The Feminine in Powys

To encompass a novelist's depiction of the feminine in a short article is a project to tempt only the foolhardiest scribbler, especially when his subject is John Cowper Powys, so prolific, teeming with ideas, provocative, and drawing inspiration always from his inner experience. I won't even attempt to be comprehensive: to avoid sacrificing detail to scope, and make the task humanly possible without costing an entire sabbatical year, I have brought evidence from five novels only, selected across his œuvre to include his first and last. To highlight relevant themes, I've given these novels nicknames: *Meek Maidens of Montacute*, *Men with Manias in Weymouth*, *Repulsive Old Men of Dorchester*, *Wales Triumphant in Defeat*, *Twins Entwined across the Milky Way*; but read on. It will become clear which ones I am referring to. Because he never makes "the feminine" his overt theme—in fact his themes are highly complex—we may glimpse attitudes which as it were emerge unconsciously from his writing. His views of the feminine, whilst being those of a man, make a composite picture: how men respond to women; their inner images of the feminine; what women think of themselves; how women see men; how women see other women.

We speak a lot today about a man's "feminine side" and vice versa, but I won't venture down that road because it would presuppose a ready-made definition of the feminine, whereas this essay looks at how Powys defines it in practice, in his depiction of women: not "as they are", for he doesn't espouse a single view of reality, but how they are seen from different points of view. Powys, as an imaginative player of many parts, may have variously identified himself as a maiden aunt or as having a Lesbian outlook, but when I say the "feminine in Powys", I refer to the women in his fiction.

They have the qualities of being real: each is uniquely differentiated so that we know precisely how we feel about her. Yet she retains mystery, not all is revealed, there are unknowable depths. In his debut novel *Wood and Stone*, this skill in depicting women is not fully developed. They are types, polarised around his anti-Nietzschean theme of the "ill-constituted" being the victors "in a universe whose secret is not self-assertion but self-abandonment". Accordingly Gladys is the representative of the "well-constituted", having the power (as daughter of the squire and industrialist Mortimer Romer), the blonde good looks and the temperament (psychological sadist) to get her own way in life and torment those who are weak and meek. Her distant relative and companion Lacrima is one of her main targets. Gladys forces her to swim daily in a deep round pond and visit the wooded Auber Lake by night, provoking her phobia. Having also noticed that the very proper young vicar, Hugh Clavering, is troubled by her physical presence in the intimacy of Con'firmation classes held for her in the vicarage, she coldly and shamelessly flaunts herself in front of him, provoking his weakness, till he is overcome with lust and guilt.

But part of the plot is to show that the “meek maidens of Montacute” triumph in the end. Apart from Gladys, and some boisterous village girls, and some more elderly gossips of the servant classes, there are a number of maidens weak or meek in various ways. Vennie is “a little ghostmoth of a girl”, a “wistful, shrinking spirit”, who desires to be a nun. In her unworldliness is a steely strength, which she exercises in persuading Quincunx to marry Lacrima, thus tying together an important part of the plot. Young Dolores, enslaved by her cruel circus trainer, Old Flick, has an instant effect on Quincunx, transforming him from timid recluse to brave decisive man of action, for she arouses his protective and paternal instincts. Other meek maidens are Nance Purvis, a mad girl who wanders the woods at night wailing in her nightgown and Ninsy Lintot, depicted as far too frail in health and prone to sudden collapse to expect a conjugal and maternal future, yet not without hopes and male admirers.

Powys’ fiction is not a critique of the political or social structure, though some of his male characters have socialist leanings, and it’s clear from their unconvincing portrayal that this kind of politics, unlike cruelty to animals, does not engage his passion. His view of the feminine hardly involves a tension between women’s position in society and their essential nature: he’s just not that sort of writer. His descriptions of the mores within and between the various classes and castes lack the bitter precision of D H Lawrence or E M Forster: but no one is more sensitive than Powys to how it feels to be in a particular position in society.

