that new life is given to things. Such a pivotal point is a name’ (MC, 162-163); in *A Glastonbury Romance*, we are similarly informed that ‘names are magical powers’ (GR, 125). If Powys’s earlier texts turned to linguistic fragments of past languages as evidence of pleasurable and productive cultural relationships with land and region—recall, for example, those ‘curious Celtic syllables’ clinging ‘about [the] outlying farms and hamlets’ of Glastonbury (GR, 1065)—then *Porius* repurposes this theme in accordance with its more political subtext. As I want to suggest, this is crucial: for it is language as a medium of cultural ‘power’—and not simply as a form of world-making that links peoples and cultures imaginatively and positively with the land—that *Porius* is chiefly concerned with, as the more threatening and violent ramifications of regional forms of meaningfulness and identity demand an increasingly ambivalent attitude towards the ‘magic’ of language.

Indeed, if productive relationships to the land were always partial and contingent in Powys's Wessex novels, then we are warned that something has gone awry by the figure of Porius Manlius, a Roman Patrician, and grandfather of the titular Porius, for whom the forest people and the Gwyddyl-Ffichti are 'treacherous rebels against Rome's right to give rivers and mountains, forests and wildernesses to whom she pleased' (P, 201). The question of 'rights' returns us to the legal matters which *A Glastonbury Romance's* first chapter swiftly put to one side in favour of its multivalent pursuit of memory and imagination, and here, as there, this 'apparently [...] undisputed right' is to be called into question, not least by the various disputants in which the Gwyddyl-Ffichti themselves are numbered (GR, 50).

Language, particularly, is to be the site of this struggle, as *Porius's* first paragraph suggests:

Porius stood upon the low square tower above the southern gate of Myndd-y-Gaer and looked down on the wide stretching valley below, a valley that was still covered by the aboriginal forest but which now bore the name Eternus or Edeyrn, the name of a favourite among the sons of the Brythonic chieftain Cunedda from whom Porius was the fifth in succession. "Eternus, Ederus, Ederyn", he was murmuring mechanically as he gazed down at that far-spread expanse of treetops. He was thinking of the pedantic way the old Roman, his mother's father, from whom he had received his own name, would always catch them up over the pronunciation of such a word as "Eternus" and make them repeat it in the correct Roman manner.

(P, 21)

As an essay written during the composition of *Porius* suggests, Powys understands language to have an imperial context, and this is implied here. In 'Welsh Aborigines', Powys draws upon his reading of the Welsh poet and grammarian Sir John Morris-Jones to argue that 'neither the Celtic Goidels ["Gwyddylaid", in *Porius*] nor the Celtic Brythons can be regarded as our true aboriginal ancestors. But so belligerent were they and so tyrannical and so quick-witted that they forced their vocabulary upon us' (OC, 10). This appeal to 'true aborigines' is, as we have seen, relative: at least by the time of *Porius*, Powys is once more qualifying any appeal to "truth", particularly as it pertains to cultural or ethnic origins. The main point,

however, is that Powys understands the forest people's adoption of Latinate and Brythonic languages as the result of authoritative and 'belligerent' acts of imposition ('the aboriginal forest [...] *now* bore the name Eternus'). That Powys introduces this theme through the apparently benign fastidiousness of a Roman grandparent is an example of *Porius*'s relative subtlety: for the violence manifested in language is both local and cultural, inhering in attitudes milder than 'blood-hate', but no less implicated in systems of power and authority.

In *Porius*, language is not only a repository of created meaningfulness; it is also a tool, even a technology, of violence and war, one that is intrinsically, if elliptically, linked with the 'ships of iron' and 'balls of fire' foreseen by Wylt, through its function as a channel of power. As Powys would write in an essay from *Obstinate Cymric*, 'we peoples of the West have reached an epoch [...] when "on every day and in every war" in peace as well as in war, we are all subjected to a steady, persistent, unabated *stream of propaganda*' (OC, 95; original emphasis). It is in this spirit that an early moment finds *Porius* repulsed, rather than enthused, by the names already given to this Welsh region. For *Porius*, it is 'sickening that *their* Brythonic-Roman township should be *already* baptized with a name put on it, as the forest people said, by a magic fate! Corwen, the "White Choir"—how he hated the word!' (P, 27; emphases added). If the Brythons' occupation of 'Corwen' belies the mystical 'fate' of the *genius loci* in its manifestation of power and authority as the actual guarantors of ownership—recall that the Romans have transplanted the Brythons, here, and given them "legal" control of the land—it also precipitates Powys's sense of language as a site of cultural conflict. Hence the way in which the forest, for *Porius*, is a kind of battleground in its own right:

'Some names,' [*Porius*] thought, "are beautifully congruous with what they depict; others are disjointed, arbitrary, accidental. What's happening here is a struggle between two cohorts of invisible spirits; one trying to name our town by a heathen name and one by a Christian name'.

(P, 27)

Appearances, in Powys's novels, however, are almost always deceiving, however, and here we might linger a little on *Porius*'s sense that there is a 'struggle' between

congruous names, on the one hand, and arbitrary and even repulsive names, on the other. *Porius*'s polyphonic form is important, here. A comparative reading of 'this problem of naming places', for example, is offered by Gwrgi (P, 27), a servant of the Brythonic family to which *Porius* belongs (P, 27). As Gwrgi sees it,

Edeyrn the Brython can do no more than put his name on our land, just as Manlius the Roman can do no more than put a toga on Edeyrn, or the emperor do no more than send his nephew here to murder and be murdered.

(P, 156)

If Gwrgi opposes *Porius*'s reading of the linguistic 'struggle' occurring, he also reverses it. For his analogy once more implies that "true" ownership of the land rests with the *Cymry*, as opposed to the Brythons or Romans who, in his figuring, merely clothe the land in falsifying garments. As another servant, Drom, reports, however, the distinction between 'arbitrary' and 'beautifully congruous' forms is itself a misleading product of language:

[The druid] says there are as many truths as there are grains of sand upon the seashore. [...] He says we give things names to get power over them, and we give ourselves names to get power over others; and that there's not one of the innumerable truths that surround us that's strong enough to bear the weight of a name without being falsified and forced to look different from what it is.

(P, 534)

The struggle between 'invisible spirits' that *Porius* observes is not simply to be read literally as a mystification: it also draws our attention to the ideological work done by *language* as a channel of 'invisible' power in its own right. What is at work, in *Porius*, is not simply an emphasis of cultural and linguistic relativity, then, but a critique of the violent (mis)readings manifested in what this novel describes as 'the maddest human insanities—like those of nationalism and war' (P, 401). If, in Wolf Solent's plunges into an imagined 'native' origin, it was his own 'fancy' that was largely at stake, then here, the foolishness that echoed back to him in the ghostly "conversation" with his father's skull now risks the precipitation of violence in both militaristic and socio-political contexts.

Language comes to manifest a falsifying and misleading surface, then, a layer of contingent meaningfulness that is, as ever in Powys's writing, not to be quickly equated with epistemological or ontological truths. Powys's characters—and by extension, his readers—are to this end repeatedly made aware of language as a shifting and composite entity. When Brochvael writes a letter, we are informed that 'he deliberately used the modern word "*confabulatio*" rather than the classical word "*colloquium*", for he had noted how his friend the great Bishop Sidonius [...] [made] use of this frivolous and rather fanciful expression' (P, 165). Morfydd, in a similar moment, wonders why Porius's mother, Euronwy, uses the term "*eques*": 'Why can't she say "horseman" if she wants to be correct? [...] These boys aren't *equites*; they're just young men on horseback' (P, 179). The manner of one's speaking is, in *Porius*, incredibly important; words are 'fanciful' decorations, true, but also choices that speak of one's social and cultural standing, and which threaten to expose one's heritage, even one's prejudices. When Brochvael hears the Gwyddyl-Ffichti, Sibylla, speak in 'that peculiar mixture of Brythonic words and Berber syntax which was beginning just then throughout the long mountain ranges [...] to be adopted as the language of Ynys Predein', it is 'not a little to [his] relief': he imagines the answering voice to be that 'of some aboriginal cave dweller whose primeval life had in some way retarded his natural growth into manhood from childhood' (P, 231). More so than in any of Powys's Wessex novels, language is a site at which prejudice, distrust, even 'blood-hate' manifests itself. As the druid observes, naming itself is a form of control, with the spectrum existing between Brochvael's 'frivolous' epistolary expression and his sense of 'primeval' and 'retarded' 'cave dweller[s]', being one that *Porius* will explore. That Brochvael associates a certain manner of speaking with "primitive" modes of being clarifies language's threat: for as much as language creates meaningfulness and modes of recognition—as throughout the Wessex novels—these threaten, in *Porius*, to curdle into limiting, and one-way modes of recognition. The obvious inclusion of a variety of Welsh and Latin terms throughout *Porius* should in this sense be taken as a literary device, one that defamiliarises the nominally "English" language in order to reveal the composite, and contested, forces that underlie it. What Powys observes of Joyce reflects equally upon his practice in

Porius: '[Joyce] is a word-worshipper who puts out his tongue at everything we express in language (OC, 31).

