Awe-Inspiring Hideousness

Porius, John Cowper Powys

reviewed by Nicholas Birns

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On the future of aesthetics

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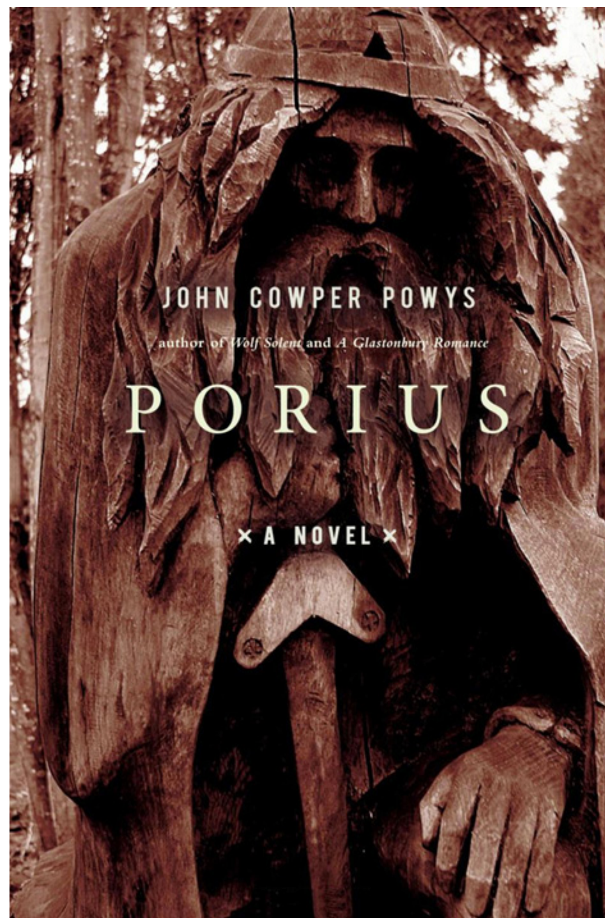
Powys's Great Twentieth-Century Novel of the Fifth Century



Porius
John Cowper Powys
Overlook Press, 2007

reviewed by Nicholas Birns
Eugene Lang College
the New School

John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) has always been a far more difficult writer to assimilate than to read. Though it is frequently complained

that not enough read him, in fact some do, not many, but those few of fierce ardor. But he has never entered the common parlance of highbrow literary conversation, instead being both beneficiary and victim of periodic 'revivals' more often than not designed to promote him for some ideological or commercial reward extrinsic to Powys's own vision. None of this has made a dent in his inassimilability, although Powys has reached readers not so much through organized campaigns but through fortuitous pickings-up from random bookshelves; an adept general reader of my acquaintance encountered Powys's *Wolf Solent* two years ago when he was past 80, and it gave him a jolt as few other books had done. Readers who read Powys do not find him hard to read at all—they are fascinated—the problem is not that individuals but the culture has not found a way to read him, has seen him under the sign of his own inassimilability. If this is so, then *Porius* is the most Powysian novel, because it is the inassimilable of the inassimilable, the book least talked about when a Powys revival is mooted, the book least likely to be taught—as opposed to the shorter *Wolf Solent* (1929), teachable if one, as I did in 2000, allots three weeks to it—or to be offered as a representative sample of Powys's genius—*A Glastonbury Romance (1932)* is better for that. Different theories have been advanced for the inassimilability of *Porius*. Jerome McGann, in a 1995 *TLS* article, spoke of *Porius* as a novel so ultimate that it burst the form, leaving any further attempt to write novellas as at best recuperative; whereas a book like *Ulysses* innovated upon the novel, or pastiched it, *Porius* exploded the form so much that to read it would be to dwell upon the bursting of the possibility of writing fiction. In a 1997 issue of *Powys Notes,* Charles Lock, pointing to the use of "gwork" as the Cewri word for "fighting and struggling" (570) in chapter 27, "The Homage of Drom." The outrageous dissonance of "gwork" so horrendously upset the outside referee, Norman Denny, consulted by the original British publisher of the novel, and Lock used this as a base to position "gwork" as emblematizing the glorious indigestibility of the work. Both McGann and Lock, in essence, argued that *Porius* cannot be domesticated, that its wildness, its challenge to normative ideas of morality and perception, is so great that if we were to embrace it we would have to jettison those attributes of the novel which have enabled it to continue as a living phenomenon and, in the 'right' hands, be both commercially lucrative and socially sanctioned.

