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Anarchy and Identity: on Power and Loneliness in the Works of John Cowper Powys

Towards the end of her life Phyllis Playter told Laurence Millman how she had first met John Cowper Powys ‘in Joplin, Missouri, in 1921, and Mr. Powys was lecturing on Dostoevski. The lecture was so powerful that three people in the audience fainted’ (Millman 88). If Powys were alive today and espoused some of his radical political views, members of the contemporary audience might faint too, though perhaps for different reasons. It is my intention here to explore some of these deeply anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian and anarchist ideas, focusing in particular on how Powys developed a rich body of work concerned with the themes of personal identity and isolation and their relation to broader political contexts.

In Porius, after the wizard Myrddin has established a camp to prepare against the Roman hordes, he begins to help the young Neb persuade himself of the importance of anarchism. After asking him whether obedience is ‘a good thing’, the boy replies, shaking his ‘impish’ head, ‘It’s what cruel people do to children and animals’ (Porius 260). Like Shevek’s rejection of ‘propertarianism’ in Ursula Le Guin’s novel The Dispossessed (1974), Myrddin sees beyond the cynical Christian definition of ‘love’ and the tendencies towards domination and ownership that this doctrine evokes: ‘I tell you wherever there is what they call “love” there is hatred too and lust for obedience! What the world wants is more common-sense, more kindness, more indulgence, more leaving people alone’ (Porius 521).

Powys’s anarchism (or Myrddin’s) is close to Peter Kropotkin’s philosophy:

It is not love and not even sympathy upon which society is based in mankind; it is the conscience – be it only at the stage of an instinct of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of everyone’s happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed. (Kropotkin 22)

The deeply anarchistic nature of Powys’s fiction should not come as a surprise given his close friendship with Emma Goldman, documented in their published correspondence (Goodway 2008) and discussed by David Goodway in Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow (2007). Emma Goldman, her partner Alexander Berkman, and Kropotkin are not the only Russian anarchists who might have sympathised with Powys. Mikhail Bakunin’s notion that destructive (anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical) urges could also, paradoxically, be creative finds a distinct resonance in Rodmoor when Adrian Sorio witnesses the sun’s light on the sea:

Pure destruction – destruction for its own sake – such as I see it – is no thick, heavy, muddy, perverted impulse such as the cruel are obsessed by. It’s a burning and devouring flame. It’s a mad, splendid revel of glaring whiteness like this which hurts our eyes now. I’m going to show in my book how the ultimate essence of life, as we find it, purest and most purged in the ecstasies of the saints, is nothing but an insanity of destruction. (Rodmoor 32)

The primacy of justice and morality in human instincts is a major theme in Porius. Having repressed any attempts by potential leaders to direct and command society, the forest people of Powys’s Wales are the most anarchistic of its various tribes. Their ‘whole way of life was non-Aryan and non-Celtic. It was communistic and matriarchal, tempered by the druidic magic
that had reached them from the survivors of the lost continent of Atlantis’ (Porius 25). The lost underwater city is mentioned in a few of Powys’s novels, largely because it represented for him, as it does for Dave Spear, an anarchist society (Glastonbury 848). But unlike the wizard, the forest people are far from utopic, as Porius’s father, Prince Einion, explains: “The forest people have never had a ‘Golden Age,’ and never will. They’re beyond it ... and that’s why we can’t – why nobody ever will – really conquer them.” (Porius 194) Again, we find the critical convergence between indigenous identity and proletarian solidarity, something seemingly intrinsic to Powys’s imagining of social alignments.

These anti-patriarchal instincts are also found in the novel’s protagonist, whose wish to obey women, and to please them, stems from an anarchistic urge to ally himself against the illegitimate and oppressive authority of the patriarchal Christian church and the Roman Empire. In the company of Lady Gwendydd – representative of ‘all the women of his life’ – Porius ‘experienced an automatic desire to be guided by a smile, a nod, a shake of the head’ (Porius 116) For Porius even the plants and rivers are in constant rebellion against external authority, leading him to tell his friend Rhu: ‘I like this time of twilight down here by the river ... the river seems more conscious of your existence than the woods and precipices’. (Porius 44) With metaphors of instinctive liberation and animism (mediated through Powys’s vivid depictions of the natural landscape) still fresh in the reader’s mind, the anarchism of Porius’s vision is unfolded:

