

## REVIEWS

### The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson

edited by JANET FOULI

London: Cecil Woolf, 2008. 272 pp, ISBN 978-1-897967-27-0. £35.00.

From the beginning of the correspondence between John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson in 1929, one is aware of the pleasure Powys took in writing to someone whose work he admired. In the first published letter we get a hint of his excitement upon suggesting they meet: 'Apart from my numerous brothers & sisters ... there's no one in England I want to see so much as yourself and it would be rather a sad disappointment to me if fate doesn't allow it.' (16) They would be separated for most of their friendship, first by the Atlantic, and then by the distance between Corwen and London, and would meet only a few times before the early 1950s, when Richardson ceased to write as her health declined. Yet there is a definite bond between them, and the correspondence, instigated by Powys, lasted more than twenty years, from 1929 to 1952. When writing to others, such as Emma Goldman, Powys sometimes had to be buttoned down, but here he enjoys letting himself go, as in this characteristic passage:

I try & visualize the hunched-up, truculent [*sic*], forbidding, impenetrable, pebble-stone-on-the-Chesil-Beach-like Ego into which most of us have the power of transforming ourselves when we 'freeze' at the approach of an enemy ... & starting with this I go ahead with the Self & the Not-Self etc etc etc using all the clap-trap I can recall out of former broodings upon Hegel in order to force my converted ones—of the Third order of Empedocles the Second—into the worship of the Inanimate as the best substitute for 'God', & the place where the wall of the cosmos is *thinnest*, so to speak, & if you put your ear close you can hear the music the *other side*. (68; ellipsis and italics in original)\*

Over the course of their correspondence most of Powys's major works come out: *Wolf Solent* appeared just before they met in August 1929. A portion of a letter written in September of that year by Richardson to Peggy Kirkaldy is included: 'The *London Mercury* gives a long article to *Wolf Solent*,

\* An example of JCP's letter writing is shown on page 6.

mostly in praise of it. And it seems John has written other books. Dark horse, he never mentioned them.' (17) As it turns out, in the second appendix there is a 1951 letter to the poet and editor Henry Savage in which Richardson expresses what she never mentioned to Powys—her candid opinion about his literary worth:

[Henry Miller's] adoration of J.C.P.'s work is as mysterious to me as is J.C.P.'s of my own, endlessly reiterated in innumerable letters. For it is not reciprocal. Alan [Alan Odle, Richardson's husband] loved his work and behind him, eagerly reading, I used to hide by quoting A., my own difficulty in getting through anything beyond *Wolf Solent*, bits of *Glastonbury* and *The Pleasures of Literature*, embodying his life-work as lecturer and, for me, his one solid contribution. All the rest I would exchange for Theodore's *Mr. Weston's good wine* [sic] and Llewelyn's little book on Switzerland. Miller, I feel, shares J.C.P.'s over-elaboration and reiteration. (247)

This admission can be viewed in any number of ways. Is it a pose created for the benefit of Savage, a relative newcomer in her life? According to George Thomson, editor of *Dorothy Richardson: A Calendar of Letters* (2007), Savage began writing to Richardson in or soon after 1946 'with the purpose, so he claimed, of leading her through argument to assert her outlook and beliefs.' (27) It might be argued that for years Richardson displayed tact, or diplomacy, by not letting her true feelings be known to Powys. For all Powys did to promote her, as the letters show, in lectures and by way of trying to get her collected works published, eagerly reading her work and engaging with it, Dorothy Richardson was unable to offer anything similar in return. She could not match his respect, let alone his enthusiasm, and didn't have the courage or character to say she didn't like this or that work. In a letter to Bernice Elliott, an extract of which is reproduced by Fouli, Richardson refers to *Owen Glendower*: 'Dear John Cowper still inhabits his dark Welsh valley. Things are not, I fear, too easy. He turns out potboilers with amazing rapidity.' (246) When Richardson tells Powys that 'they are right who claim the *Autobiography* as one of the few immortal books of the century' (93), what does she mean, and who is this 'they'? It appears not to include her.

Not only did Powys encourage audiences to read Richardson, he wrote a book on her, news of which brought out from Richardson the gracious comment to Elliott that she was 'not quite sure whether to be jubilant or horrified'. (10) While writers often remember the negative reviews more than the positive ones, generally they do like it when someone goes out of

their way to publicize their work. Perhaps, in some other letter to a third party, Richardson expresses gratitude, but the mystery as to why she would be 'jubilant or horrified' about Powys's views is not dispelled.

Literary history has judged Richardson's ranking of Powys's fiction and essays rather differently. John Cowper's literary essays are hard to find, whereas his major fictional works are in many bookstores (new and second-hand), with Faber Finds enabling readers to purchase on-demand novels early and late. However, even now there's no critical consensus about the value of the novels. There is intermittent interest in Dorothy Richardson, as found in the work of Gloria Fromm—above all, her biography of 1977 and her edition of the selected letters, *Windows on Modernism*, in 1995—and, recently, Debora Parsons's assessment of Richardson's role in Modernism's theoretical reflections and formulations: her *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf* was published in 2006. Yet Fouli is close to the mark when she says that both Powys and Richardson are 'now suffering an eclipse; neither writer is really in the canon of English literary studies though both are recognized as significant figures'. (9)

Richardson writes letters that are highly readable, their descriptive passages filled with a poetic attention to detail:

Here, spring sings aloud & gorse, gently blazing all the winter, flames high now in our midge-haunted tamarisk lane-to-the-sea. But our floods don't abate. I mop gallons from the stone floor of the kitchen, to find them replaced almost before I can turn round. A broad rivulet invades the passage & another the floor of a foolish little bedroom with a no-doubt-heavenly-in-summer outer door, flush with the soil. I cannot, for the rain-din on the roof, hear myself cook, hear, that is to say, whether the stew is just gently whispering or perilously near the boil. (119–20)

The anthropomorphizing of the season, the vegetation, the 'foolish' room, and the natural swerve into domestic affairs, are elements close to Powys's supplications to nature and various spirits, and his comically disastrous encounters with the fire, the stove, and anything to do with maintaining a household. When Richardson writes to give her opinion of *The Pleasures of Literature* over a five-page letter written in February 1939 (155–60) she is at her critical best: attentive to Powys's work, supportive, and engaged with the text, while working out her own opinions.