All this is undeniably true. But this new edition of *Porius,* substantially enlarged and overhauled from the original manuscripts, and edited by Morine Krissdóttir, Powys's biographer and the leading scholar of his work, as well as by Judith Bond, raises the opportunity to find other motivations behind the way criticism has so flagrantly neglected this work. The text, presented in Krissdóttir and Bond's edition, whose issuance is the acumination of a series of reissues of Powys's major novels from the admirable Overlook Press, is not a pure reconstruction from the original. Rather it is a re-expansion of the previously

published editions, incorporating the vast majority of the portions left out by earlier truncation (which, because it was based on the idea that the novel as submitted was too dense and ambitious for an audience, was really a kind of censorship). But spelling and grammar are made consistent with normative uses, and the text in general is made 'presentable.' So this is an enhanced and in many ways redeemed *Porius*, and certainly the most authoritative version and the one closest to the author's intention. But, as McGann would be the first to argue, it is not the only possible 'authentic' *Porius*, and future editors may well come up with different *Poriuses* that, like new translations of Dostoyevsky, might continue to incite debate and interest and renew the pertinence of a novel felt to be especially difficult to digest.

Beyond the sheer strangeness of the novel, it might be well to historicize *Porius*, (perhaps a potentially dreary exercise but such a flagrantly inventive text can tolerate some historicization that might drain a lesser book of all vitality). Indeed it is well to historicize it in two separate ways: with respect to the 499 AD of its setting and the 1951 of its publication (in fact, the text was complete by 1949). The 499 date is meant to signify being on the verge of a century's end, just as Powys, even in the 1940s, was prompted by the apocalyptic horrors of World War II to think of the upcoming millennium. The millennial resonances continue even after the turn of the millennium has passed; the last conference in the U.S. devoted exclusively to Powys took place at the World Trade Center in May 2001, and the support staff that facilitated the meeting fled for their lives from the Towers four months later, fortunately escaping intact. But the millennial aspect of just a garnish; the fifth-century setting puts the book not just in the Age of Arthur (or, as it might be called nowadays, "the long fifth century," but in an interstitial context, after the waning of Roman rule, before the rise of an English national identity, and in a period of history traditionally neglected by the mainstream and left to be valued by eccentrics and connoisseurs of the strange and obscure. Brochvael praises the forest people for not aspiring after a "Golden Age" (194), and those writers interested in the interstitially early medieval have similarly been, as Brochvael says, "beyond it."

Indeed, even somewhat pulpy bestsellers set in this period—such as Gary Jennings's *Raptor* (1993), or the mid-twentieth century novels of Alfred Duggan, have a strangeness about them, an aspect of fantasy. It is indeed hard to write realistically about this period as so few records survive from it and these lack other orderly or inspirational virtues we normally look for from history. All this makes the era inherently destabilizing. A writer of idiosyncratic tendencies such as Powys could very plausibly find an imaginative home there, and Powys signals this by his delight in the representative arcana of the age, the cameos he gives to figures like Boethius (159, 391) and Sidonius Apollinaris (392), whose fastidious Gallo-Roman elegance most likely, Powys admits, had been gathered to the next world by the 499 of the novel's setting.

But Powys was also doing something specific with respect to the history and legend in of the period. It is set in the Age of Arthur, a conceit whose allure has always been that Arthur probably did not exist, but that so little is known of the Britain of his time that his existence cannot totally be ruled out. The Arthurian idea has served as a safe semi-legendary space to play out constitutive dilemmas of the European. But *Porius* is not in fact a very Arthurian book—certainly not as compared to John Heath-Stubbs's *Artorius* (1972) or T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1938-1958)—and in a book surprisingly sympathetic to so many contending forces, the Arthurians do not come off that well: the "new Arthurian cavalry" (38) is seen as somewhat of an unwelcome innovation, their relentless pursuit of battle yielding an arrogance that Porius, our protagonist, does not especially admire. Indeed, Powys historicizes Arthur and mystifies his milieu, making Arthur and his retinue more matter-of-fact and their distant surroundings more colorful, in such a way as to disestablish the centrality of Arthur with respect to his own 'age.'

