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The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Emma Goldman
edited by David Goodway
Cecil Woolf (£30)

by Jeff Bursey

Emma Goldman (1869-1940), born in Lithuania but most often a resident of the United States, became both infamous and an inspiration for her anarchist activities and writings. Her most enduring work may be found in the causes she championed (described in, among other places, *Living My Life*, a two-volume autobiography first published in 1931). In his introduction to *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Emma Goldman*, David Goodway provides a good overview of her eventful life, judging that “1906 to 1919 mark the apogee of her revolutionary career.” After spending two years in a U.S. jail for campaigning against conscription in the First World War, in 1917 she was “immediately deported” to Russia. *My Disillusionment in Russia*, published in two volumes (1923-1925), charts her disenchantment with Bolshevism. It and she were enemies forever after. Goldman became an English citizen through a marriage arranged for that purpose. Her activist nature never diminished, but she was in “limbo” from the mid-1920s until, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, she found a new purpose.

In England, Goldman organized, harried, lectured, wrote, and attempted to stir society to show sympathy towards and give money to the Spanish cause—to little avail, “considering the rigidity of the British Public,” as she wrote to Powys in February 1937. She did better in Spain. “Here I am again in England after three months in Spain. I may say, without exaggeration, the three most exultant months of my entire career.” The hysteria, bloodshed, carnage, and devotion to a true anarchist cause (no government, but governance by the people as equals) found among Spaniards, Catalonians in particular, rejuvenated her as she neared seventy. The civil war within the civil war—political infighting between those on the side of Stalin and those who were not—ended her time there. Back in London, she resumed trying to enlist sympathies and provoke political pressure about the treatment accorded those who had fled to France from besieged Spain. “Let no one talk to me about the liberality of France,” she wrote Powys during the winter of 1939. “In point of fact France has been living on her past, like some unfortunate women whose age is devoid of everything worthwhile and who therefore can have nothing to give to the world except their boastful youth.” By the summer she was in Ontario, Canada, where she died in May 1940.

John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) is the best-known member of a prodigious literary family that contained Theodore Francis (T.F.) Powys (1875-1953) and Llewelyn Powys (1884-1939), among other writers and artists. In 1930 alone, ten books appeared written by five family members. The brothers were prolific, perhaps overwhelmingly so: their works were densely woven, mystical and/or animistic; they stayed away from literary cliques; and they weren’t interested in long silences between works. Despite his own output, JCP (as he is often referred to) fell off many literary maps soon after his writing life stopped. He began as a poet in the 19th century, but shifted to lecturing, first in England, and then, profitably, in the United States from the early 20th century to roughly 1930, addressing countless audiences in major cities and small towns. He met Emma Goldman on such a circuit, and in 1936 referred to her as “an old colleague

of mine in the States in the cause of free Culture and enlightenment for the masses.” Lecturing was how Powys maintained himself and his family (his wife Margaret Lyon and their child, Littleton) until the success of *Wolf Solent* (1929) encouraged him to give that up. Living in the States for long stretches also helped him stay away from a marriage that never suited; Powys met the ideal sylph of his dreams, Phyllis Playter, in Joplin, Missouri in 1921 when he was nearly fifty and she was twenty-six. They lived together until his death.

In 1915, Powys’ first novel, *Wood and Stone*, sold very well, and he quickly wrote a second, *Rodmoor* (1916). These were followed by many books that might be regarded as literary self-help works, alternating with dithyrambic appreciations of other writers. Those two titles, as well as *After My Fashion* (1920; not published in his lifetime), and *Ducdame* (1925), are now available through Faber’s print-on-demand service. In 2007, the Overlook Press published two significant works: the complete version of what many consider his finest novel, *Porius* (1951), which had previously only appeared in abridged versions; and the first biography devoted to JCP alone, Morine Krissdóttir’s *Descents of Memory*, that hopefully will increase interest in his work and life. Overlook has in print most of the masterworks: *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932); *Weymouth Sands* (1934; *Jobber Skald in England*); *Autobiography* (1934); *Maiden Castle* (1936; the unabridged version); and *Owen Glendower* (1940). *Wolf Solent* has remained in print through a variety of publishers. While this is not a renaissance, or a return to his popularity in 1915 or the early 1930s, it does indicate serious interest. Once more, people have the chance to see why such diverse writers as Annie Dillard, Henry Miller, Theodore Dreiser, Robertson Davies, and Margaret Drabble have been advocates.