The trajectory of the term, 'Cymry', is particularly instructive, for *Porius* dramatises the establishment of this collective noun—recall that 'prehistoric [...] undertone of communal existence' that the word supposedly carries—in ways that crystallise its reading of language, power, and the relationship between these two forces (P, 445). During a climactic battle between the emperor's horsemen and Gwyddyl-Ffichti archers, Powys's Merlin-figure—Myddin Wyllt—uses the word 'Cymry' to rouse these forces into a tentative alliance (P, 422). The term becomes a 'trumpet call of defence and a rallying cry of refuge', given as the lumbering shapes of two *Cewri*, 'two gigantic figures', 'dressed in the skins of beasts' (P, 442). The *Cewri* are unarmed—'neither carried any weapon'—but the wake of their passage prompts excited speculation amongst the opposing forces: 'many of the horseman [...] were talking eagerly and passionately to little attentive groups of their former enemies' (P, 444). On the face of it, the scene appears benign, underscoring the communal power of 'Cymry', which is quickly 'caught up in a thundering shout from thousands of ecstatic throats— *Cymry! Cymry! Cymry! Cymry!*' (P, 445). Indeed, the term even suggests that new forms of communal identity might work to repair the fractious divisions of old: as Keith notes, the term originally means "comrade".²⁷ The etymology is suggestive, and by no means incidental, since Powys observes it explicitly (P, 710); though we should acknowledge Goodway's note that, while Powys was something of a 'communist sympathiser', 'from the late 1930s [...] Communism and Fascism are viewed [by Powys] as *almost* equally abhorrent dictatorships'.²⁸ It is authority, and authoritarianism, that is at stake, here. Indeed, echoing Woolf's wartime juxtaposition in "The Leaning Tower"—'There was communism in one country; in another fascism'—Powys's *Obstinate Cymric* understands 'State-Communism' as another form of 'despotism': 'the scientist has his infallible absolution from conscience, the Reactionary his infallible absolution from

²⁷ Keith, p. 16.

²⁸ Goodway, p. 97; p. 155; See for example, a letter to Louis Wilkinson, October 1939, in which Powys writes, '[b]oth are bullies & there may not be *much* to choose between them; I speak of Hitler & Stalin' (LLW, 53).

thought, and the Communist does what he's told' (OC, 110-111).²⁹ Powys's sense that naming something might be to 'falsif[y]' it suggests how language, in *Porius*, is both a creative and expressive tool, and a site of ideological reification: like the trajectory offered by historical narrative, it works to impose order, rather than to discern it, to absolve individuals from 'thought', 'conscience', and responsibility in ways that this novel finds distinctly problematic.

Indeed, if 'Cymry' establishes community, it is also a form of exclusion, marking, as it does, 'the difference between us who have been in the country from the beginning and yet now have to serve others, and all these upstarts and invaders' (P, 341). The chanted repetition of the term itself captures the moment at which language might offer 'absolution' from both thought and conscience becoming a form of propaganda, to borrow Powys's word, as much as anything else; indeed, as this cry 'echo[es] up the gorges and tarns and precipices of the Cader itself, whither those monstrous shapes of the true aboriginals of Ynys Prydein had, as so many now believed, actually come and gone', we are recalled to Maxwell's sense that 'no culture is entirely innocent, however peace-loving' (P, 445).³⁰ Again, it is Powys's sense of perspectival and cultural relativity that is diffused throughout the text: Morfydd, for example, whose Gwyddyl-Ffichti mother has brought her up to 'regard badgers as sacred animals', regards the badger baiting of the Brythons as 'an indecent bestiality, only excusable because to the ancient forest people all these Celtic invaders, whether Gwyddylaid or Brythonaid, were no better than ignorant barbarians' (P, 646). Differing rituals and practices relating to the forest precipitate cultural differences, so that the Gwyddyl-Ffichti see the Brythons as 'bestial' just as the Brythons see the Gwyddyl-Ffichti as 'primeval' 'cave dweller[s]'.

Powys relativises our sense of the "primitive", here, in ways that work to subject the myth of "civilising" colonial power to scrutiny. Powys's treatment of the *Cewri*, who do, in fact, dwell in caves, distils the theme. For *Porius*, the giants are 'savage old

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', in *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 105-125 (p. 114).

³⁰ Maxwell, 'The Lie of the Land', p. 209.

aboriginal[s]’ (P, 472). Yet, when Porius meets the giant whom he decides to call Creiddylad, after his grandmother—another form of nominal appropriation, we might note—Powys is keen to emphasise her ‘perceptible discrimination in what she wore’, her clothes being ‘not [fashioned] in a rough hugger-mugger manner, but with considerable awareness of their general effect’, her hair being ‘twisted [...] into great massive yellow braids’ (P, 472).³¹ Even more telling is the language of these giants, of which Porius learns a particularly suggestive fragment—‘*Thumberol Gongquod*’—where “‘*Gongquod*” means “the earth”, and “‘*thumberol*” means “to tread amorously” [...] “making love with the soles of your feet”” (P, 465). The *Cewri* possess their own culture; their hounding from the land marks a further form of political and historical erasure, emphasising the persecution and displacement of these ‘aboriginal giants’. Prince Einion, reporting on the sighting of the *Cewri*—‘great filthy carrion eaters’—observes that, while the ‘Cymry, who were itching to shoot their arrows into [the giants]’, and the emperor’s ‘young nobles’, ‘who were burning to cut off their heads and carry them to Arthur’, have turned away from the *Cewri* and towards the Saxons, ‘our men or our dogs will finish them [the giants] off’ (P, 458-459). Note, particularly, the ‘forlorn desolation’ that is the result, as it is glimpsed outside the Old Stone, where ‘the *Cewri* had passed ere they took refuge’:

Here, where so recently the emperor’s horsemen had confronted the Derwydd’s bowmen, not a living soul was in sight; while whole beds of tall clumps of rushes, clumps of faded bracken, and every variety of ferns and mosses and grasses had been trodden by horses’ hooves and by the feet of men into a lamentable mud of forlorn desolation. (P, 485)

³¹ Certainly, the scenes in which Porius seduces—or is seduced by—this second Creiddylad are reminiscent of a mode of popular colonial romance in which the gendered and orientalist body becomes a site of exotic desire: ‘The young *cawres* had even twisted her heavy straw-coloured hair into great massive yellow braids, braids that gleamed and glittered when the sun shone upon them with a metallic lustre, braids which waved and tossed round her neck as she moved, falling sometimes between her shoulders and sometimes between her breasts’ (P, 472). In this sense the novel might be said to oscillate between inhabiting and revising these tropes.

Hardly an amorous tread, the prints of these ‘men’—and note that this gendering is hardly incidental—records a violence done against both the ‘aboriginal’ *Cewri* and the equally ‘aboriginal’ forest. The Cymry’s ‘rallying cry of refuge’ is not simply a heroic moment in which former enemies unite to stave off the distant Saxon forces that are the novel’s central antagonists: it also reflects an uneasy sense that the privileging of national or even cultural identities might itself be an act of exclusion, a form of violence based upon myths of cultural superiority.

In this sense, *Porius* both evidences and complicates Jed Esty’s sense of a late modernism in which ‘English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture’.³² Here, it is pertinent to recall Gwythry’s observation of the force of ‘blood-hate’, and to quote the remainder of his speech:

[...] *the emperor plays upon it* [‘blood-hate’]. He doesn’t bother about us enough *yet* to cry out to us: ‘*Cymry* of Ynys Predein! Let all comrades join hands to keep out the foreigner’. But mark me well, my girl, he soon will. Yes, he soon will. And why? So that he and his courtiers may rule the country undisturbed!

(P, 331-332; emphasis added)

Language and naming are again implicated in forms of reactionary and authoritarian power, so that the Emperor, Arthur, and the repeated cry of ‘Cymry’ serve to recall us to the more sinister applications to which nationalist identities were being put in Powys’s contemporary moment. If Powys begins the novel with a historic note describing the ‘barbaric’ and ‘semi-barbaric’ peoples posed to invade Britain in 499 AD, the logic of his text prevents us from equating those forces too readily with the spectre of fascism embodied by the ‘barbarous Hitler’ of *Obstinate Cymric* (OC, 10). Violence, authoritarianism, and nationalistic ideologies, the text suggests, are endemic to Edeyrnion in ways that prevent us from reading Powys’s mythopoeic writing as a straightforward allegory for his historical moment. Indeed, as Prince Einion is willing to swear, ‘these very Saeson under Colgrim coming from Germania were no worse

³² Jed Esty *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

pirates and oppressors than the Romans themselves' (P, 133). Arthur himself, Brythons, and Romans—even the Cymry—all are implicated in acts of colonising violence. As Gwrgi puts it, 'Romans, Brythons, Saxons, they all depend on conquering': 'they rob and maim and murder each other. But let *us* assert ourselves—and in a moment [...] they've become one bone, one blood, one tongue, one purpose' (P, 156). National and even racial unity, here, is understood as a myth in its own right. However much Powys might cling, in his correspondence, to a fascination with 'blood-heredity', his text remains sceptical of 'blood' as the ground of anything more than an imaginative plunge into the past, a particular and contingent form of identity that, when privileged above other forms of continuity and community, manifests in the destructive violence of 'blood-hate', nationalism, war. If the language of romance requires and even sustains a starkly divided world, then Powys is to seek forms of ameliorative community elsewhere; indeed, it is in the forest, as I now want to suggest, that *Porius* begins to locate a disruptive, resistant force.