Porius felt it was infinitely preferable for the unnumbered gods and men and spirits and elementals and beasts and birds and fishes and reptiles and worms and insects and all vegetation and for the air and the earth and the sun and the stars and all the waters to have nothing to struggle with beyond themselves, and nothing to compete with beyond themselves, and nothing to punish them or reward them beyond themselves, save only

Likewise, the close relationship between religious and political hierarchical authorities is also discussed: ‘For all of us sons of earth, the enemy is the reigning despot of heaven, whether that despot is the Olympian, as he has been for the last ten thousand years, or this new Triad of Cruelty, Love, and Lies, who will rule for the next two thousand years.’ (Porius 259) Note the placing of ‘love’ between ‘cruelty’ and ‘lies’: this is the love that extorts and suppresses.

Powys sympathised with the ‘Communist system of social justice’, though not with ‘the Communistic philosophy: for I feel that the deepest thing in life is the soul’s individual struggle to reach an exultant peace in relation to more cosmic forces than any social system, just or unjust, can cope with or compass’. (Autobiography 626) In A Glastonbury Romance the views of the anarchist Paul Trent seem, of all the characters in the novel, closest to those of his creator. Trent tells Elizabeth Crow, one of the grand and rather discourteous old ladies of Glastonbury, about the communist Dave Spear, a friend and fellow revolutionary:

‘What I’ve found out is,’ he went on eagerly ... ‘that none of these people, that you quite properly call politicians, Miss Crow, know what liberty is. The capitalists take liberty away from us in the name of liberty, which, under them, means liberty to work like a slave, or, to starve. But your relative Mr. Spear isn’t much better! He takes liberty away from the individual in the name of the community. So there you are, you see! I am probably the only man in Glastonbury who fights for real liberty – which means, of course, a voluntary association of free spirits to enjoy the ideal life. ...’ (Glastonbury 995)

While the anarchists have always held that humans are strictly part of nature – ‘Man is part of Nature’, explained Bertrand
Russell, ‘not something contrasted with Nature’ (Russell 367) – communism has typically viewed man as a half-finished product who tries to overcome the natural world he finds himself in. According to political journalist Chris Hedges, who is sympathetic to anarchism: ‘As long as the Earth is viewed as the personal property of the human race, a belief embraced by everyone from born-again Christians to Marxists to free-market economists, we are destined soon to inhabit a biological wasteland’ (Hedges 280). Communism also involves the private ownership of production, so does not create the conditions under which manual and intellectual labour can be ‘the highest want in life’, to use Marx’s own phrase.

Powys explains his belief in a key distinction between communism and anarchism:

I have often wondered how I would get on in Soviet Russia to which I feel as much attracted as I do to the Catholic Church. I am so simple in my tastes, and so unambitious, that as long as I had the smallest room to myself and enough kopecks to keep me in bread and tea and cigarettes, and as long as I had a road, or even a path across a common, where I could walk alone, I believe I could be happy there. Only I should be always wanting to share the contents of my samovar with some mystical Father Zosima. I fully agree that I ought to be forced by a Communistic State to share the burden of manual labour. But, when I’ve done my share, I want to be free to turn from the State altogether, and from all tedious mundane concerns, free to discuss God and Freedom and Immortality with learned and pious men! Yes, I agree altogether with my Communistic friends that I ought to be forced to do some sort of manual labour. But I do not agree with them that it is a waste of time to discuss God. It is not that I myself ever want to go to church. I never feel the remotest desire to do so; and when I pray, as I weary myself with doing, I pray to idols and fetishes and images, to sticks and stones, to the Sun and the Moon and the Earth. (Autobiography 323)

Defying both the capitalist and communist views of labour, Powys had written in 1930: ‘Our rulers at the present day, with their machines and their preachers, are all occupied in putting into our heads the preposterous notion that activity rather than contemplation is the object of life.’ (In Defence of Sensuality 136) Man is for Powys an inherently philosophical animal, and the institutions of the world should reflect and encourage this.