The *Letters of John Cowper Powys and Emma Goldman*, recently released by the small English publisher Cecil Woolf, is another addition to the fine collection of Powys letters his firm has already published. The letters cover the period 1936-1940, and with such figures—Powys full of admiration for Goldman, Goldman consumed by the dire state of Spain—we might expect either a cautious correspondence or one that takes full flight and seizes the reader. “How important was this correspondence to the participants?” Goodway asks in his Afterword. He offers an only partially satisfying answer, that Powys was an “invaluable morale booster” for Goldman, and that she tutored him in anarchist thought, correcting his early errors. Thanks to her, Powys could balance his idiosyncratic outlook on the world with political thought. Her re-education of him was necessary, and beneficial, and it gave him the words and concepts to refine and better articulate his own libertarian (i.e., anarchist) views.

This seems a particularly narrow ledge from which to view the workings of both writers. Like many of his siblings, from the very beginning Powys never fit into a wider society easily, and he learned to be (or persisted in being) singular and unclassifiable. Here, I believe, Goodway has the tail wagging the dog. In the introduction he writes, “Why, it has to be asked, is Powys not at his best in his correspondence with Goldman?” After knocking down a few possible reasons, he provides an answer: Goldman was “not a close friend. . . at the outset—rather, a celebrated acquaintance.” In short, some hero worship had to be gotten over, and only after four years, so Goodway’s reasoning goes, does Powys relax and sound like he did when writing others.

That seems like another partial answer. There are other reasons why Powys sounds restrained (by his standards) in what is a revealing correspondence of great worth to Powys and Goldman scholars. The first letter is from Goldman to Powys on the first of January 1936, and in it she asks his advice on how to “go about to gain a hearing,” that is, find a venue to attract audiences in England. She also sends him material that might help him figure out a way she could promote herself. A year later she asks if Powys would let her list his name, as well as

Llewelyn's, for a "theatre affair" she is arranging. In January 1938 Goldman asks Powys to be a sponsor for a different matter. He provided a written tribute to her that "brought a lump to [her] throat." However, it can't be used for her purposes, being "too personal," and she asks for something a general audience can hear. Powys obliges. Later in 1938 he provides an article on Spain for a publication, at her request; it contains errors that Goldman corrects some months after its publication. At the end of this year she returns to his re-education. "I have no desire to impose such works in you, but I will be very happy indeed to send you a collection of some of the things by the foremost exponents of Anarchism." When she writes inquiring about his latest book, Owen Glendower, in June 1939 it almost comes as a shock due to the rarity on her part of such questions. She then asks if he'd consider writing a preface to someone else's book, offsetting her momentary interest in his vocation. For his part, Powys always inquires after her work, thanks her for whatever she sends him, and responds to what she's doing, in England, Spain, and Canada. Throughout the correspondence Goldman alternates between two main salutations: "Dear John Powys" and "Dear Friend." Powys generally writes "My dear Emma Goldman" or "Dear Emma."

I mention these things because this important correspondence—charting Goldman's English activities on behalf of Spain, and Powys' deepening understanding of anarchist thought—is remarkably free of fun. Powys relished the joyous liberty of going off on flights of fancy. A sign of his high spirits, and his interest in what he's saying and responding to, is found in multiple clauses in one sentence (often fragmented, filled with dashes and underlining) that loops around or leaps away from the main subject, eventually getting back to the main topic that has, in the course of the lines, been subtly or grandly transformed. These are frequent in the letters Powys and English novelist Dorothy Richardson exchange (also newly published by Woolf this year). Goldman's epistles don't allow room for Powys' usual humour to present itself, since he is often both tutored and used as an instrument, with his own literary work not nearly so important as a political cause. He rarely opens up for an exchange of a literary sort, or delving into the mystical that is a hallmark of so much of his writing. Anyone familiar with Powys would know his habit for placating or worshipping others, and those things are definitely present in these letters. I also believe that Goldman is sincere every time she praises his warmth towards her, for he did support her. That is why the publication of their letters is so welcome. It shows a restrained Powys and a Goldman more interested in large movements than an individual she was "always so glad to hear from." Hear from, but perhaps not listen to as openly as an equitable friendship would require.