III: 'Natural freedom'; "natural" order

In a significant sense, *Porius*'s turn to the forest marks another return, this time to the lavish, mythopoeic forms of writing that we saw in *Wolf Solent* (1929), in which symbolic forms speak of a commingling between mind and matter that the reader is invited to explore. This is perhaps most obvious in a lengthy scene in which Morfydd travels through the forest and finds herself 'facing in baffled wonder the intricate, complicated, and organic knot of mystery in which the living roots and fibres of her heart were lost' (P, 424). As these organic metaphors suggest, *Porius* works to locate the human within biological, as well as historical, entanglements, though Powys's figuring of Morfydd's increasingly awed responsiveness to this 'mystery' will prevent us from describing this novel as "organicist" too readily. Organic shapes and forms, for instance, are observed as being arbitrary and subject to chance, as indeed they are when Morfydd encounters a thicket of brambles that spreads out according to its own, 'profane' order:

[Morfydd] noticed for instance how the sprays of the spreading brambles that were too adventurous to bear blackberries crept rebelliously, flat on their bellies, across the moss and the pine needles, and how they projected, with a mathematical regularity that suggested human arrangement, their oval-shaped leaves in clusters of three, and yet how these triadic sproutings, that in their prone and surreptitious advances over the wrinkled forest floor seemed invoking the support of a god who, like themselves, possessed the peculiarity of being three-in-one, yielded with equally regular periodicity to an impulse that every now and then flung forth profane and defiant clusters of five! (P, 424)

Here, we should consider *Porius*'s incorporation of phrases such as 'mathematical regularity' and 'regular periodicity' in its figuring of Nature as a creative, material phenomenon. I think it is fair to suggest that these are not the phrases or ideas that spring to mind when we read of 'the full-blown Nature worship of the novels of John Cooper [sic] Powys'; but now, however, we are in a better position to accommodate the way in which Powys's sense of 'Nature' encompasses both 'mathematical regularity' and 'rebellious' forms of productivity.³³ Note, then, that there is something recalcitrant and resistant in the organic forces that are encountered in this passage. Close attention, for example, reveals an array of figures constituted around 'impuls[ive]' and 'defiant' offshoots and 'adventurous' and 'rebellious' barrenness, so that the '*suggested* human arrangement' is framed as precisely that: an ordering imposition on a problem as 'knotty' as any of those observed in *A Glastonbury Romance*.

This sense of imposed, human meaningfulness is crucial to our reading of *Porius*. In my discussion of *Wolf Solent*, I quoted Jeffrey McCarthy's description of 'the English novel from 1900 to 1930', in which nonhuman nature 'shapes the discourses that produce and develop imagined relations between subject and society'.³⁴ If Powys's earlier novel participated within that body of literature without entirely replicating its inherently politicised trajectory, then *Porius*'s use of 'Nature' is much more overtly

³³ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 74.

³⁴ Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 7.

engaged with relationships between ‘subject and society’. There is an urgency to these procedures that is, if not new, then at least increased, as Powys’s characters—caught as they are in the eddies of cultural and racial violence—seek promises of recuperative and regenerative power, clues towards more productive forms of meaningfulness and community than those that manifest in ‘blood-hate’. Where *Wolf Solent* often returned to the titular character’s sense of elation, the insights gleaned from non-human ‘Nature’, in *Porius*, have to be recognised in their socio-political contexts.

So it is that Morfydd’s experience with the forest’s ‘profane and defiant clusters of five’ anticipates a moment later in the same chapter, where the fanatical Christian priest, Minnawc Gorsant, incites the Gwyddyl-Ffichti to violence against Myrddin Wylt and his Brythonic allies. Declaiming the counsellor as a ‘corrupting taint’ that ‘should [not] remain on this sacred soil’, the priest appeals to the order of ‘God’s most holy cosmos’:

That unholy, huddled-up, monstrous toad over there hates the very name of the Blessed Trinity! He has even dared to declare [...] that one of the worst of these devils in human flesh that those thrice-accurst Greeks called “Philosophers”, a prize-devil, a master devil, a dragon-tailed devil, a great ramping, roaring, ram’s-horn devil called Pythagoras swore that the number *four* and not the number *three* was the secret of God’s most holy cosmos. (P, 439)

A Glastonbury Romance’s earlier, more celebrative emphasis of the elliptical processes by which Glastonbury’s ‘soil [...] [became] soaked with legends’ gives way to a more politically charged inquiry into the claims made on behalf of Edeyrnion and its forests (GR, 214). The ‘mathematical regularity [...] suggest[ing] human arrangement’ that we glimpsed in material ‘Nature’ returns with a vengeance here, as the priest insists upon a ‘cosmos’ ordered according to the fiat of Christian divinity: ‘Christ’s sacrosanct state which has absolute authority over the whole world’ (P, 637). As Hooker notes, these reflections upon the ‘tyranny of Christ’ (P, 699) are linked, if not conflated, with the militaristic and nationalist ideologies that we will come to, later; indeed, the priest demands ‘a battle just as ruthless, just as desperate as the

victory our emperor is even now winning over these lost and doomed heathen' in order that 'every thought, fancy, hope, imagination, desire, purpose [...] [might be] completely bound and chained to Christ' (P, 680). Powys's exaggeration of the priest's rhetoric is hardly subtle as a mode of irony, perhaps; the point, however, is *Porius's* framing of fanatical and violent impositions of order and authority against a 'soil', a 'cosmos', that, increasingly, is understood to exceed them. As the observant reader will have noted, the priest's divine system of 'three'—along with Wylt's, of 'four'—is rather pointedly subsumed in the 'profane and defiant clusters of five' observed by Morfydd. If the forest provides shelter for the various 'aboriginals' of the this novel, the forces contained therein, as we will see, offer an ontological rebuttal to these desperate appeals to supposedly divine, or "natural", forms of order.

In this sense, it is not incidental that the forms of order imposed on the forest are singularly gendered. That Morfydd senses a disruptive force at work in these 'rebelliously' barren brambles bears upon her own position in ways that develop Powys's broader themes. Morfydd's betrothal to *Porius* and subsequent bearing of a child has been calculated on the part of herself and Euronwy, *Porius's* mother, as a strategy that might diminish hostilities between the occupying Brythons and the Gwyddyl-Ffichti. That she encounters a 'defiant' and 'adventurous' barrenness in the forest—or, more accurately, its bearing of 'profane and defiant' clusters in the place of the expected fruit—suggests how the forest begins to function as a site at which challenges to these gendered authorities might be conceived. That Morfydd elects, ultimately, to marry *Porius* by no means undermines the insights she gleans in these forces; rather, the rebellious 'Nature' that Powys describes becomes a device to dramatise Morfydd's struggle with, and eventual giving over to, those social forces that demand certain kinds of action.

Powys's incorporation of one particular branch of the *Mabinogion*—that concerning Blodeuwedd, a girl transformed into an owl—is worth unpacking here. Created by the magicians Math and Gwydion for the heroic Llew Llaw Gyffes—who has been forbidden to take a *human* wife—Blodeuwedd's existence is teleologically curtailed and specifically gendered. This is a point that *Porius* foregrounds by having a

Christian preacher recount both the tale and his sense that ‘the punishment was justly given to this adulteress whose soulless life was only bestowed upon her to satisfy the *natural desire* of a noble ruler’ (P, 682; emphasis added). Blodeuwedd’s ‘punishment’ is to have been transformed into an owl by the magician Gwydion; her crime is to have arranged, along with her lover, the murder of her husband, Lleu. That Powys picks up on the gendered implications of the myth is crucial, for the ‘nature’ that *Porius*’s preacher invokes is entirely discursive, a conduit of social and ideological power that falls into the category of ‘metaphysical nature’ described by Kate Soper: ‘one is invoking the metaphysical concept in the very posing of the question of humanity’s relation to nature’.³⁵ Powys’s twist is to have Myrddin Wyllt transform Blodeuwedd, via his own magical powers, back into her human form: ‘The Christian group [...] now watched with horrified intensity every movement of the great magician. There began to emerge from beneath that queerly agitated cloak a pair of long, naked, beautiful, girlish legs’ (P, 688). For Ballin, this is ‘an overpoweringly feminist statement’, though the strength of this observation needs to be qualified, if not questioned, not least as Wyllt becomes ‘a real champion’ for ‘every feminine creature in the world’, ‘as if the counsellor’s mantle had been a maternal womb’ (P, 688).³⁶ We will return to these maternal metaphors. For now, it serves to note that Powys’s target is certainly a religious conservatism in which social roles are gendered and subject to a divinely ordained morality according to which ‘everything connected with the pleasure of sex was totally and entirely evil’ (P, 688). Refuting the priest’s misogynistic sense of ‘natural desire’, Wyllt’s nature-magic is imagined as dissolving the fanatical and repressive systems imposed by church and state alike. We might recall Powys’s claim that ‘the magic of the *Mabinogion* [is] a nearer approach to the secret of Nature than anything you could learn by vivisectioning dogs’, here, for the transformative ‘magic’ of that medieval text is, in *Porius*, to be appropriated for Powys’s own political ends, as a device that might productively disrupt otherwise “naturalised” ideologies (A, 287).

³⁵ Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 155.

³⁶ Ballin, p. 230.

On the subject of Powys's 'feminist statement', however, it is worth noting that the Gwyddyl-Ffichti are organised according to a strictly matriarchal society, hence the instruction offered to Morfydd by her now deceased mother, Kymeinvoll:

“Where I come from!”—and she always made mention of the City of Dilyn in Iwerdon—“It’s known and acknowledged as the truth. We’re nearer Nature than men; and the only safe test we shall ever have, little daughter, as to what is true in life, is nearness to Nature”.