Indeed, though Porius is (somewhat Sir Walter Scott-style) Arthur's cousin, the Arthurian cavalry (too early to be 'knights') are seen with wary though suspicion, and as a kind of alien body, not unlike their portrait as an ethnically distinct Sarmatia cadre in the 2004 *King Arthur* movie. In truth, Powys is far more interested in Merlin (Myrddin Wyllt) than in Arthur, and the master-disciple relationship Merlin usually has with Arthur in the legends is here largely between Myrddin Wyllt and Porius.

This is not just, though, a turn from the Arthurian to the more primally mythic. It is to some extent, as Powys makes clear that Romano-Britons like Arthur are not at the core of the novel's imaginative vision, their places taken by more aboriginal figures such as the Cewri (giants), called the real prehistoric aboriginals of Wales (25) the Gwydyll-Ffichti (Scots and Irish, or proto-Scots and proto-Irish, but distinguished from the Britons-Brythons, who, though also Celtic, are not only more Romanized but more 'European' in outlook), and the forest people, repeatedly identified as non-Aryan and with connections to the Mediterranean basin and to Africa (Iberian or Berber). These less heroic but more instinctual groups provide the novel's spirituality and strangeness, leaving the Arthurian world as, by contrast, a far more conventional, workaday enterprise—which the giant exception of Myrddin, whose magical craft is far more akin to the unfettered energies of the more fiercely wild people. Yet again, *Porius* does not simply favor myth over history. Porius is said to be the great-great-grandson of Cunedda, an attested historical figure who is claimed in the cultural linage of both Wales *and* Scotland. Cunedda is a much more reliably real personage than Arthur ever shall be, and in linking Porius to his lineal descent, Powys is making sure his protagonist has one foot in the referential world, even as his other is certainly in the fantastic. Moreover, there are all sorts of links in the book to the remnants of the larger Mediterranean world—Porius' grandfather, Porius Manlius, is still as much a Roman of the

mos maiorum—of the old, severe, pagan ways—as it was possible to be in the late fifth century AD. Furthermore, there are still links with Constantinople, a motif that often crops up in Arthurian fiction, as if to make the point that Britain has a connection with the East unadulterated by the attempted mediation of Western Europe, particularly the Roman papacy. Indeed, the Byzantine connection has a pronounced anti-Papal tilt, were, as Brother John goes to Constantinople to combine in support of the Pelagian 'heresy,' of individual choice—that individuals can strive for the salvation of their soul—as opposed to the Augustinian 'orthodoxy' of guilt and original sin—that individuals are doomed from birth because of Adam's and Eve's transgression and can only be redeemed through the radical grace offered by Jesus Christ.

Yet despite taking one side in controversies within Christianity, the outlook of the novel is overwhelmingly non- and even anti-Christian, which is especially notable because so many of the Victorian novels set in this or slightly adjacent periods were conversion-novels depicting the rise of Christianity, which served to compensate for whatever social disruptions were chronicled in the books. Powys is not disdainful of Christianity and understands the enabling role it has played in Western cultural and intellectual history. Yet the thrust of the book is one of straightforward protest against the "new Three-in-One with its prisons and its love and its lies," which, with a quasi-Nietzschean flourish, will "only last two thousand years" (261).