Both the anarchists and communists, then, while agreeing on much, have quite different conceptions of the relationship between human nature and nature itself. For communism nature is something that man must master; he asserts himself over it, and harnesses it to his own purposes. There is an inherent opposition between man and nature that is expressed in man’s quest to gain control over the forces of nature through his labor, to turn them to productive economic purposes, and to create the man-made world in which his own nature will realize itself. (Shatz xvii)

This theme of the indifference of nature, and the broader societal lessons we can glean from it, crops up in much of Powys’s work, even in his first novel:

Only the distant expanse of the Milky Way, too remote in its translunar gulfs to heed these planetary conflicts, shimmered haughtily down upon the Wood and Stone of Nevilton – impassive, indifferent, unconcerned. (Wood and Stone 518)

According to anarchism, however, humanity’s relationship with nature is seen to be one of harmony: ‘Human society is not a collective enterprise for the mastery of nature but an organic outgrowth of nature, and the ills of society stem from efforts to impose artificial constraints on its free, spontaneous development’.
To the anarchist (and we might say to the artist), life is a spontaneous flow of creativity and inquiry. By contrast, the communist is typically suspicious of nature and of spontaneity. Powys sided firmly with the anarchists on this question:

In action we may be weak and clumsy blunderers, or on the other hand sometimes incompetent and sometimes competent. All this is largely beyond our control. What is not beyond our control is our feeling about it.

‘I am a cowardly, blundering, incompetent worm.’

Very good. So be it. But it is in my power to be a worm with a deep, calm, resolute cheerfulness, if not with a magical exultation. (Autobiography 626-27)

The need for unshackled, uncompetitive and personalized intellectual and moral growth, a characteristically anarchist sentiment, is exhibited in a number of Powys’s fictional works. John Crow at one point lies with his lover Mary and makes a prayer: ‘Don’t let me ever compete with anyone! ... If I’m a worm and no man, let me enjoy my life as a worm. Let me stop showing off to anyone; even to Mary! Let me live my own life free from the opinions, good or bad, of all other people! Now that I’ve found Mary, let me want nothing else!’ (Glastonbury 73). On his way to Glastonbury, being driven by Owen Evans, John Crow looks upon the rural scenery and sees in it an anarchistic urge for self-fulfilment:

The wide Plain stretched around them, cold and mute, and it was as if the daylight had ceased to perish out of the sky, even while the surface of the earth grew dark. The identity of that great space of downland was indrawn upon itself, neither listening nor seeking articulation, lost in an interior world so much vaster and so much more important than the encounters of man with man, whether evoked by prayer or by chance, that such meetings were like the meetings of ants and beetles upon a twilit terrace that had thoughts and memories of its own altogether outside such infinitesimal lives. (Glastonbury 96)

One of the reasons Powys shied away from explicitly political polemic, with its slogans and jargon, and kept to literary language (even in his non-fiction) was due to the misleading and often unhelpful nature of words not reflected upon. He protested against those ‘human minds – and they find it easy to hypnotise the shallowly clever – who apply to the primordial mysteries of life and sex certain erudite names, and by this naming, and by the noting of certain sequences, they think things are explained’. (Glastonbury 666) While James Joyce could ascribe linguistic anxieties to Stephen Dedalus – ‘I fear those big words, Stephen said, which make us so unhappy’ (Ulysses 31) – Powys sought to combat this fear through what in Porius is called the Henog’s ‘insanely intense and incorruptible concentration on the mystery of words’. (697). In Confessions of Two Brothers Powys discussed ‘that invincible human trick of using language to conceal rather than to reveal’ (11). In Rodmoor Brand Renshaw has, by his own admission, ‘lost the power of being frightened by words’ (191), and Powys was perhaps unique among modern novelists in his insistence that rising above this Joycean anxiety could lead to peculiar but vital forms of personal and political liberation.

Powys reckoned his life to have been directed for him by a series of ‘five rather discordant elements’: ‘a desire to enjoy the Cosmos, a desire to appease my Conscience, a desire to play the part of a Magician, a desire to play the part of a Helper, and finally a desire to satisfy my Viciousness.’ (Autobiography 6-7) Out of the intense loneliness of his younger years emerged a mature figure who had learnt to protect his solitude:

How often in my life there have come such moments when I have turned away in sullen apathy from the tribal activity into which I have been flung! I can recall the feelings so well with which at such times I have hunted round in my recalcitrant
Anarchism seeks the form of social relations in which each person retains the right to solitude. This is expressed in words of a parodic litany taught to Porius as a child by his Auntie Esylt, and now murmured by him in recollection: 'Neither Life nor Death nor Love nor Hate nor Angels nor Devils nor Mind nor Matter nor Present nor Past – No! nor even the Blessed Trinity Itself – has any power to meddle with the individual human will. ...' (Porius 34) Through the mediation of subtle tropes and symbols, Porius seems to hint that its protagonist’s admiration for wind – ‘the power he worshipped beyond all the other elements’ (Porius 136) – stems from a deep respect for the invisible power of free will. It is with a similar antinomianism to William Blake’s that Porius rejects Christianity’s binary moral distinctions: ‘I don’t see things in that light, and never shall.’ (Porius 49)