(P, 630)

The didactic implication would seem to be that there is a positively—if problematically—gendered sense of ‘Nature’ at work in the novel, one which is to be set against equally gendered religious, military, and governmental authorities. As Goodway notes, however, there is something jarring about the scheme: ‘how can the forest-people really be communist and anarchist if they have princesses exercising a “traditional authority [...] based upon a special kind of Matriarchy”?’.³⁷ This ‘inconsistency’ is telling, as is the way in which the ‘forest people’ (Gwyddyl-Ffichti) are themselves appropriated—in some cases willingly—into the priest’s fanatical crusade, for as much as Powys might ‘regard [the forest people’s] social structure as of the greatest significance’, the novel is neither a didactic instruction to return to a supposedly prior, matriarchal society, nor the straightforward and mystifying reclamation of a myth of maternal ‘Nature’ that we might, at this point, suspect.³⁸

If ‘nearness to Nature’ is, as Morfydd’s mother supposes, a ‘safe test’, then the text of *Porius*, as a whole, complicates the claim to speak on behalf of ‘Nature’, precisely because it recognises that ‘Nature’ is also a contested discursive ground. In the early pages of the novel, Porius finds himself facing a river and wondering whether it was ‘the actual river itself [...] that his aboriginal ancestors had worshipped, or whether they had visualized in their prayers *the human lineaments* of the great River-Mother (P, 56). A sense of ‘Nature’ as a site of hermeneutic inquiry raises its head, here; as

³⁷ Goodway, p. 170.

³⁸ Goodway, p. 169-170.

indeed it does when Porius encounters the telluric forces inscribed into the jagged rock face of the Old Stone:

This unexpected shifting of the wind had brought it about that, though the lower portion of the Old Stone was still cloudy and obscure, its upper part was revealed in all the jaggedness of its origin.

In fact it was presented to Porius in the precise way it had been left when the original cosmic convulsion had cracked its heart, wrenched from its foundations, shattered its symmetry, splintered its curves into gaping chasms, and with the peculiar ecstatic delight wherein Chance, the greatest of all artists, extemporizes her creations, carved signs and symbols upon its furrowed forehead that only the final race upon earth would probably—if even they—possess the wisdom to read.

(P, 470)

It is human meaningfulness that is largely at stake, here, as the forces of ‘Chance’ set to work ‘wrench[ing]’, ‘shatter[ing]’, ‘splinter[ing]’, and ‘convuls[ing]’ the comforting ‘symmetry’ and ‘curves’ that we might discern—even desire—in ‘Nature’. The nonhuman world as *Porius* presents it is full of symbols that are—or that would be—pregnant with divinatory possibility, if only its human onlookers had the wisdom to “read” these shapes and patterns. In this, Powys’ late novel shares, with the writers described in Kelly Sultzbach’s *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (2016), a sustained ‘tension between representing nature as a chaotic force scrambling access to meaning and depicting nature as a source of harmony where truth and meaning ultimately coalesce’.³⁹ Such a ‘tension’ is captured quite precisely in the metaphor of material nature as the ‘rubble’ from ‘Nature’s’ workshop:

[Porius’s] attention was called to a chance-made little square in the grass beside it, formed by the entirely accidental approach to one another of four tiny willow twigs. He had always had a *peculiar fancy* for the auguries and omens and hieroglyphical portents that can be deduced from the arbitrary and entirely accidental arrangements of what might be called Nature’s windrow or the husks and chippings and sawdust

³⁹ Kelly Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 24.

and rubble of her workshop [...].

(P, 486; emphasis added)

If the metaphor implies the existence of a “natural” order, its visible manifestations are nevertheless ‘arbitrary and entirely accidental’, ultimately incompatible with the ‘fancy’ of human observers, Porius included.

When Porius reflects upon the natural history intimated by the creeping growth around The Fountain of Saint Julian, for instance, the concept of ‘metaphysical nature’ begins to cut against narratives of human exceptionalism:

The masonry of the wall as [Porius] reached it now looked indeed far older than it could possibly have been if Saint Julian really built it. So old did it look that he began to wonder if the saint had not found it there and just appropriated it! Mud, lichen, moss, ferns, reeds, and ancient alder stumps pressed against it on every side. Unnumbered generations of dead leaves, secular death piled upon secular death, gave to the black pools between the rushes a strange, rich, foul smell, evilly sweet, lecherously drugging, and sinking down into the pit of Porius’s stomach as his feet sank down into that moonlit mud. (P, 150)

The fountain’s ‘appropriation’ evidences relationships between language, historical narrative, and power, and we will return to these. The point I want to note here, however, is the overpowering sense of ‘secular death’ that has crept into Powys’s attention to the land and its flora. This strikes a discordant note that disrupts *Wolf Solent*’s dreamlike plunge into a ‘green pool of quietness that was older than life itself’ (WS, 7); indeed, if Solent is animated by the regenerative promise of ‘damp, dark mud’, then it is a much more deathly mulch that Porius’s feet ‘[sink] down into’ (WS, 85). The absorption of feet, bodies, and even corpses into mud is a recognisable trope of wartime literature, of course, and here we might detect a modernistic note of revulsion as the entropic effects of time and natural history demonstrate a universe that is fundamentally at odds with human desire:

It was a rough, blind expanse of stone [that Porius] touched, where *miniature armies of moss* and tiny ferns and little round-leave trailing plants and *squadrons of grey lichen* seemed in league with the swamp and the forest in their slow tireless vegetative determination to go on *invading* this solitary outpost of human civilization until they had swallowed it up.

(P, 150; emphases added)

Non-human nature becomes an invading, militaristic force in its own right, here, in ‘league’ with the colonising human forces that efface, if not erase, previous cultures (historically and otherwise) precisely because its ‘secular death’ reserves no divine or privileged position for human existence. In this example, ‘Nature’, to use Powys’s formulation, is not the benign, maternal force that we might expect: its creativity is amoral, uncaring, and unperturbed by the violent displacements that constitute Edeyrnion’s human history.

This is not quite a new note, since *A Glastonbury Romance*, too, had articulated how ‘the processes of all creative force’, ‘Nature’ included, ‘are complicated, tortuous and arbitrary’ (GR, 373), as indeed had *The Complex Vision*, in its sense of evolution as processes of ‘change’ irreducible to ‘human valuations’ (CV, 315). In *Porius*, however, this version of ‘Nature’ is a pronounced, rather than marginal, presence. It appears, in fact, even as Wylt contemplates a more poeticised version of nature, ‘mother the earth, *Gaia Peloria*’:

But for life, for inhuman miserable life, to go on on any terms and to change perpetually and to take ever new forms was dearer to her [‘mother the earth’] than for her progeny to enjoy themselves, free from bloody tyrants and false prophets and dying priests!

(P, 282)

Wylt discerns a flow of Evolutionary change that, as Powys understands it, is neither destined nor teleological, nor at all concerned with the relative wellbeing of human life. So too, social and political organisation, as Wylt recognises, is neither divinely nor “naturally” ordered: nor should it be, *Porius* intimates, once we acknowledge the sense of ‘inhuman [...] life’ that Powys observes. Reclaiming a notion of amoral creativity from telluric ‘rubble’ and from the forest’s ‘mathematical regularity’ and

‘secular death’, *Porius* updates the myth of a maternal ‘Nature’, even as its characters appeal to this deity.

Kymeinvoll’s claim is not, in this sense, the key to unlocking a didactic reading of the novel that it might first appear, precisely because the difficulty of interpreting ‘Nature’ is, in *Porius*, entirely conscious. What the text constitutes, ultimately, is what Sultzbach describes as a ‘spectrum’: since the observation and interpretation of this materiality is, in *Porius*, foregrounded as a contingent and perspectively dependant act, demanding divinatory and prophetic attention, with all the fancifulness that this might entail.⁴⁰ Take, for instance, a passage that could almost be mistaken for a quotation from *A Glastonbury Romance*, as a ‘small horny-scaled beetle’ mistakes Porius for a ‘beast of the field’:

As carrion they might both serve a conceivable purpose, but alive and in motion they were simply “unpredictable acts of God”. Thus the fragment of tepid matter covering the left cheekbone of a Brythonic prince struck the beetle’s intelligence as identical for all practical purposes with [...] the more dangerous surfaces of the pointed antlers of the great stag of Coed Sarn Elen.

(P, 131)

Repeating the close attention to variable narrative scales found in the earlier text, Porius’s ‘conceivable purpose’ as ‘matter’ is underscored in such a way as to remind us of the relativity of human—and narrative—importance. For all the forest precipitates the political and discursive function of ‘Nature’, it also speaks of Powys’s persistent decentering of the human.

An instructive example occurs when Porius encounters a river ‘swollen by recent rains’ and carrying ‘bits of wood [...] part of a hen roost [...] still grey with the droppings of the fowls’: ‘The whiteness of the river seemed to Porius at that moment in its livid forlornness to be the acme and epitome of desolation. It suggested lost battles and the blood-frozen corpses of innumerable dead men’ (P, 44; 48). Here, as in

⁴⁰ Sultzbach, p. 24.

A Glastonbury Romance's deluge, the primordial forces manifesting in rivers and seas are pregnant with intimations of the human's passing contingency; they establish, that is, a sense of scale that is far removed from that of the novel's plot, and even further removed from that of the horny-scaled beetle that interrupts it (P, 54). The variable attention to scale, however, also has the effect of foregrounding the persistence of the river's 'incomprehensible murmurings':

The river that was worshipped as an immortal by living persons within a few miles from where they stood, gurgled and sucked and oozed and rippled and sighed, just as it had done when those strange ships, thousands of years ago, brought the remnants from the lost continent of Atlantis to its mouth.

(P, 48)

The 'murmuring' of the river exemplifies an almost verbal, if non-communicative, agency that persists beyond and in spite of the question of human meaningfulness. The river "speaks", here, albeit in a language that is irresolvably other to terms of human communicativeness.