Porius indeed—and this is its second temporal subversion—is part of the late, mythic, less canonical phase of modernism, in which the emphasis was less on irony, disjuncture, and innovation of technique than on totalizing mythic syntheses, somewhat verging on the parodistic. This is the difference between the Joyce of *Ulysses* (1922)—whose taking place in one day in Ireland in June 1904 is paid tribute to by *Porius*'s taking place in Wales in one week, from October 18 to 25, 499—and that of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), and the caustic and elegiac 'The Waste Land" (1922) and Eliot's more serene and harmonious "Four Quartets" (1944). *Porius* can also be seen as part of the New Romanticism of the 1940s, which yielded in poetry such figures as Heath-Stubbs and Sidney Keyes, and which betokened a general interest in the Celtic and the fantastic seen in T. H. White and also in J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *The Lord of the Rings* (1953-5) is a weird counterpart to *Porius*, even containing some of the same names (e.g., "Teleri," originally from the *Mabinogion*, used by Tolkien as a name for an Elvish people, by Powys as that of "The Half-Woman" who provides the title of Chapter XXIX). Powys has all the overt sexuality and apparent reference to the modern world Tolkien positions far more obliquely, yet the works undeniably exist in a strange kinship.

Part of the 1940s valuation of the Celtic (not particularly shared in by Tolkien, but certainly by such figures as White and Heath-Stubbs) is that the Celts were not Germanic. Whereas England had defined itself in the nineteenth

century by its sturdy Anglo-Saxon roots, with the Celtic as a mild, melancholy supplement, in the twentieth century, with Germany as its main enemy, the Celtic aspects of the British heritage were pushed to the center. Indeed, the only ethnicity, in *Porius*'s multicultural, ethnically overlapping panoply, to not be 'fairly' treated is the Anglo-Saxon. In a book with few villains (and this alone pulls it out of the conventional historical-novel category), the Anglo-Saxons, largely offstage characters, are not seen benevolently, their exclamation such as "Wasseil" and "Drincheil" (194) seen as barbaric, and it is assumed throughout the novel that, whatever their other differences, the Romano-Celto-aboriginal peoples of Britain will make common cause against the Saxon enemy. 499 is not just an apocalyptic, end-of-century date but also the fifty-year anniversary of the first Saxon invasion, led by the quasi-mythical brothers Hengist and Horsa. Powys's multiculturalism is, in an English sense, an odd one. It is multiculturalism for everyone except the Anglo-Saxon. Powys fully knew this could never be a reality for either his Britain or Porius's, and despite his close identification with Wales, Powys was mainly English by descent and had only lived in Wales for less than 15 years when he wrote the novel, spending his childhood and early adulthood in England and many of his mature years in the United States. But the novel was written when any sort of pride in the Germanic was, understandably, at a low ebb, and Powys's splaying of identities while stowing the Saxon on the ethnological back shelf is an eloquent dissent from the organic race-mysticism that had stood behind Nazi ideology. This Powysian posture, for all its eldritch interest in Druidic mystery, is actually quite patriotic, and Powys was in a strange way an old-fashioned British patriot. The Celtic is a continuation of the Roman and a precursor to modern Britain. "Eternus, Edernus, Edeyrn," (21) the mantra chanted by Porius on the first page of the novel to image his great-grandfather and the region to which he gave his name, also traces the linguistic way that Roman names became Celticized and later emerged as indelibly British; the memory of "Claudia" in the name "Gladys" is only one example of the Eternus/Edeyrn kind of linguistic mutation. But it also fostered a more general idea of heterogeneity. Powys deliberately includes Jews and even Arabs in his ethnic kaleidoscope. (In the case of the Jews, this is very nearly historical, as Jews were certainly in Gaul at that time and could plausibly have crossed the channel.) At a time when exclusivist racial rhetoric was a live danger, Powys braided together a plurality of mentality, of sexuality, of psychology, *and* of ethnicity. He constructs a Britain not just simply English or simply stolid and well-behaved, without succumbing to alternate essentialisms. This cosmopolitanism, deepened by Powys's interest in other kinds of multiplicity, may well be why Powys has fascinated not just those interested in the Celtic and mythic—for whom he frankly, and despite appearances, does not provide he usual fare—but critics such as George Steiner who are responsive to Powys's never-ending quest for *heterogeneity*.