In *Weymouth Sands*, written nearly twenty years later, his themes are more complex. Its plotlines are focused around a set of alienated and solitary male characters, "men with manias". In Jobber Skald, a noble heart wrestles with a homicidal grudge. Magnus Muir is blindly infatuated with Curly Wix, though she continues to deceive him with another, even whilst leading him on to propose marriage. Sylvanus Cobbold follows mystical promptings and draws spiritual energy from close encounters with female disciples. Rodney Loder dreams futilely of escape from the dominance of his invalid father and getting his own life. Richard Gaul scribbles away at his erudite philosophy as a way of making life meaningful. These men are sympathetically portrayed, but the women who interact with their lives are depicted with a special delicacy of observation, especially in vignettes of maidens at various stages of growing up. In particular, Powys uses each female character as a lens through which a numinous reality may be glimpsed. As Perdita observes, boys may be braver, but girls are more aware. Through them it is possible to register "special moments."

> "There are moments in almost everyone's life when events occur in a special and curious manner that seems to separate that fragment of time from all other fragments."

Even Peg Frampton, lonely, ungainly, unloved, predatory like a boy, survives her darkest moments of humiliation that drive her to contemplate suicide, moments whose pain is due to her feminine gift of awareness that can take no refuge in delusion; and even she finds a man, Richard Gaul, offering them both the possibility of redemption in the sacred fusion of the sexes. For in *Weymouth Sands*, the romantic dream still holds, even though in a typically Powysian fashion, the varieties of relationship are many and varied, so that we never encounter a simple straightforward love story.

The real heroine of the novel is the orphaned exile Perdita Wane, coming from Jersey to be Mrs Jerry Cobbold's companion. We see through her eyes as she takes in new scenes, acquaintances, experiences. Her awareness is infectious: it makes men aware of her and transforms their savage souls. When she visits Larry Zed's hayloft, and lies on his bed in a reverie, she induces a parallel but separate reverie in this "mad boy", as he gazes at her:

> Thus while to the ecstatic senses of young Zed there lay exposed before him, yielded willingly up to him, two of the whitest, softest, young girl's breasts that the world contained, behind those breasts the girl's heart had substituted a full-grown man, dark and formidable and full of the magic of the sea, for the boy's red hair and burning fingers.

But it's on the Jobber that she has the most marvellous effect. He has been carrying a large pebble in his pocket throughout, as symbol and agent for his planned murder of Dog Cattistock. It is the purifying power of her love alone that makes him abandon this plan. Their various dramatic love scenes reflect a cosmic struggle between good and evil, tenderness and violence, with Perdita as both agent and reward for the victory of Good.

> And as he held the unconscious girl, who every now and then "made sweet moan" in her sleep, his delirious fantasy turned this new Being that was them both into the pressure of the fatal imperative that he kept calling "God". It never once occurred to him that his original motives, righteous indignation, his long-nourished hatred, his sense of the man being a Power of Evil, had been totally transformed since yesterday morning when he went to High House.

In *Weymouth Sands*, then, the special awareness possessed by women provides a source of enrichment, a gateway to a transcendent reality. For Sylvanus the mystic, girls are a way to God:

> "They're my friends," he cried hoarsely. "Friends, I tell you. May, Marret, little Peg . . . They're my friends. They understand me and I understand them. It's God between us, man! Can't you see? Can't everybody see? It's through them I touch God!"

Powys in this book shows women as having a redemptive influence on their men, though the relationships within which they exercise this influence are various and not all patterned on romantic love. For example Daisy Lily cares for her demented uncle Captain Poxwell and Ruth Loder cares for her invalid father James.

By contrast *Maiden Castle* is dark, contrasting a frequently repulsive reality with the pliable and airy freedom of solitary fantasy. The hero, Dud No-man, has for ten years been living with memories. Erotic fantasies of his wife Mona, who had died a virgin, have sustained him during this time. He realises that he has embellished these fantasies with qualities that she never had in life, but then he meets a living embodiment of these same qualities, in the form of a circus dancer, Wizzie. Their relationship after he buys her from the circus is hardly more physical than that with Mona, for it remains unconsummated, and they don't understand each other either.

So far, this is the kind of novel which, having read the *Autobiography*, one might expect from Powys, at least in its portrayal of women as idealisations existing in a man's head. No-man is an introverted writer living in the margins of society. Visiting the side-by-side graves of his mother and wife, he encounters Nancy Quirm. Through this encounter, he goes on to meet Wizzie, Jenny Dearth and Thuella. He also meets the "repulsive old men of Dorchester", such as Urien Quirm (whom he discovers to be his father), Teucer Wye and worst of all Old Funky, the circus trainer.

> To Dud's dismay he saw with perfect distinctness a small grey louse making its way gingerly and tentatively along the thin line of demarcation between the wig and the skull.