Porius's attention to cultural and linguistic relativity does not, in this sense, render the material world meaningless. Instead, it allows us to glimpse a persistent agency that is displayed, in the river, in the telluric forces inscribed into the Old Stone's rock face, or even in the 'mathematical periodicity' manifested in the forest's flora. Sultzbach's term, "tension", is again useful, for 'Nature', in *Porius*, is hardly a pleasant or leisurely site of reassurance, but rather a literary device dramatising the epistemological and ontological struggles of Powys's characters *and* manifesting a materiality that is extraneous to the pleasurable and religious utility that humans discern in its contours. Returning to Morfydd's sojourn into the forest, we can see that this disruptive and non-communicative agency is present even in those scenes in which 'nearness to Nature' seems to offer a direct model for 'rebellious' and 'defiant' modes of social and political action. Here, Morfydd is '*compelled* to pause again by the appearance of another and an even more curious phenomenon of Nature' (P, 425; emphasis added). I would suggest that we take Powys's choice of this agentic term quite seriously.

The girl's shadow was in fact now passing in front of a minute waterfall which the sun's horizontal rays had turned into a million blazing diamonds, diamonds as dazzling as if poured forth from a fabulous casket of some legendary queen of Marrakesh.

It was a moss-grown rock which evoked this effect, for in its grey interstices there were veins of dazzling white quartz and over both quartz and moss, turning the latter into a soft mass of water-soaked sponge that clung to the rock like a skin, and turning the former into a blaze of gems, trickled one of the many little streams that ran into Saint Julian's lake.

(P, 425)

Lurking in these figures is a form of agency that might be quite properly elucidated by the emergent language of new materialist discourse. For critics such as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 'the prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is [...] more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality'.⁴¹ By no means do I wish to equate Powys's writing with a new materialist theoretical standpoint; I do, however, want to flag up the shared sense of a fundamentally creative, yet non-teleological, force that is gestured to in both this critical discourse and in *Porius's* representations of 'Nature'. As much as the interplay of geological stratification, moss, and sunlight may produce miraculous effects for the human observer—gestured to in the equally extravagant simile that precedes them—it is the interplay of geological and meteorological action that is the focus of the writing, here: indeed, the moment exemplifies, I take it, the mode of writing that Sam Wiseman discerns in Powys's novels, whereby 'textual details stand alone, resisting attempts to view them from a broader interpretive standpoint'.⁴²

As far as *Porius* is concerned, however, I would suggest that it is the tension between these opaque surfaces and the hidden depths that they *might* conceal that is characteristic of Powys's figuring. 'Nature' oscillates, in these passages—as indeed it

⁴¹ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 1-43 (p. 8).

⁴² Wiseman, p. 50.

does in this novel—between its function as a site of discursive and hermeneutic inquiry and its immanence as a ‘phenomenon’ in its own right. Describing the late writings of Woolf, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and Gertrude Stein, John Whittier-Ferguson describes how the lateness of works by these modernist writers is established as they attempt ‘to mark [their] later works with repetitions’, that is: ‘turns and returns mark these texts in quite different ways—at the level of syntax, in stylistic details and thematic elements, and in larger poetic and narrative forms’.⁴³ This is a sense of lateness, I would suggest, which we find in *Porius*, too, particularly when it is non-human nature that is at stake. Indeed, if the ‘small horny-scaled beetle’ that we have seen already might well have appeared in the earlier novel, we should note that *Porius* substitutes the anthropomorphic voicing of the earlier novel for a more elliptical sense of nonhuman agency and communicativeness. That this is conscious as a form of ‘turn and return’ is suggested by a further scene in which a rather knowing call back to *A Glastonbury Romance*’s fantastic anthropomorphisms is made. Here, Brother John speaks directly to a ‘cluster of whitish-yellow ash seeds’ hanging from a tree:

“You’re a fine family,” he told these study seeds. “You’re all brothers” You know each other’s ways, under the wind, under the rain, under the frost!”

“I want to ask you a question, Master! May I do so?”

These words were spoken suddenly, harshly, unexpectedly; *and they were spoken not by the ash tree in the air but by the Henog on the floor [...]*.

(P, 104; emphasis added)

It is perhaps only a reader of *A Glastonbury Romance* who would anticipate a speaking ash tree, for Powys’s ostensibly superfluous qualification recalls, of course, the ‘vegetative comment’ passed by the ‘ash tree of Water-ditch Field’: ‘*wuther-quotle-glug*’ (GR, 89). If the scene is a local, and wryly metafictional comment on *Porius*’s departure from the incredibly self-conscious use of romance and fable that we saw in *A Glastonbury Romance*, however, it also throws *Porius*’s sensitive politicising of language into relief. That *Porius* reigns in the fantastic

⁴³ John Whittier-Ferguson, *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 6.

anthropomorphisms of *A Glastonbury Romance*—even where these utterances were offered in full consciousness of their imaginative license—is telling precisely because the creative ‘magic’ of language, the claim to confer names and meaningfulness upon the land or to speak on behalf of ‘Nature’, is much more ambivalent in this later text, as I now want to suggest.

IV: The Earth and Planetary Community

That Powys responds to the ‘madness’ of ‘nationalism’ by observing how identities based upon ‘blood-hate’ ultimately offer only a *façade* of community, albeit a powerful and affective one, is crucial. For *Porius* is not simply a critical novel; it also speaks of Powys’s repeated sense that the violence of war might somehow herald the birth of new communal and cultural forms based upon forms of identity opposed to the resurgent nationalisms of his historical moment. We have seen how Powys’s essay, ‘Pair Dadeni or, the Cauldron of Rebirth’, collected in *Obstinate Cymric* (1947) but initially published in *Wales* magazine in 1946, which reflects upon the Second World War as an ‘unfathomable procession of life and death’ (OC, 86). In *Porius*, it is the ghoulish Medrawd—‘the Welsh form of Mordred, nephew of Arthur, who rebels against him in the Arthurian romances’, as Keith notes—who introduces this theme most explicitly.⁴⁴ Stoking the cultural and racial divisions that beset Edeyrnion, Medrawd dramatises the mythic, dualistic struggle envisioned in ‘Pair Dadeni’. It is Medrawd who opines that ‘in life there’s more pain than pleasure, more ugliness than beauty, more lies than truth, more misery than happiness’, and announces his chilling proposal: ‘I have condemned life to die, and I have appointed war its executioner’ (P, 527). ‘War’, as it is conceived here, transgresses the bounds of cultural and natural animosities to become a threat to ‘life’ itself, and it is this theme, in particular, that I want to turn to in order to close the chapter. We have seen Powys’s attention to the

⁴⁴ Keith, p. 32.

disruptive and creative forces of ‘Nature’; so too, we have seen how *Porius* reads cultural and linguistic forms of meaningfulness as social constructions that might ossify into nefarious channels of ‘power’. *Porius*’s attention to ‘life’—which is focused, and expanded, simultaneously, by the recurring figure of the earth—begins to unify these themes. For as this novel suggests, war and violence are destructive transgressions not only of a more material form of kinship that is glimpsed by the magician Wylt and the poet Taliesin but, in the technologically advanced times of Powys’s own historical moment, of the relative wellbeing of the planet itself.

The anticipation that war itself might not only be destructive, but that it might facilitate new—and, almost unfailingly, superior—cultural forms is not, of course, a unique sentiment within the period of Powys’s *oeuvre*: MacKay describes, for example, ‘modernism as what in military terms would be the desperate policy of scorched earth’, in which ‘war becomes emancipation, and a radical purgative for the sickness modernism identified’.⁴⁵ In one sense, *Medrawd* is a dramatisation of this position taken to its (il)logical extreme, with the ‘sickness’ imagined to have spread so far that localised or selective acts of destruction are no longer tenable. Yet, *Medrawd*’s sense of an inherently diseased, dying, or fallen world is not an isolated opinion within *Porius*’s textual world. When the forest’s ‘bed of dark green moss and light green sorrel’ becomes the resting place of the priestess Erdudd, its ‘natural tints [make] a striking contrast with the dead woman’s green dress’ in ways that lead Brochvael to ‘[lift] up his voice in a groan of defiance towards whatever powers they might be, divine, or demonic, or, as Democritus would have declared, simply chemical, who had brought this accursed humanity into being, on this *infected planet*’ (P, 431; emphasis added). The juxtaposition of the ‘natural tints’ of the forest and the cultural production that is the ‘green dress’ return us to the ‘metaphysical concept’ of ‘nature’ described by Soper, through which one Powys is to be found ‘posing [...] the question of humanity’s relation to nature’.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ MacKay, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶ Soper, p. 155.

This question, as we have seen, is answered ambivalently within Powys's writing: on the one hand, Powys celebrates the material and cultural embedding of the human within a broader world, lavishing joyous attention to the imaginative, cultural, and biotic fragments that are discerned within his open-ended sense of 'life'. On the other, a text like *Wolf Solent* announces, through images of a 'vivisected' planet or a dark and squat slaughterhouse, the violent power of human action and the violence of anthropocentric cultural norms. In *Porius*, similar images return: Myrddin Wyllt, at one moment, is struck by a sense of the world as a 'slaughterhouse'—"death, death, death, death," he said to himself—a figure that recalls 'Pair Dadeni's' sense of the Second World War as a procession of 'somnambulists moving forward together, killing and being killed' (P, 269; OC, 103). The violence that is, in the earlier texts, localised in its transgression of the nonhuman body is now visited upon human forms, though as in *Wolf Solent* it is the image of the earth, in *Porius*, that is to link these together.