Rejecting the popular myth of man’s predominantly selfish proclivities, Porius’s mentor Brother John believes, as a Pelagian, that ‘The heart of man ... is naturally good!’ (Porius 715) and that only the cruel promote what we know as ‘the profit motive’, epitomized here with some hyperbole by the French sociologist Gabriel Ardant: ‘Homo oeconomicus has no feeling of affection for his fellow man. He wishes to see in front of him only other economic agents, purchases, vendors, borrowers, creditors, with whom he has in theory a purely economic relationship’ (cited in Braudel 165–66). This view, of man’s fallen nature, is subtly and ironically mocked by Brother John as representing ‘the simple minds of our ordinary Gaer people ... as containing deep hell pools and dark Tartaruses of abominations of which they themselves are totally ignorant’. (Porius 715)

It is Porius’s celebration of individual choice over the arbitrary dictates of power that stimulates his remarkable interpretation of the Genesis myth. As a young man Porius recalls a Byzantine icon in his mother’s bedchamber showing ‘the infant Jesus playing with a snake’:

the little Jesus, a comically plump babe, was lovingly and obstinately thwarting the one supreme desire of his dangerous plaything, the desire to escape. This desire had smouldered into such a recoil of tragic desperation that even as a boy Porius had read in the one small saurian eye which alone was visible the shuddering resolve, sooner than not to escape, to drag the world’s hope of redemption down with him!

‘It wants to escape,’ Porius said to himself. ‘It wants to escape into Nothingness; and if God won’t let him, he’s ready to drag Creation down with him!’ (Porius 146)

Powys’s individualist anarchism finds its most original and potent expression in his fiction, for there it can be worked out in its own forms of solitude. Outside of fiction, however, Powys’s anarchism comes up against certain inconveniences, such as other people. David Goodway may well be right in describing Powys’s A Philosophy of Solitude and In Defence of Sensuality as filled with ‘bad-tempered misanthropy and solipsism’ (Goodway 2007: 105). It appears as though Powys required the psychological zones and distances generated by his fictional worlds properly to articulate a political and personal philosophy recognizably anarchist, without being too obviously misanthropic. (Nordius 1997)

While Goodway points to a series of passages from the Autobiography and In Spite Of that demonstrate Powys’s philosophy of sensuousness and ecstasy, it would be difficult to tease apart the
sensibilities expressed here from more general philosophical and political notions that stress the importance of life’s simplicities over its grandiosities: Powys gestures to ‘dust’, ‘smoke’, ‘grime’, ‘ashes’, ‘masonry’, and ‘yellow and green mould’ for their ability to stir ‘an enchanting ecstasy’ (In Spite Of 294), but also asks in his Autobiography: ‘why, in the Devil’s name ... do we go on making a cult of everything except these? Why must politics, religion, philosophy, ambition, revolution, reaction, business, pleasure – all be considered intensely important, and these rare magical feelings not be considered at all?’ (Autobiography 194) The importance for Powys of deriving political directions and ideologies from lonesome ecstasies and reveries is undeniable – something shared with the American writer David Foster Wallace:

Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers. They tend to lurk and to stare. ...They are born watchers. They are viewers. They are the ones on the subway about whose nonchalant stare there is something creepy, somehow. Almost predatory. This is because human situations are writers’ food. Fiction writers watch other humans sort of the way gapers slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision of themselves as witnesses. (Wallace 151)

John Crow has little respect for artificial things, or for humans and what they make; his admiration is directed instead towards the world of mind, not matter: “Let these things of gilded vapour,” he thought, “these things of tinsel and tin have their day! Let the savage opposites of them have their day too. They are all dreams, all dreams within dreams, and the underlying reality beneath them is something completely different from them all.’’ (Glastonbury 372)