However, there is a problem with *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson*. The Introduction contains an arguable thesis that the letters 'are not deliberate self-revelations for the public ..., for unknown

readers were not anticipated by either writer.' (13) This may seem unlikely: all writers must consider the danger that their private writings will enter the public domain. But perhaps Janet Fouli is right, and neither Powys nor Richardson, both of whom had to struggle to get their novels published, ever had an idea that their letters would be printed. More seriously, for any editor of correspondence involving John Cowper, to write, as Fouli does, that one particular exchange of letters forms a 'self-portrait projecting each of them in his preoccupations and his environment, and also a mirror, showing how each of them sees the other' (13), is to say only that at heart this volume is indistinct from other volumes of Powys letters. This actually underplays the particular interest of this volume.

Further, when we look at the editor's bold announcement that this correspondence 'show[s] how each of them sees the other', and then at the letter to Savage where Richardson reveals her honest opinion about Powys's work, we see something very far from truthful 'showing'. There is a touch of impatience behind Richardson's complaint over Powys's admiration of her novels 'endlessly reiterated in innumerable letters', as if she felt put upon by a tiresome fan. Fouli provides the material to arrive at this conclusion, and it's disconcerting that she doesn't notice the contradiction in her claim. We are left to wonder what else Richardson thought about Powys and his work which went unstated to him but which she was clear about to others, or kept to herself. The editorial apparatus is of little help here.

Indeed, the Notes, which occupy the back of the book, fail to provide enough context. A few examples will illustrate this. Powys mentions a book titled *Quiet Interiors* (43), for which the note gives little beyond its author's name, E. B. C. Jones. It is surely worth mentioning that the book was highly praised by Katherine Mansfield. The planet Eros that he refers to (44) goes without a note, though a Google search calls up much about it. When Powys notes that Richardson 'became a Bugloss' (81) the meaning is mysterious. This appears to be a noxious plant, but is there some other meaning it might have? Might it also be the name of a character from some literary work? Further on, a Dr Bertrand Allinson and a medication named Yadil are referred to, but no note accompanies these references (90-92), though a Google search reveals that Allinson was an advocate of vegetarianism. French goes untranslated (98); when Richardson asks 'Is the passing of Mary Butts a blow for you? For us it is' (121), readers are sent, and not right away, to a note that tells of a publication by this still little-known writer. The same fate is imposed on 'Shaw, Webb & Wells' (204), where Shaw and Wells are clear from the context, but anyone not familiar with Webb will find no

more about him except that his first name was Sidney, and that is to be learnt only in the Index.

From 30 March 1930 to 29 September 1932 there are only two letters from Richardson. More information on her life, in addition to the extracts from Powys's diaries, would have been useful here. There are many places where a reader would be thankful for entries identifying Peggy Kirkaldy, Henry Savage or Bernice Elliott. It would also have been good to have more than one paragraph on Richardson's last years. In general Fouli has not taken the opportunity to fill in the biographical context, or address particular biographical issues, in adequate detail. She does, however, decipher Powys's notoriously bad handwriting and his erratic placement of words on a page, which is no small achievement, and for which she deserves appropriate commendation.

At a time when people are purchasing Kindles, or not purchasing books at all, making books harder to read, through the use of endnotes, is perverse and self-defeating. In the case of *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson*, the material placed at the back of the book could have been turned into footnotes. Why any publisher—and I'm not singling out Cecil Woolf with this complaint—should make a reader flick two hundred or so pages ahead of where he or she is has always been mysterious; whatever the reason, the effect is discourteous. Other readers will of course object to footnotes: they clog the page, look unseemly, disrupt the illusion that one is reading inside a sealed world, or prevent a smooth reading process. Yet endnotes are far more disruptive than footnotes. In a collection of letters such as this, footnotes would not have taken up much space.

Despite these reservations, *The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson* is an enjoyable collection, filled with wonderfully unpredictable thoughts, and two distinct modes of writing. It would be fitting to close with an example of each writer's style. After a meeting between Powys and Richardson, and Phyllis Playter and Alan Odle, in 1934, Powys writes: 'After being with you two I felt a glow that lifted me on a wave of foamless content with the possibilities of existence & I didn't care what I'd blurted out or what blunderings I'd committed; and I knew you'd take Phyllis just right and as she likes to be taken, as your words now prove—not as if she were [a] pilgrim swallowed by Gargantua with his lettuce, but like a [*sic*] girl with her own thoughts as she rides on the Centaur's back!' (85) Richardson's letters provide views into her own marriage: 'For five days we've been here, drunk with release, both of us, for Alan at home is dishwasher & boot-cleaner, breakfast-getter & toast-for-tea maker, from every kind of chore; drunk also with the

*POWYS AND DOROTHY RICHARDSON*

excitements of urban centrality, keeping us, who are flush with the roadway, with half an eye permanently slewed round to see who is passing, & both ears wide for farm-yard sounds & meadow-sounds & the occasional thundering of the omnibus down the lane.' (122-6) Whatever the writers' wishes or expectations, the editor, and the publisher especially, deserve our thanks for making these letters available. Though the readership may be wider than the letter-writers intended, it is likely to find much to appreciate and admire.

Jeff Bursey