Powys's treatment of Wyllt, for instance, dramatises the technologically-facilitated violence of *Wolf Solent's* 'vivisected' planet. We have seen Wyllt's remonstrations with 'mother the earth, *Gaia Peloria*' already, his sense that this maternal 'Nature' is one of amorally creative evolutionary forces. With the claim to speak on behalf of an orderly or teleological 'Nature' rejected, however, Wyllt nevertheless attunes his hearing to planetary forces. Wyllt, who can 'read the minds of animals as easily as [Brochvael] can read Greek', is 'a poor magician [...] and a bad prophet', as he admits, though in Powys's scheme, this is less the indictment that we might initially suppose (P, 399, 369). Indeed, while the 'earth' is 'always murmuring and muttering in [his] ears', Wyllt adds a necessary qualification that: 'Yes, she is telling me things all the time; only I'm so foolish and feeble and weak and muddle-headed and mad that I miss the drift of half the things she tells me' (P, 369). Here, we are returned to *Porius's* sense of 'auguries' and 'omens' and, crucially, it is Wyllt's own act of prophesy that comes to speak of violence done against the earth:

But when our Lord the Sun with his attendant planets has passed from the power of Pisces into the power of Aquarius the white Dragon from Germania will cross the sea

to trouble us again. This time it will not swim with its feet and with its tail through the water-breathing smoke and fire. It will . . . It will . . .’.

(P, 110)

Myrddin ‘suddenly stop[s] short’, here, ‘gasping and gaping’. Over the page, Porius helps him to recover his bearing:

His whole frame heaved and shuddered; and Porius had for a second the sensation that was he was holding, and must at all cost be tender of, wasn’t a man at all but a funnel or a vent through which [...] there came some unimaginable intimation, an intimation confounding to human senses and staggering to human reason.

So overpowering indeed was the effect upon the man of the thing he was now being compelled to utter that its very violence, in the overcoming of the resistance offered to it, caused the unfortunate prophet such physical distress that as from a woman in childbirth there was rung from him a rending cry, interspersed with strange words, among which all that his hearers could understand were the reiterated syllables: ‘Out of the air—out of the air!’.

(P, 112)

The voicing of airborne destruction is figured as a violent rending of the maternal body, as Powys alludes to the increasingly destructive scales at which modern warfare was taking place in his contemporary moment. Evoked here, of course, is the Blitz, though I would suggest that *Porius*’s writing also spills into the mid-century and beyond in ways that need accommodating: the atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and indeed, the nuclear threat of the Cold War, for example, might also be discerned in Powys’s comparison of 499 AD’s ‘terrifying possibilities of human disaster’ with ‘the possibility of catastrophic *world* events’ that Wyllt foresees (P, 18).⁴⁷ The aeroplane signals an ambivalent attitude towards technological development here, as it had in *A Glastonbury Romance*, where the industrialist Philip Crow’s aerial perspective is linked with instrumental domination: ‘Philip’s spirit felt

⁴⁷ Though Powys, stationed in Corwen, would write to a friend of his relative safety from German bombing—‘Here I am safe in this place, knowing nothing of the war’—he was far from oblivious to the effects on the ground: his friend and former lover, the writer Frances Gregg, was killed during a bombing raid in April, 1941; so too his sisters, Gertrude and Katie, would write to him informing him of ‘a German plane [that] came down in the field adjoining the house, killing two men’. John Cowper Powys, letter to Nicholas Ross, quoted in Krissdóttir, p. 349. See pp. 347-349 for a discussion of these incidents.

as if it had wings of its own that were carrying it over this *conquered land*' (GR, 231). Yet, even as modernity threatens ever-increasing scales of destruction, the new perspectives it offers '[c]reate new ways of envisioning and experiencing the landscape'.⁴⁸ As Wiseman argues: 'Powys [...] implies that the developments of modernity facilitate new ways of understanding the recurring narratives that connect humanity with place, and the diverse histories embedded in the landscape'.⁴⁹ In light of this I want to emphasise that it is Wyllt's act of prophesy—that is, the fantastic ingredients of romance and fantasy—through which *Porius* conveys these modern insights, for this further demonstrates Powys's creative experimentation with romance form. In a dramatic revisioning of legend, Powys updates the '*vita*' of Wyllt so that it acquires a suggestive, yet specific, pertinence for readers in his historical moment.

Powys's deployment of a maternal earth, rended by her own childbirth is, in this sense, more than incidental, for his metaphor captures the point at which the sense of a harmonic, stable, and 'natural' order is exploded by the 'power'—explosive, atomic—wielded by the human. Indeed, in a further figuring of wartime violence as a violent transgression of the earth, we find *Porius*—who has yielded to a 'remorseless killing of [...] Saeson'—feeling as if he were himself 'a planetary body that had been struck by another body and had had a great fragment torn out of it, so that a scoriac crater yawned in his side' (P, 518). Wyllt's observation that 'as long as the earth remains there's hope for us all' carries a darker irony once it is situated within these contexts. For if the human—as Powys's texts are always at pains to emphasise—is a part of 'Nature', its capacity to threaten and destroy the 'life' in which it is interwoven is also, in *Porius*, forcefully rendered.

This goes some, but not all, of the way to rupturing the logic of organic holism. As Joshua Schuster argues:

In a continually regenerative nature, there is no need to elaborate on the specific and precarious vicissitudes of an environment. Loss, resource depletion, species

⁴⁸ Wiseman, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Wiseman, p. 71.

competition, extinction, pollution, and the long-term effects of human management of the land do not register for a nature preprogrammed for growth and redemption. Furthermore, organicism assumes a continuity of life among species, requiring no further analysis of species codevelopment, thus leaving unthought the nuanced relations that occur when species are interdependent but also often at odds with each other. That these are key elements of modern ecology indicates how organicism had to be jettisoned in order to be able to conceptualize environmental distress at all.⁵⁰

The intrusion of war into *Porius*'s sense of 'Nature', or 'life', as a creative and material system suggests the way in which *Porius* looks to the 'Nature' of the forest not only as a site of possible regeneration, but as a system whose immanent plurality is threatened by the destructive consequences of human action. The extinction of the *Cewri*, the dwindling presence of an 'almost extinct [...] breed of oxen called *ychen bannog* who were held sacred to the gods until the Brythons came', the intimations of rended earth: these are all examples of a humanity that belies the myth of a 'continually regenerative nature' (P, 34). Intimations of a cratered earth further underscore our awareness of destructive human agency.

Yet, *Porius* does find some hope within the dark and fractious forests of Edeyrnion. Here, again, is Medrawd:

My meaning [...] is clear enough; and only a Brython [...] imitating the Romans and full of pride at killing a few Saeson could miss it. [...] My meaning is that it would have been much better if life had never begun [...] [b]ut since it has begun, the sooner its brought to an end the better, and the quickest of all ways to bring it to an end *is war!*

(P, 527)

Medrawd can discern no value for life in the amoral, creative world that *Porius* frequently references; it will be left to Myrddin Wyllt to make a case for the cessation of hostilities. It is in such moments, perhaps, that *Porius* shifts most clearly into the genre fiction of fantasy, transforming the creeping horror of modernity into a dualistic

⁵⁰ Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), p. 13.

struggle between Wyllt and Medrawd: ‘I am come’, Medrawd insists, ‘that the world should have death; and I am strong because death is more powerful than life, higher than life, larger than life, older than life, deeper than life’ (P, 527). While Powys goes some way to conceding the point, as we have seen, in his figuring of the human as a brief, evolutionary upstart in a larger, material scale that cares little for its wellbeing—the stones of a partially constructed church, for example, will ‘one day [...] be [...] ruins and dust’ (P, 27)—his late novel transforms the fragility and ephemerality of life, thrown into relief by the violence of war and these vast temporal scales, into the precise value of its existence.

Consider, for example, the moment already discussed in which Wyllt is beset by a similar sense of the world as a ‘slaughterhouse’ (P, 269). Tellingly, it is the creeping of a small rodent that dispels this gloom and prompts ‘an incredible feeling of warmth’ to ‘[rush] through him’:

Suddenly he became aware of a curious sensation upon the knuckles of one of his hands as they rested on the punting pole. It was a half tickling and a half scraping sensation, and it was accompanied by quite definite scratching on the back of his wrist. Without a movement of any kind and guarding with exquisite care the very drawing of his breath, he slowly lifted by an infinitesimal degree one of his heavy eyelids. And there, curled up upon the back of his hand, its hind feet steadying its cold, wet, plump body, was a bright-eyed water-rat, assiduously and with absorbed and intense concentration licking his knuckle.

(P, 269)

Powys’s readers have seen the water rat before: it is this creature that joins Wolf and Gerda in an act of joyous observation by the side of the Lunt River (‘don’t make a noise! It’s so lovely when you can make a water-rat flop in and see it swim across’) (WS, 146). If *Porius* incorporates fantasy—reissues of Powys’s writing occasionally bear *The Independent*’s (questionable) claim that ‘it is no great surprise, perhaps, that thousands of baby-boomer readers who grew up with Tolkein should now want to spend their mature adulthood with the sprawling chronicles of Powys’—it is telling, I think, that it is the ‘tickling’ and ‘scraping’ of a water-rat, and not any heroic or

fantastic feat, that ultimately refutes Medrawd's glorification of death, war, and violence.⁵¹

Seen from this perspective, Powys's mythic and dualistic scheme is less important than the immanent sense of 'life' as a creative, material force that runs through this novel. We should note, then, that Wylt's own anticipation of a 'Golden Age' is figured in a moment of writing where the counsellor observes the sunlight of a 'golden noon' scattering through the forest's canopy:

Each leaf as it falls [...] must have its own sound to the creatures who hear it. They must fall like trees of different size to the ears of [...] mice, and like avalanches of heavier or of lighter rock to the apprehension of beetles [...]. And every leaf whether crinkled or withered, whether torn or twisted, whether crumpled or soft with sap, was a leaf of gold. Some were floating down from their place of growth, others were swaying and undulating on their stems. All were alive, all alert with meaning, like quivering scrolls of prophetic mystery unrolled by this east wind!