Porius himself, our protagonist, is an inherently 'multiple' figure. His grandfather is a Roman, his mother a Gwydyll-Ffichti, he has Brythonic, Cewri, and forest people descent. Porius as a figure also spans generations. Porius is young, written by an old man, but there is also a Porius about Powys's age when he was writing the book, Porius's grandfather Porius Manlius, whose name begins and ends with sounds that, together, make "Powys." The younger Porius is far more mystical than his stoic old Roman grandfather, a man of the new age (despite his aversion to Christianity—not the old, a man of mysticism not of philosophy—yet he is also the true heir of the elder Porius. Porius, as many critics have pointed out, is also 'porous.' Though in many ways the novel is a traditional *Bildungsroman*, as Porius, growing up in a time of stress and change, works out the influences of various family and older-mentor figures, experiences an intense, true love with Morfydd, the daughter of Brochvael, while also having other sexual adventures along the way—not so far different from the norm that it cannot be graphed on a spectrum running from David Copperfield to Augie March. The novel concerns the adventures, loves, influences of the young, impressionable Porius. McGann has termed *Porius* a romance, and, for all the different species of femininity and sexuality in it, Porius is still—and this is not a condemnation, rather a testimony to the accessibility of its spirit—a boy's book, but neither innocent nor didactic but filled with the energy of a youth responsible enough to negotiate the perspectives it will have to choose between in life, and resilient enough not to be awed or cowed by them. But Porius as a character is not simply open to experience; he often engages in lengthy, introspective musings, where he corrects earlier misunderstansdings or realizes implications of his own experience. This is what Steiner meant when he spoke of the book as combining Shakespeare and Henry James, although Porius's musings do not at all seem like interpolated anachronistic streams-of-consciousness but simply what an intelligent fifth-century Briton might think if he stood aside from himself at times. This can be seen in a crucial passage from Chapter XXIV, "Birth and Death."

> ….his own mind swung back to what he had just seen which was the first birth he had ever witnessed in his life.
>
> He had differed since his infancy from all previous members of the prolific Cunedda family by taking an interest in animals. Of horses, of dogs, of sheep, of cattle he knew as little as it was physically possible for the only child of a born huntsman like Einion ab Iddawc to know. Then as he had been entirely removed from the circumstance of any birth in his association with his mother, his foster-mother, and his betrothed, his knowledge of the singular and startling accompaniments of birth was practically nil. (504)

What's first notable about this passage is how clear and accessible it is; indeed, it is quite approachable, with the exception of the Celtic names and references, which in many ways lay a false trail of difficulty for a text that, notwithstanding them, is not hard to read. A very helpful *Readers' Companion,* a glossary/annotated guide to the novel, compiled by the distinguished Canada-based scholar W. J. Keith, is available online (www.powys-lannion.net/Powys/Keith/companion.pdf). What is also apparent is the combination innocence and self-consciousness in the musings of *Porius*, related in a way halfway between the Jamesian limited third-person point-of-view and the Victorian omniscient narrator. Porius looks back in introspection, in self-consciousness but what he looks back upon is his ignorance of birth. Since he has not had any experience of birth, he cannot really know his own birth, the conditions under which he came into the world, but this does not prevent him from being very conscious of what he *does* know. In addition, the terms of the world Porius recounts are medieval, and the sorts of animal birth Porius has not seen are just what medieval Europeans would have had the possibility to experience, but the way he thinks about them, without being inappropriately modern, stands far more out of the immediate situation than any medieval mode of reflection would. Porius's whimsical wondering-aloud to himself, his side-commentary, relates directly to the reader above the novel's myriad of event and reference.

Oddly for a novel of the age of Arthur, and one that again is, in an edgy way, a romance and a boy's book, *Porius* is not action packed, and probably this is the biggest difference from comparable mythic romances. The novel has no villains, no metaphysical antagonisms; it is rather a *tour d'horizon* of Porius's anarchic fifth-century world, filled with happy, rogue discoveries, almost "the explorer's delight" of the Seven Seals section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The suspense in the book is mostly episodic, seldom stretching from chapter to chapter; the fiction's animating issue is the self-definition of Porius, namely who he will love and what spiritual path he will follow. Yet though these have *Bildusgsorman*-style determinate answers—he will love his cousin Morfydd and follow the lore of Myrddin Wyllt—several other possibilities are sampled. Spiritually, these include Christianity and Mithraism—the religion of the Arthurian soldiers—as well as the lore of the Cewri and the forest people and adjacent yet competing beliefs of the poet Taliesin and the tale-telling Henog of Dyfed. Romantically, these include Creiddylad the Giantess, whom Porius has sex with in one of Powys's bravura passages, intense without being at all purple or pornographic. Powys's critics have at once exulted in the transgressiveness of this scene and been faintly abashed by it, as in truth in overall torque the implications of the passage are little different from the typical arc of the Western domestic narrative, as the male protagonist engages with and then rejects an unsuitable woman before settling, or re-settling, on a more conventional partner, and the strapping Creidyllad is