Relatively, John Geard is the man of the ‘planetary consciousness’ who, because of the dream-like nature of wakefulness, can think of the next life as ‘the next dream’; Sam Dekker also felt as if he were living in two worlds at the same time, and one of them, by far the less real and by far the more absurd, was trying to convince him that the other was a fantasy. (Glastonbury 965) Porius belongs within their company: ‘I’ve no music in me, no poetry in me, no love in me. And yet I had an ecstasy just then, I can have an ecstasy as well as another, though I have no music, no poetry, no love, and enjoy nothing in life but life and trying to analyze it!’ (Porius 495) The protagonist’s physical movements are described at one point as being ‘accompanied by the rapid movements of thoughts so detached, so uninvolved, so independent, that it was a wonder they didn’t paralyze the natural reactions of his senses or reduce them to a tantalized sullenness’. (Porius 610)

Crow’s wife, Mary, finds herself detached, even alienated from her husband’s philosophical musings:

Perhaps a girl’s nerves respond to the nerves of another girl and send out magnetic currents that can be caught from far off; whereas something in the masculine constitution, something dense, thick, opaque, obtuse, stupid, has the power of rejecting such contacts. Or it may be that the erotic emotions, when they brim over from the masculine spirit, extricate themselves, as women’s feelings never do, from the bitter–sweet honeycomb of Nature, and shoot off, up, out, and away, into dimensions of non-natural existence, where the nerve-rays of women cannot follow. (Glastonbury 612)

John Crow watches a flock of sheep moving up a hill in the Somerset countryside, and the figures of a man, a boy, and a sheep-dog walking behind them:

As he watched these figures and that moving river of grey backs in front of them his mind was carried away upon a long vista of memories. Various roads where he had encountered such sights, some of them in Norfolk, some of them in France, came drifting through his mind and with these memories came a queer feeling that the whole of his life was but a series of such dream-pictures and that the whole series of these pictures was something from which, if he made a strong
enough effort, he could awake, and feel them all dispersing, like wisps of vapour. Pain was real – that woman crying out upon her cancer and calling it ‘Lord! Lord!’ – but even pain, and all the other indescribable horrors of life seemed, as he stared at the backs of those moving sheep, to be made of a ‘stuff’, as Shakespeare calls it, that could be compelled to yield, to loosen, to melt, to fade, under the right pressure.

(Glastonbury 704-05)

One of the central concerns in Porius is how the protagonist resists the urge to rid himself of the troubles of self-awareness through seeking death by water – that creative-destructive element to whose mysteries Powys was so attentive, and out of which life originally arose. As John Geard slowly drowns at the climax of the novel, the narrator invokes the analysis of this event subsequently published by ‘one of the cleverest women psychologists of our time’: ‘While many pathological subjects, this writer maintains, seek a pre-natal peace in death, what Mr. Geard in his planetary consciousness desired was a return to that remote and primal element of Water, which was literally the great maternal womb of all organic earth-life.’ (Glastonbury 1105) We learn on the next page that (not unlike the novel’s author): ‘Mr. Geard’s character will never be understood – or the monstrous inhumanity of his departure from the visible world condoned – until it is realised that the unruffled amiability and the unfailing indulgence of his attitude to those near and dear to him concealed a hidden detachment from them that had always been an unbridged gulf.’ (Glastonbury 1106)

The unavoidable incomprehension and distance between human beings is a theme that has attracted a number of prominent English novelists (notably Iris Murdoch); Powys relished this as a condition of fictional characters, and used this ‘unbridged gulf’ to inform his anarchistic philosophy of ‘leaving people alone’. Towards the end of Wood and Stone we find an early instance of its explicit manifestation:

The rain increased in violence. It seemed as though the room where they sat was isolated from the whole world by a flood of down-pouring waves. The gods of the immense Spaces were weeping, and man, in his petty preoccupation, could only mutter and stare.

Luke rose to his feet. ‘To Romer and his stone-works,’ he said, emptying his glass at one gulp down his throat, ‘and may he make me their Manager!’

Mr. Taxater also rose. ‘To the tears that wash away all these things,’ he said, ‘and the Necessity that was before them and will be after them.’