(P, 280- 281)

Porius's emphasis on plurality and multiplicity in the face of authoritarian social forces is distilled and focused in Powys's sense of immanent material significance—'all were alive, all were alert with meaning'—that can only be translated into language through contingent acts of interpretation ('scrolls'). A similarly material form of continuity is glimpsed by Powys's version of Taliesin, who spends much of the novel producing poems anticipating a 'godless' world that will '[exclude] from Annwfn [the Celtic land of pagan gods] nor man, beast, nor woman' (P, 378-379).⁵² In a striking moment, the poet 'let[s] his whole soul sink into a multiple consciousness of the material of our planet in its various immediate manifestations'; the result is a mythopoetic writing that recalls *The Complex Vision*'s (1920) sense of a

⁵¹ Boyd Tonkin, 'New Age began with John Cowper Powys', *The Independent*, 1998, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/new-age-began-with-cowper-powys-1198414.html>> [accessed 18/07/2017]. See also Clare Garner, '65 Years after publication, the sales finally take off', *The Independent*, 1998, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/65-years-after-publication-the-sales-finally-take-off-1198413.html>> [accessed 18/07/17].

⁵² See Keith, p. 6.

material universe in which ‘strictly speaking there is no single moment when any material form or body can be called “dead”’ (CV 257):

The petal-scented honey still lingering on his tongue, the barley bread dissolving at its leisure in his stomach, the dry resinous odours from the distant fir trees, the vague aromatic fragrances from various growths at the water’s edge, the feeling of the empty air receding into fabulous distances in every direction, but leading down at last, ledge by vertiginous ledge, to the dry scoriac bones of the Great Mother, all these—though he himself was a somewhat voluble oracle, and the straw had been flattened out too long to permit a single breath passing through it—[...] Taliesin seemed to share on something like equal terms with his unresponsive fellow tellurian.

(P, 379)

The differences between the ‘voluble’ poet and the breathless straw on which he sits are de-emphasised in a moment of writing that instead privileges the shared materiality (‘the barley bread dissolving at its leisure in his stomach’) of ‘fellow tellurian[s]’. The dissolving bread, the odours, and the taste of honey serve to further destabilise our capacity to distinguish between agentic human subject and an objectified, material world. So it is that Taliesin is struck by the fact that the ‘non-sentience’ of this ‘organic matter [...] was on a part with that of any fragment of his own skeleton when once that skeleton was scattered to the winds’ (P, 379). It is this insight which demands the Welsh poet’s “dialogue” with the straw to proceed in terms of equality and connectedness, giving him ‘a reason for saying “you and I” or “you and me” to this lifeless object’ (P, 379).

This is an insight that we have seen throughout Powys’s fictions, and one that works, ultimately, to shape his endowment of the non-human forms of his own fictional worlds with a similar sense of vitality and, indeed, consciousness. Whether this shared materiality manifests in the local instance of the water-rat or in the mythopoetic writing prompted by *Porius*’s magician and its poet, what is discerned, ultimately, is ‘Nature’ as the ground of meaning. By the close of *Porius*, the human’s implication in ‘Nature’ signifies not any sense of singular, “natural” order. Instead, the non-human world’s auguries and omens speak of a refreshed epistemology that will seek to displace fanatical insistence upon foundational truths with attention to the shifting

immanence of ‘life’, as well as to the violent and destructive technologies— aeroplanes and explosives, but also language and propaganda—by which it is threatened in both 499 AD and in Powys’s historical moment.

The result, to be sure, is not to absolve the human of its responsibility; on the contrary, *Porius*’s treatment of myth underscores the importance of care, restraint, and community on a planet that refuses to pay heed to the relative quality of life for humans and nonhumans alike. A final mythopoetic moment establishes the qualification. As the body of Wylt—exhausted after an expenditure of his nature-magic—falls into *Porius*’s arms, the counsellor’s frame becomes a ‘medium’ for ‘impressions of multiplicity’ that foreground the earth as a ‘multiple entity composed of many separate lives [...] even rocks and stones’, albeit one threatened by *Porius*’s ‘Herculean’ strength (P, 74). Powys’s figuring of this fantastic proceeding deserves full quotation:

[*Porius*] grew aware of vast continents and countries and cities. He grew aware of the unrolling of world-shaking events; of famines and plagues, of battles and migrations, of the births and deaths of whole civilizations.

And it seemed to [*Porius*] as he kept resisting the giant in his blood which would fain have tightened his powerful hold, that he shared the recession backward of the bones under his grasp into those animal worlds and vegetation worlds from which they had, it seemed only yesterday, emerged.

And by degrees the figure he was holding grew less self-contained, less buttressed in upon himself, and the man’s very identity seemed slipping back into the elements.

The human frame he held became an organism whose *conscious recession* into its primordial belongings extended far beyond the prophet’s temporary existence. It was as if he held, and what he could so easily have crushed, became a multiple entity composed of many separate lives, the lives of beasts and birds and reptiles and plants and trees, and even rocks and stones! This multiple entity was weak and helpless in his grasp and yet it was so much vaster, so much older, so much more enduring than himself that it awed him even while he dominated it.

(P, 74)

This, too, is an image of possible earthly destruction, though now it is the “technology” of *Porius*’s enormous strength—as befitting this romance-inspired narrative—that threatens to crush the life out of a ‘multiple entity’. The parallel between *Porius*’s strength and the airborne destruction of the 1940s and beyond is suggestive; the changed sense of scale, as Powys’s sense of the ‘catastrophic *world* events’ unfolding during the years of *Porius*’s genesis suggests, makes it ever more urgent. Contradicting Wyllt’s sense that no contemporary reader would give a ‘denarius’ for Powys’s ‘*Dark Ages Novel*’ (LDR, 209), Powys holds the form of the earth against the fractious violence of his historical moment, and the increasing possibilities of unfathomable destruction that it gave birth to. It is this shared materiality, ultimately, that links past with present: in *Porius*, it is also this ground that provides the hope for a refreshed sense of planetary community, a final hope of peace. If romance, as McClure suggests, demands a starkly divided and fractious world, then Powysian romance, by way of contrast, emphasises the necessity of worldly, even planetary, community.

To be sure, there is a utopianism to the project, not least because of its mythic stature. Wyllt’s summary underscores this, returning us to this novel’s persistent attention to ‘power’:

Nobody in the world, nobody beyond the world, can be trusted with power, unless perhaps it be our mother the earth; but I doubt whether even she can. The Golden Age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and devils learn to unmake themselves as I did, and leave men and women to themselves! And don’t *you* be deceived [...] by this new religion’s [Christianity] talk of “love”. I tell you, wherever there is what they call “love” there is hatred too and a lust for obedience! What the world wants is more common sense, more kindness, more indulgence, more leaving people alone.

(P, 260-261)

That Wyllt yearns for a new and utopian ‘Golden Age’—to be established, we infer, from the somewhat impressionistic anarchism of ‘common sense’, ‘kindness’, and ‘leaving people alone’—suggests how *Porius* is perhaps more successful at diagnosing the operations of ‘power’ and intimating the creative vitality of the earth

than it is in offering solutions to the religious, national, and authoritarian fanaticism that it diagnoses in both 499 AD and Powys's historical moment. We can observe this, however, without discounting the insightful and productive manner in which *Porius* deploys mythopoeic 'Nature' writing, fantasy, and animism with an intent that is at once political and ethical, informed by both Neb ap Digon's sense that 'obedience [...] [is] what cruel people do to children and animals' and its own awareness of 'Nature' as a creative, material force in which the human is fundamentally implicated (P, 260). In this light, it is not just a detail of psychological colouring that is at stake when Porius contemplates whether 'it might be possible that Christianity could survive without any root in the riverbed or if the stalks were long enough; *or still more if the stalks produced floating roots of their own*' (P, 55; emphasis added). For, as our trajectory through the forests of Powys's late novel suggests, the attention to cultural forms that might establish meaningful, and composite, relationships between humans and the nonhuman world is, ultimately, a quest for 'floating roots': a means of anchoring the human meaningfully within the world without foreclosing the plurality of forces and identities through which it manifests and understands itself. That this is found in the aqueous materiality that, in *Wolf Solent*, was 'shared, after their kind', by 'all living souls' (WS, 152), by the water that, in *A Glastonbury Romance*, dissolved solid boundaries between past and present, human and non-human, marks a further return, made new.

Conclusion: Powysian Ecological Consciousness

Porius was not the last time that Powys would make an imaginative plunge into the past. In coming to write the preface for the 1955 reissue of *A Glastonbury Romance* some twenty years after its publication, Powys observes that to ‘translate’ the ‘more instinctive workings of his mind as his mind worked when he was writing this particular romance’ into ‘the conscious movements of his mind as his mind works today’ demands a particular metamorphosis:

What I must try to do now is to hover round this book and dart at it like an extra large specimen of those curious insects we used as boys to call “hoverers” and which my young Sherborne friend Hugh Hill Bell, who was killed if I am not mistaken in the Boer war, used to “collect” as if they had been butterflies.

(GR, ix-x)

To my mind, the figuring of this ‘curious insect’—a dragonfly? A hoverfly?—offers a striking analogy for Powys’s poetics. The desire to inhabit obscure perspectives, to “see” through the eyes of animate and inanimate forms that require ‘magical’ acts of transformation is, of course, manifested most obviously in *A Glastonbury Romance*. Taking us beyond the confines of that novel, however, is Powys’s sense of an erratic and darting movement, an insectile consciousness that pauses to “hover” above, and observe, details that might remain absent from fictional worlds composed according to more localised and stable perspectives. Everything in the Powysian world, as we have seen, is ripe for this kind of literary inspection. Indeed it is this eye for detail that is expressed in Solent’s moving of the ‘the tiny green buds of an infinitesimal spray of milkwort’ as he extinguishes his cigarette upon a piece of chalk (WS, 101); the ‘oak-apple dust’ and ‘sterile bracken-pollen’ carried by the wind in *A Glastonbury Romance* (GR, 780); or the ‘tiny little pyramidal hills composed’ by ‘sand worms’ in *Weymouth Sands* (1934) (WES, 307).