only a slightly more unpresentable ‘other woman’ than is Circe or Calypso. Indeed, the more bracing channeling presented by Porius’s experience is not anything explicitly sexual at all, but rather the cognitive reach of his ‘cavoseniargizing’—a word totally invented by Powys—where the gulf between body and soul becomes “temporarily bridged” (93) in an omniprevalent ecstasy. Cavoseniargizing is an extremism of sexual pleasure to all of life, or a redefinition of life’s un-sexual pleasures so that they attain a concentration usually associated with the sexual. Cavoseniargizing is post-Freudian or anti-Freudian, and not necessarily in the direction of the expansion of instinct; cavoseniargizing is about freedom and non-reduction, which in Powys entails a certain de-sexualizing. Cavoseniargizing extends the animal pleasures of sexuality to vegetative and even mineral life, and this extension makes it more polymorphous, yet also more chaste, more holy. Samuel Menashe illustrated this mentality in “Pagan Poem”: “I would break all vows/ That bind me to your bed/ If I could make out/ With one pine instead.” Except that Powys would extend this from a pine to the granite and gneiss beneath it.

It is the cavoseniargizing rather than the liaison with the giantess that gives the novel’s sexuality its unconventional aspects—bearing in mind that the main relationship, with Morfydd, is not only conventionally heterosexual but lyrically and decorously so, a Victorian editor could take these passages alone and fashion them into a quite moving meditation perfectly acceptable in nineteenth-century moral terms. But there are dimensions to Porius’s sensory experience beyond what he and Morfydd share. Some have tried to cast Powys as gay; he was from all evidence not literally so. But he was not heteronomrative either, and his horror at heterosexual copulation (he used a different term) is well documented. Porius is fervidly interested in Morfydd but not possessive of her; when she seems as likely to end up with his friend Rhun, Porius maintains a casual, even cavalier attitude, as if he would want to stand with more conviction in defense of his love but is too detached and too removed from full bodily awareness to do so.

Similarly the poet Taliesin (like Cunedda, an attested if shadowy historical figure) rhapsodizes about:

> The ending-forever of the Guilt-sense and God sense
> The ending forever of the Sin-sense and Shame sense
> The ending forever of the Love sense and Loss sense (478)

He intones against just the sort of Christian sexual restorations on the verge of taking power, proleptically arguing for a twentieth-century neo-pagan transvaliuation of normative values. Yet Taliesin is said to have no sexual

feelings at all, and the repudiation of guilt and anxiety is concomitant with an abstention from sex as such, altogether. The Henog of Dyfed is Taliesin's great antagonist on most issues, but with regard to sex he merely substitutes disgust for indifference, it being said of him that "All intercourse with the opposite sex" (388) was "so distasteful to him" that a woman being in any kind of sexual relationship with a man is, to him, virtually tantamount to her being raped. The novel, in other words, does not unequivocally affirm sensual liberation as the antidote to bourgeois or Christian inhibitions; indeed, the parts of the book most categorically sexual occur in Porius's courtship of Morfydd, which again is very much, in the conventional sense, "romantic."

