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"Talented Member of a Literary Clan"

Descents of Memory: The Life of John Cowper Powys
Morine Krissdóttir
Overlook Duckworth
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Porius
John Cowper Powys
Ed. Judith Bond and Morine Krissdóttir
Overlook Duckworth
751 pages, $28.71 cloth
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by Jeff Bursey

The lives of some writers don't fit tidily between one set of covers. Examples include Dostoyevsky and his Russia, as represented in Joseph Frank's multivolume biography, Goethe and his age, in Nicholas Boyle's ongoing study, and the prodigious John Cowper Powys, who acquires in Morine Krissdóttir his ideal biographer.

Charles Francis Powys, a vicar, and his wife Mary (whose ancestors include John Donne and William Cowper) had 11 children, one of whom, Eleanor, died at age thirteen, of peritonitis. The Powys were tribal in their ways and manners, and, as an acquaintance put it, they "stood there blasphemous against the solidarity of the human race." The brothers and sisters entangled themselves with one another and were expected to be interested in each other's lives on the domestic, sexual, romantic, financial, literary, professional, religious, and philosophical levels. They "regularly read each other's diaries," lived with each other in close, feverish, and ever-changing combinations. Not a few were mentally fragile, confined to this or that "Great White Ship of Suffering," as JCP called hospitals, with TB or ulcers, and often inept at handling the simplest of day-to-day matters. Richard Graves begins his broader, more circumspect and therefore limited biographical work *The Brothers Powys* (1983), with the statement that "[s]even of [the children] wrote books, and of their books more than a hundred appeared in print between 1896 and 1960." In 1930 alone, ten books came out from five of them. The best-known artists in this prolific and multi-talented family are John Cowper (1872-1963), Theodore Francis (1875-1953), and Llewelyn (1884-1939). Though sharing family characteristics, their varied sensibilities resulted in the creation of dissimilar works.

Called (by themselves or others) the Welsh Ambassadors, the "Hydra-Headed Powys," and that "convoluted breed"—names that speak firstly to their complex social intercourse and then to their self-mythologizing—the family presents a knotty problem to biographers. How do you tell a clear story of one without getting lost in the forest of the entire clan? Coupled with this is the necessity to explain the works while producing the narrative arc that John Cowper Powys resisted in his *Autobiography* (1934): "It is most important in writing the tale of one's days not to try to give them the unity they possess for oneself in later life. A human story, to bear any resemblance to the

truth, must advance and retreat erractically, must flicker and flutter here and there, must debouch at a thousand tangents."

Morine Krissdóttir has edited two of John Cowper Powys's diaries, *Petrushka and the Dancer* and *The Dorset Year*, picking through his crabbed handwriting, words jammed into every corner, dashes standing in for every type of punctuation, and crossed-out lines. She presented clean texts with minimal guesswork at this or that word, her notes supplying the right amount of context. In *Descents of Memory* she shows the depth and breadth of her familiarity with Powys, illuminating previously murky corners of his long life, turning up for view his obsessions, fetishes, and deep-seated fears, while analysing with acuity his major works.

At times Krissdóttir leaves Powys's immediate life to consider his siblings. These are not debouchements, for in every case when one Powys suffered or triumphed, at least one other Powys would become involved. When Philippa, known as Katie (whose novel *The Blackthorn Winter* has recently been reissued by Sundial Press), has her "psychotic breakdown," she is nursed by Powys and their sister Gertrude (a painter). Another sister, Marian (who wrote a book on lace based on her own expertise), lived with John in New York, and he referred to her in 1919 as "my dear companion and wife of 5 years." (This is not the first or last time the theme of incest is sounded). Many times, Littleton, a brother who wrote memoirs, aided John financially and in other ways. It's necessary for Krissdóttir to spend time with these siblings, each of interest in their own right, so that a full picture of John Powys's doings and his inner life can de drawn, and she expertly guides the reader through the complex family dynamics. She is also quite good at describing how Powys interacted with those outside his family, as when she writes about the three-way relationship between Frances Gregg, Imagist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Ezra Pound, which soon included Powys (who already had a wife, Margaret, and a son), a friend of his named Louis Wilkinson, and Llewelyn. In other hands this could have been an unwieldy anecdote, or a bedroom farce. Krissdóttir's sensitivity allows the reader to marvel at what people will go through in the name of love, while remaining keenly aware of the real hurt and damage that each party suffered.

Trained in literature and psychology, Krissdóttir analyses Powys's major works with an understanding of the sources of his inspiration—his lust for women who had the appearance of sylphs, and his manias ("his passion for self-humiliation") and phobias ("blood and breast")—without being reductively psychoanalytical or disrespectful of her subject, or the creative process. A reader coming to this thoroughly researched biography will appreciate that it requires balance and control to move naturally from discussions of the misery of living in upstate New York or war-torn England to enema treatments and Powys's self-damaging contract negotiations with publishers and agents.

Powys is not read much now, though his advocates include Annie Dillard, Margaret Drabble, Henry Miller, and Robertson Davies (who considered him "obstinately great" and classed him favourably with Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence). His fiction will live on far longer than his essays or books on philosophy. One could start with *Autobiography*, an artful mystification, or with the novels *Wolf Solent* (1929), "an instant success in America," *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), a compelling 1,100-page masterpiece, *Weymouth Sands* (1934), also published as *Jobber Skald*, *Maiden Castle* (1936), a disturbing work best read in the unabridged University of Wales edition, and *Owen Glendower* (1941), set in 15th-century Wales. Finally, there is the newly issued and uncut *Porius* (1951), a historical work set in 499 AD, employing Welsh myths and Merlin. Overlook has done readers a great service—and shown some courage, from a commercial point of

view—by publishing this restored novel, expertly edited by Krissdóttir and Judith Bond. Their version, handsomely laid out, supersedes all others.

Patrick White wrote in a letter that "[Powys] was a great novelist, I think, but an evil mind," which points to the genuinely dark depths in what look like old-fashioned works. Thanks to Krissdóttir's patience and industriousness—her determination to read his handwriting alone warrants some kind of award—we can perceive much more of this tortured, frightened, intelligent, controlling, and inventive personality. Powys left masses of published and unpublished material: diaries, manuscripts, bills, and notes. So did his siblings. Krissdóttir had access to that material, as well as the papers of Phyllis Playter, Powys's "highly-strung and volatile" companion of forty years. "The question," as Krissdóttir puts it, "was how to fit all this into four hundred pages in a form that would interest both the general reader and the scholar." For thos readers who regret that Krissd óttirdoes not show Powys enough in the literary context of his times—Greenwich Village, Bloomsbury, the Modernists, and so on—there is more than ample compensation in other areas. Krissdóttir's biography is a stunning achievement that can't be soon matched, let alone surpassed, and she leaves a reader eager to read his splendid books.

In structuring *Descents of Memory* Krissdóttir thankfully does not start with Powys's birth, and she shows an unusual delicacy in not lingering over his last three years. Chapter titles appropriately identify watersheds in his life—e.g., "America", "Meeting Frances Gregg", "Phyllis Found", and "Wales." In the last chapter, "Cloud Cuckoo-Land", Powys is shown to be slowly losing his faculties (an old fear of his, revealed in a line from *Autobiography*: "We are all in secret fighting for our sanity.") He had seen his only child die, as well as some siblings, and he could no longer walk outdoors, which used to be a great solace and spark for invention. Phyllis attempted to comfort John by hanging a painting near his bed, "an abstract oil in tones of brown, gray, and bluish white—the moorland, the mountain beyond, and then the sea. As he looked at it, past merged into present and neither any longer held terror."

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