Crucially, Powys seeks not only to record these fragments of a natural history, but to lavish attention upon them, to allow his writing to digress into moments of inspection and even absurdity that remind us not only of the details themselves, but of the imagination by which they are shaped. As Powys put it in a letter to Louis Wilkinson:

You see I am more than selfish, I am an “ish”—not an “itch”, I hope, but the “ish” at the tail of the word “selfish”. I so soon get out of my skin and become an “ish”—just a dot or a syllable of consciousness, enjoying a single sensation. In this I am absolutely commonplace, ordinary, and so natural and so human-too-human that I stop being an individual animal and become *any one* of all the animals, birds, snakes, insects, & even tree-roots that exist. Especially I become all the babies and baby-creatures. Yes, by Heaven, I lose all individuality!

[...]

I am a born actor, & why? Because I have no original self in me at all. I have always “played” at life, “played” at religion, “played” at philosophy. [...] The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch myself as—as *any* thing!

(LLW, 296-297)

There is an ethic to this Powysian play. The ‘ish’ that unfolds into Powys’s obscure perspectival digressions—his invocation of ‘the language of trees’ and the ‘gibberish’, ‘*wuther-quotle-glug*’; his inhabitation of the beetle’s perspective in *Porius*, which transforms the titular character into the ‘fragment of tepid matter covering the left cheekbone of a Brythonic prince’ (GR, 89; P, 131)—is a conscious approximation of a perspective that is impossible to achieve, except perhaps through an overt and ludic expenditure of the imagination, a playing at ‘get[ting] out of my skin’. That Powys draws upon the fictive license of romance and fable is not, in this light, simply an expression of his sense that the past is continually remade in the present, but also of a writer for whom the imagination is the human animal’s most ecologically sensitive apparatus. His fictions thus seek traces of this imagination in their ‘profoundly and emotionally humanized’ landscapes (MC, 48) while recording and performing the necessity of looking beyond these narrowly anthropocentric cultural complexes. This is something of a creative paradox: for Powysian fictions seek to explode anthropocentric limitations through a fundamentally humanist appraisal of the imagination. Recalling Solent’s imagining of the ‘infinite variety’ of the Lunt river brings to mind a pertinent example, though it is not just detail, but a sense of ‘variety’ and ‘diversi[ty]’, and a pleasure in moving beyond the habitually local, that animates Powys’s prose: ‘the extraordinary number of its curves and hollows and shelving ledges and pools and currents; the extraordinary variety of organic patterns in the

roots and twigs and branches and land-plants and water-plants which diversified its course' (WS, 109). When Powys declares the 'imagination' to be the source of 'everything I value most in life', in the *Autobiography* (A, 286), and when Wolf observes that 'the more he stared at the Lunt the more he liked the Lunt (WS, 149), these are not simply the results of 'full-blown Nature worship', but rather the marks of an imaginative engagement that seeks to look through, and beyond, habitual human perspectives, to *connect* this localised vantage point with the more-than-human worlds in which his characters are always and already implicated.¹

It is this imagination, ultimately, that makes Powys more than just a writer of place, and begins, indeed, to produce a kind of *ecological* consciousness. For his detailed and minute observations, like his overtly imaginative narrative vignettes, are to be surrounded by, and embedded within, concentric circles of vision that extend in all directions, immense gradations of regionality and locality that thoroughly problematise readings of Powys as a parochial country fantasist. There is no reliable scale to Powysian fiction; only a shifting sense of our present location as it recedes and expands in all directions. What matters is not finding our bearings, but experiencing the 'immers[ion]' of Powysian play as it operates across all levels:

I began by talking about "translating" our mental tone of the past into our mental tone of the present. Well! This playing the part of one of Hugh Hill Bell's "Hoverers" round *A Glastonbury Romance* has taught me that all attempts at any such "translation" only confuse the issue. In Criticising as much as in inventing we have to strip and dive naked into the element in which we are immersing ourselves whether it be earth or air or fire or water.

(GR, x)

With a full sense of Powys's ecological imagination in mind, however, it is necessary, and productive, to qualify the ways in which Powys's imagination, and more particularly, his *writing*, ultimately goes beyond the ecological. Powys's fictions are animated by the joy and pleasure that he takes in recording and even performing the immensity and diversity of his literary worlds, as we have seen; yet it is this fictitious

¹ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (Routledge: London, 1999), p. 72.

quality, too, that might give us pause for thought. In closing, we might finally turn to what is perhaps the most (in)famous passage of his *oeuvre*, the opening paragraph of *A Glastonbury Romance*:

At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of march, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon rail-way station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the utter-most stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occur when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe. Something passed at that moment, a wave, a motion, a vibration, too tenuous to be called magnetic, too subliminal to be called spiritual, between the soul of a particular human being who was emerging from a third-class carriage of the twelve-nineteen train from London and the divine-diabolic soul of the First Cause of all life.

(GR, 21)

If nothing else, the passage alerts us to the fact that the expansion of human perspective that we are to find in Powys's fictions does not always readily align itself with the forms of ecological interconnectedness privileged by contemporary readers; nor should it. Yet it is curious that Jed Esty remarks how 'readers trained in naturalist and modernist fiction are hard pressed to know what to make of a novel that begins with these words', precisely because the difficulties that such writing poses for the reader, and for the reader of *romance*, particularly, are exactly what modernist (eco)critics might be expected to attend to.² Compare, for instance, the opening paragraph from another regional romance, R. D. Blackmore's geographically proximal *Lorna Doone* (1869):

If anybody cares to read a simple tale told simply, I, John Ridd, of the parish of Oare, in the country of Somerset, yeoman and churchwarden, have seen and had a share in some doings of this neighbourhood, which I will try to set down in order, God sparing my life and memory.³

² Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 63.

³ R. D. Blackmore, *Lorna Doone*, ed. by R. D. Madison and Michelle Allen (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 15. I am indebted to Dr. Richard Brown for pointing me towards this novel.

If Blackmore's romance narrator establishes a sense of verisimilitude by locating his 'simple tale' within a particular parish of Somerset, then Powys's opening paragraph, and indeed his fiction, explode not only the time-bound simplicity of Ridd's act of personal recollection, but the anthropocentric focus of his tale. The resultant passage is hardly what we might expect from Hooker's description of Powys as a 'traditional storyteller'; neither is it likely to be readily called to mind by his further appellation: "sophisticated modernist". It does, however, make us intensely aware of the mediating relationship between *language* and the world in which we find ourselves, of the kinds of aesthetic and literary functions that are always occurring while we read fiction. The reader facing these observations of a 'First Cause' and its (imagined?) relationship with 'a particular human being', of the links between 'the deepest pools of emptiness between the utter-most stellar systems' and 'Brandon rail-way station' has to pause, perhaps by necessity, and contemplate both the dimensions of this fictional narrative and the logic—or illogic—that holds it together.

Ultimately, perhaps, this *is* amenable to ecocritical discussion, precisely because it suggests, too, how the literary ecologies in which we immerse ourselves speak to our sense of order and scale. There is a strangeness that emanates from Powysian fiction, and which works to unsettle us from our familiar habits of reading. When Esty reassures readers of *A Glastonbury Romance* that the novel 'quickly turns to a more concrete and inviting evocation of character and landscape', or when Chris Baldick argues that 'genuinely original analyses of motive, and surprising moments of symbolically charged action [...] are overwhelmed by an ecstatic flatulence that surpasses even D. H. Lawrence's comparable excesses', both critics occlude the radically transgressive potential of Powys's fiction in order to reclaim its participation in the novel's "proper"—and notably human-focused—pursuits.⁴ I do not mean to suggest that the above passage is not an example of bad, or more accurately, *excessive*, writing; but rather, to remind the reader that this excess is precisely what Powys discerns in 'the lavish and wasteful fertility of Nature' itself (MAC, 317).

⁴ Esty, p. 63; Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, x: The Modern Movement, 1910-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 232.

Powys understood that moving beyond the human's comfortable perspective and sense of scale require moments of excess in which habitual proprieties, literary and otherwise, are suspended; his writing is all the stronger, and weaker, for it.

Appendix: Postscript from John Cowper Powys to Dorothy Richardson, Aug 23,
1944, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Dorothy Richardson Collection

P.S.

No you see
I've got a
a curious
mania for
antiquity in
continuity in our
shot or the
earth's surface
if I can
claim with
almost absolutely
certain certainty

to show I would be subject
to

a share
 by
 blood-heredity
 in
 this particular
 continuity
 it
 goes
 back
 to
 total obscurity
 and
 mythology
 fading
 away
 too
 slowly to be
 caught at any

point for certain
 between
 reality & unreality
 and
 between history
 and
 legend.

This ever receding
 landscape

&
 mirage
 (reality & unreality!)

I can become
 here
 as
 nowhere else
 as it
 would
 be
 a loss to me
 to leave
 it.

I can now read
 Welsh easily enough

To be
thrilled by
it

both old and
new Welsh
we

There's far less
difference

here
between old and
new than
anywhere
else.

I read 3
local Welsh
weekly newspapers
every week!

But of course if
Phyllis — or
if our old ladies
wanted to move after
our war — I wouldn't

be
happy
to
do
it

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