They went out of the house together and the silence that fell between them was like the silence at the bottom of deep waters. (Wood and Stone 722)

Porius had interpreted the myth of the Fall through a snake, albeit one depicted and recollected; Myrddin, sitting on a raft in the middle of a calm stream, suddenly realises the presence of a rat licking his knuckles: “So you, water rat,” he thought, “you alone of all my creatures have dared to disobey me! For this disobedience may your children ... have luck upon luck upon luck in finding their food and safety beyond safety from all their enemies!” (Porius 270) We soon find that the crux of the novel, like the heart of anarchism itself, is a rejection of arbitrary and oppressive authority, not least when it appears under the guise of love.

Nowhere is Powys’s version of this theme more thoroughly explicated than by Myrddin in responding to the question of the inquisitive child Neb:

‘What turns a god into a devil, Master?’

‘Power, my son. Nobody in the world, nobody beyond the world, can be trusted with power, unless perhaps it be our mother the earth; but I doubt whether even she can. The Golden Age can never come again till governments and rulers and kings and emperors and priests and druids and gods and
devils learn to unmake themselves as I did, and leave men and
women to themselves! And don’t you be deceived little one, by
this new religion’s talk of “love”. (Porius 260-61)

Myrddin tells the young boy how this Second Golden Age will be
brought about, by ‘putting an end to all tyrants, dictators, despots,
rulers, kings, priests, and governments. By putting an end to myself –
as a god – and leaving men and all the children of earth – alone!’
(Porius 260) Powys is here channeling a deeply anti-Hobbesian
form of anarchism, attempting to reverse the process set forth in
Leviathan according to which man has emerged from a ‘state of
nature’.

There has been much contemporary advocacy of ‘the politics of
hope’, but hope is only another instrument of coercion, teaching
patience and obedience now in return for a better hereafter,
whether in this world or another. Anarchists mistrust the politics
of hope for various reasons, one of them given by Powys in The Art
of Happiness (1935):

Too much has been made of hope. The better a philosopher
you are the less you will hope. To hope is the most
unphilosophical of all mental acts, for it implies that you are
failing in the supreme achievement of turning the present
into the eternal. (The Art of Happiness 187)

Alluding to Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, a scene in
A Glastonbury Romance, set on a particularly rainy night, explores
Powys’s rejection of authority through the mouth of Dr Fell:

‘I read a Russian book once, Barter, by that man whose name
begins with D, and a character there says he believes in God
but rejects God’s World. Now I feel just the opposite! I think
the whole of God’s World is infinitely to be pitied – tortured
and torturers alike – but I think that God Himself, the great
Living God, responsible for it all, the powerful Creator who
dereliberately gave such reptiles, such sharks, such hyænas, such

jackals as we are, this accursed gift of Free Will, ought to have
such a Cancer ... as would keep him Alive and Howling for a
Million Years!’ (Glastonbury 691)

Sam Dekker later informs Owen Evans of his no less
unconventional, Tolstoian approach to religion, which seems to
anticipate Porius’s reflection on the infant Jesus and the snake:

‘My Christ’s like Lucifer – only he’s not evil ... at least not
what I call evil. But He’s the enemy of God. That is, He’s the
enemy of Creation! He’s always struggling against Life, as we
know it ... this curst, cruel self-assertion ... this pricking up of
fins, this prodding with horns ... this opening of mouths ...
this clutching, this ravishing, this snatching, this possessing.’
(Glastonbury 815-816: all ellipses in original)

Such a Dostoevskian vision, and such a rejection, had been the very
motive for Wolf Solent’s journey out of London; there we find a
similar antipathy to hope, an intolerance of the aloof redeeming
promise that a brighter future might justify the darkest present:

One of the suppressed emotions that had burst forth on that
January afternoon had had to do with the appalling misery
of so many of his fellow Londoners. He recalled the figure
of a man he had seen on the steps outside Waterloo Station.
The inert despair upon the face that this figure had turned
towards him came between him now and a hillside covered
with budding beeches. The face was repeated many times
among those great curving masses of emerald-clear foliage. It
was an English face; and it was also a Chinese face, a Russian
face, an Indian face. It had the variableness of that Protean
wine of the priestess Bacbuc. It was just the face of a man,
of a mortal man, against whom Providence had grown as
malignant as a mad dog. And the woe upon the face was of
such a character that Wolf knew at once that no conceivable
social readjustments or ameliorative revolutions could ever
atone for it – could ever make up for the simple irremediable
fact that it had been as it had been! (Wolf Solent 3)

Nell Zoyland understands the importance of cultivating her forces in an effort to bring about social revolution: ‘Blind, and dumb, and inarticulate, she felt something surging up within her, that, if she only could express it, would blow all the institutions in the world sky-high’ (Glastonbury 461). Paul Trent works with Glastonbury’s small band of revolutionaries to bring about the establishment of a commune – what he calls a ‘Voluntary Association of Free Spirits’ – though even he confesses to understand the limits of his personal political vision, and the ultimately inexplicable, unpredictable nature of revolution:

What Paul Trent felt just then was a dim suspicion that if everybody in Glastonbury – these difficult natives as well as these easy visitors – were only to stop doing anything at all, just stop and listen, just stop and grow porous, something far more important than a ‘Voluntary Association of Free Spirits’ would reveal itself!