Dud is drawn variously to Wizzie, Thuella and Nancy, but none of the women displays the redemptive awareness that we find in *Weymouth Sands*. The opposite is the case, indicates Powys, for example when Teucer Wye complains at his daughter Thuella's cold cream being left on the shelf next to his precious volumes of Plato. Compared with Perdita, Wizzie is no heroine: she takes on No-man merely to get away from the circus and as someone to provide for the child she had by Old Funky. Thuella is outspoken, lacking in femininity and somewhat of a Lesbian. This does not prevent an erotic encounter between No-man and Thuella by the Scummy Pond, where

> the absence of actual contact between them evoked, in place of any twinge of tantalisation, an intensity of imaginative lust that was transporting.

The erotic charge remains, but uniting with the feminine is no longer romantically idealised. Women's nurturing presence persists uncelebrated, but men continue in their philosophical manias, whether Marxist, Platonist or bardic. In No-man's eyes, Wizzie the circus-dancer in spangled tights is an object of desire and a possession to be bought. To herself she is a clear-eyed practical mother, who knows how to make the best of things. She muses about No-man and his father Urien:

> Yes they're both the same! Their life, their women, their work, their love—all nothing to them unless far away, far off in the past.

Powys makes a similar observation about the young Rodney Loder in *Weymouth Sands*, confronted with a girl he had known since her infancy, now grown into a woman:

> It was characteristic of the vein of unhappy sluggishness and inertness in him that only when impressions had subsided into the remote past could he be thrilled by them.

It's striking that Urien, in the days of his final decline sprawled on a filthy sofa, cultivates the presence of not one but three women to bring him to inspiration. He caresses Wizzie on his lap, wants Thuella nearby and his complaisant wife Nancy hovering discreetly in the background. Like Sylvanus Cobbold, Urien is addicted to the feminine as to a drug: under its influence his spirit can transcend his broken body and assert prophecies such as

> the "power of the Underworld that our old bards worshipped, *though it was never defeated*, is the power of the Golden Age!"

The monumental *Owen Glendower*, completed four years later, is of course an historical novel, faithful to the high deeds and low cruelties and superstitions and day-to-day realities of the fifteenth century. The love interest revolves around the young hero Rhisiart, young in every way, for as the novel opens he is seventeen, with his head full of feudal idealism, he bears a Crusader sword and sees himself as a knight-errant desirous to serve Owen. In a dramatic gesture, he saves the friar Mad Huw from burning at the stake, earning the gratitude of Huw's dedicated handmaiden, Tegolin, a girl of Rhisiart's own age. The stage is set for romance between the two youths, enacted as sexual symbolism: Tegolin wants to touch his sword, a gesture he is at first reluctant to allow.

> Rhisiart hesitated and pondered in silence. Did the girl know all he would be giving her if he let her do that?

They sleep chastely in a cow shed.

> Last night it had been so sweet and natural when they lay in each others' arms, overcome by exhaustion. What Tegolin didn't realize was that it was just this innocent sleeping together that had destroyed her strangeness to him without initiating him in the art of love. He wanted to assert himself with her but he didn't know how to do it.

Neither of them is ready for love. Rhisiart is almost seduced by her mother, who's obsessed with sadomasochistic sex; and nearly succumbs to the physical attraction of a lady in-waiting, Luned. It is Catharine, Owen's daughter, who awakens in him the first glimmerings of love, and their romance develops against a background of wooded walks, celandines and primroses twisted in her hair. But her father Owen desperately needs a political alliance and she must marry Edmund Mortimer. Rhisiart proposes a complicated plan for fleeing the country together. Her plan is simpler, dictated not by logic but her feminine being: she wills him to take her, possess her, now! With his fussing Norman brain, he misses the cue, fails to act, and Catharine's marriage to Mortimer goes ahead. John Cowper Powys is indeed a feminist writer, for he sees through women's eyes that men are foolish creatures!

Glendower prompts Rhisiart to marry Tegolin, which would seem the prelude to a happy outcome, and the impromptu wedding just before they set out to war, with the bride in shining armour, is like a richly-coloured illustration for a fairy-tale. But it's not "happily ever after": to spring her husband out of jail she consents to sleep with his jailer; whilst Rhisiart hides his pain and humiliation beneath the middle-aged mask of a dignified English judge, for the narrative seems to skip suddenly from his youth to his middle years. Like other men in Powys' fiction, he is better able to contemplate the feminine in retrospect than in the present moment.