The aforementioned Henog of Dyfed comes close to being the *raisonneur* of the book. As said before, Powys, in his mid-seventies as the book was written, was too old to be Porius, so he must be someone else, must be the Henog. This is not to say that Powys is notably *not* Porius; an intriguing link is that he had only lived in Wales for less than 15 years when he wrote the book—so as an actual, or adoptive, 'Welshman' Powys was, in the late 1940s, no more than a teenager himself! But the Henog, in his crotchetiness, his intellectual ambition, and, most of all, his preference for narrative over poetry as the privileged vehicle of imaginative art, is surely the actual Powys's self-projection. Notably in only one of many Greek-Celtic puns throughout the book, the "hen" in "Henog" plays on the Greek word for "one." *Porius* is a highly Greek book, remarkable in that, in its represented time, the only aspect of Greece available to the Britain of 499 was, as Powys depicts, Christian Byzantium. *Porius* is suffused with Homeric references, Brochvael's recollection of the Homeric term *aisima*, or "decency in fate" (204), of the "moly" (220) that cured the madness of the men enchanted by Circe, of the blinded Cyclops (223). True, all of these associations are made by one character, Porius's uncle-cum-father-in-law Brochvael, and are kept apart from the consciousness of the protagonist, but it cannot be denied that Brochvael's Homeric predisposition was also shared by Powys himself. As Powys's very last work, even after *Porius*, becomes more fantastic, even more incoherent, it also becomes more Homeric.

Porius has one of the most memorable final utterances, "There are many gods; and I have served a great one." Porius's self-evaluation of the week that has been elevates Myrddin to the level of a god, restores him to his rightful place (as equivalent to Saturn/Cronus) away from his immediate service to Arthur and deference to the Roman/Christian ideals he represents (and which Powys, again, does not scorn, preferring them to the Saxon; he merely diagnoses them as incomplete). Porius admits both plurality, that Myrddin is not the only possible god, that he does represent the only possible set of values which deserve loyalty. But Myrddin deserves loyalty, potentially more than any other comparable object, and most important, he deserves loyalty from Porius. Porius's respect for Myrddin is the indispensable backbone of his

animate self. It is not a totalizing claim, but Porius is defending the integrity of his own beliefs and the life experience that has ensued from them. There is also a domestic marriage-plot-ending aspect to this last line, as Porius thinks of addressing it to Morfydd upon their projected reunion and the beginning of their life together as a couple. This embeds Porius's fealty to Myrddin in a domestic context—and implies that Porius's adventurous days might be over once he settles down to wedded happiness. It also suggests Porius's love for Morfydd—quite the obverse of Myrddin's epic contest with his female foil and rival, Nineue ferch Avallach—is the domestic manifestation of the same desires of which Porius's cavoseniargizing and the "awe-inspiring hideousness" (748) of Myrddin are the more uncanny avatars. It is a double ending, but a conjoint double. The familial and transcendental aspects cohabitate rather than contradict. It is, in other words, an ending fit for all sorts of readers.

Yet who will read *Porius* now? I know that Overlook, for its own understandable reasons, and many Powys fans want this book to sell to a broad, nonacademic public. Yet right now, the only interpretive community equipped to handle and negotiate with the complexities of a text like *Porius* is the academic community. It would be nice if there were a sophisticated coherent nonacademic community to analyze these texts, but there is not—there are only the lonely, perceptive general readers who, in their loneliness and perceptiveness, have always been the pith of Powys's audience. One understands the hopes of Powys's publishers (for commercial reasons) and Powys enthusiasts (because it would make their Joy in Powys more appreciated) for a kind of popular canonicity for the author, but this hope—and here I may well be too austere—seems to me an un-Powysian hope. The anti-academic tone in the introduction—amusingly figured in the parapraxis of academics having "poured" (14) over the work—is tolerable on one level. One should not expect Powys to write mechanically for an academic consistency—but one should not expect that of many academics also, and the entire tone bespeaks a continuing quest for a popular Powys, when for anyone—not just Powys but John Updike or Margaret Atwood—the serious readership will be an academic readership, remembering that academia includes students and former students as well as teachers. What is of value in the novel is that it provides an extremely outlandish yet historically faithful rendition of a confused and confusing time in history, which yields both demographic and ontological 'multiplicity.' The achievement of Powys's strange fifth-century tale, as presented in this splendid new edition, ensures that this readership will have new access to *Porius*, although one fears—or perhaps hopes—that it may yet remain inassimilable.

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