A feeling stole over him as if all the way down its long history Glastonbury, the Feminine Person, like Mary at the feet of the Master, had been waiting for the fuss to cease, for the voices to subside, for the dust to sink down.

... so Paul Trent felt himself now to be watching the Glastonbury atmosphere, on this day of such strange lights and shadows.

Could it be possible that the secret of ecstatic human happiness only arrived, when all outward machinery of life was suspended, all practical activity held in abeyance? Man must live, of course, and children must be born of women; but was there not something else, something more important than any conceivable organization for these great necessary ends?

A doubt came into Paul Trent’s mind, different from any he had ever felt, as to whether his inmost ideal—this thing that corresponded to the word liberty—was enough to live by. Wasn’t it only the gap, the space, the vacuum, the hollow and empty no-man’s land, into which the fleeting nameless essence could flow and abide? He felt as if he were on the edge of some thrilling secret, as this thought, this doubt, touched him with its breath. (Glastonbury 999-1000)

Along with a concern for anarchistic outsiders, Powys had a deep compassion for the homeless and down-and-out. One of the central motivations for him leaving England was because of its traditional class system, which he abhorred. With a perceptive understanding of the intersections of class and identity, Powys constructed an alternative class system: ‘The deepest emotion I have is my malice against the well-constituted as compared with the ill-constituted. Dwarfs, morons, idiots, imbeciles, hunchbacks, degenerates, perverts, paranoiacs, neurasthenics, every type of individual upon whom the world looked down, I loved, respected, admired, reverenced, and imitated’. (Autobiography 515-16) Jeremy Fox has elegantly summarised Powys’s art of presenting fictional persons in their separateness as well as in their relations: ‘In their dream-like serenity he has presented us with majestic characters who, even when they are caught up in political or spiritual quests, are largely concerned with personal romance in all human endeavours. His protagonists philosophise about communism at one moment and debate the intricacies of love at the next. They love each other as if the future of the world depends on their kisses, which in a sense – a particularly anarchist sense – it might.

What is extraordinary about Powys’s literary achievements is that his work blends these themes – of love and of politics, of the social and the solitary – in intricate ways that only Tolstoy and
Dostoevsky could rival. Yet Dostoevsky’s socialism was defined primarily by a sentimentalised quest for a Christian Russia, and Tolstoy’s anarchism was founded on an intense devotion to the figure of the pacifist Jesus. Powys goes beyond either by developing a less exclusionary and more universalist model of ‘anarchy. He takes up what Stephen Dedalus had called ‘the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning’ (Joyce 2000, 208) yet Powys cultivates solitude for very different purposes: while Dedalus would have nothing more to do with ‘my home, my fatherland or my church’, Powys’s novels draw even the most solitary characters into a vision of some sort of community. In the works of Powys there is cosmic silence, political exile, and much cunning from both the human and preternatural worlds. And this:

the power of the individual mind to create its own world, not in complete independence of what is called ‘the objective world,’ but in a steadily growing independence of the attitude of other minds towards this world. For what people call the objective world is really a most fluid, flexible, malleable thing. It is like the wine of the Priestess Bacbuc in Rabelais. It tastes differently; it is a different cosmos, to every man, woman, and child. To analyse this ‘objective world’ is all very well, as long as you don’t forget that the power to rebuild it by emphasis and rejection is synonymous with your being alive. (Autobiography 62)

Powys’s affinities and sympathies with anarchism are to be found not only in what his fictional characters say and do, but in the understanding that every person should be able to make a space of their own. We must defy those who would persuade us that the objective world is all that there is. If that were the case, then there would be a fixed quantity of space to be divided and contested. It is the power of the imagination, and its most human task, to build and rebuild as much space as each of us needs.