I have not till now mentioned the wives of the men of action in the various novels. They patiently endure their husbands' manias, knitting and plotting and moderating and pursuing as much of their own agendas as their conjugal role allows: Mrs Romer, Lucinda Cobbold, Nancy Quirm, Owen's wife the Arglwyddes. They play a supporting role from the shadows, mostly tolerant, sometimes infuriated by their husbands: "Behind every great man there is a great woman", as the English say. But it's a mark of Owen's special strength to be able to withdraw his senses from the world, to immunise himself against the promptings of his conscience and the vicissitudes of fortune, to go beyond the electric charge of male and female. In his last days, he is able to hide out in an ancient underground fortress, attended by two of his most faithful male companions. Male foolishness and female awareness have been predominant themes through much of this tale, but at its close we are to admire the wounded hero, beleaguered, dying before a blazing fire, where symbolic of "Wales Triumphant in Defeat" the king's pardon to Owen is consigned to the flames, and Owen himself dies still defiant and proclaiming his princehood. These events are attended by an audience of men and a boy. But still, in their minds, come visions of the feminine:

> Whether it was the curves of those prehistoric mouldings or whether some primitive matriarchal aura emanated from that bloodless altar, it now became the destiny of all of them to think of the women of their lives.

Powys' last novel, *All or Nothing*, restates many of his life-long preoccupations and philosophical ideas in a joyous format, whimsical and episodic like a serialised bed-time story improvised by an ancient grandfather. Reading it in this spirit (for I never used to see anything in it) I discovered its wisdom and humour and gentle English hospitality: even on a planet at the other end of the Milky Way guests who drop in are offered a pile of buttered toast and a drink of hot "borrabug". Central to the story are the seventeen-year-old twins John o' Dreams and Jilly Tewky, the "twins entwined", whose sexual awareness is awakened by their encounter with Ring and Ting, the son and daughter of giant Urk. The Montacute vicarage of the Powys childhood is evoked: the love between brother and sister is just short of incestuous. Sex is a frequent topic of conversation. Sadistic violence is described explicitly, but the victims are wicked giants and we know it's all make-believe. The book is a celebration of growing up free and adventurous and coming to no harm. Virgins of both sexes imagine the act of procreation and how it will be, the girls speculating that having a baby to suckle is the peak experience that makes all the rest worth while. John o' Dreams for his part imagines his wedding night with Ting:

> Would she sympathise with my nervousness about ravishing her, and let me go on enjoying her naked body night after night for several days without attempting to take her virginity?

He expresses an awed admiration for virginity, perhaps an archetypal male attitude, and one traceable through all Powys' fiction:

> "My own idea", he said to himself, "is that the greatest wisdom in all the human race lurks in women who like Jilly Tewky have never been ravished."

This is a reminder not to forget the two senior spinsters of the novel, Auntie Oh and Miss Deborah Posh, noted for their passionate dreams and their devotion to the celibate Rector. Nor must we forget Miss Le Fleau, Magnus Muir's landlady in *Weymouth Sands*, "a morning-after-morning sitter and knitter in a room full of old furniture", from whose calm strength Magnus draws such sustenance (for he gets none from Curly!) whilst she thinks:

> Oh, the darling fools that men are! We torment them, we humour them, we look after them, we drive them to perdition, and all the while they are so blind, so stupid, that it's hard to bear it!

What is the attraction of the feminine? This is the theme which John Cowper pursues in all five novels, as well as in his *Autobiography*: sex or something else? In *All or Nothing* he attempts an answer:

> And if Jilly Tewky [John o' Dreams' sister] was the exciting, massive castle reflected in the deep lake with its romantic lights and shadows and its overhanging battlements, Ting [his lover] was that far-off glimpse of an horizon retreating and retreating into the mystery of forgotten memories, and even into a half-conscious sense of lives lived long ago, before our mother gave us birth into this present world.

Powys' fiction is fuelled by an erotic charge springing from the very existence and polarity of the sexes, and not just relationships which find carnal expression. There are grand romantic affairs in his novels, fully consummated, but their number is exceeded by the variety of other forms of relationship: fantasy, dreams, one-sided infatuation from afar, impotent or purely cerebral lust. Ultimately his viewpoint is male. The feminine is fascinating because it is the Other.