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Outside the Canon – T. F. Powys' Short Stories and the Ordinary

Milosz Wojtyna

- 1 The fixed quality of the canon of the British modernist short story is evident—the influence of Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, Lowry, and Beckett is so beyond question that any discussion of their contemporaries will inevitably make reference to the giants of the time, and adopt the vocabulary employed in the discussions of their fictions. Still, attempts have been made to extend the image of the modernist short story.¹ What follows here aims to add to this positive trend by observing an author that remains in the margin of the literary canon of the period. By analysing the short stories of T. F. Powys—especially their treatment of plot, of characterization and of the underlying theme of the ordinary—the article presents a body of short fictions that provide an alternative for the modernist re-evaluations of the short story form and of the conventions of realism.
- 2 T. F. Powys was by no means a modernist—neither his works, nor any participation in appropriate literary circles would classify him as one. His position in the history of twentieth-century British literature is difficult to determine. David Malcolm claims that “Powys is an original in the history of the British short story” (157). Charles Prentice, in his preface to *God's Eyes A-Twinkle* (1947), notices that “it would be a mistake to attribute to Powys any systematic theory, either theological or metaphysical” (xiii). The unusual quality of his work and the idiosyncrasies of his biography ensure Powys a place among the substantially underestimated writers of the century. It is difficult specifically to indicate the origins of his prose, detect contextual parallels with other authors, or observe any influence he might have had on any other writer.
- 3 His originality has resulted neither in readerly nor in critical attention. His books are now mostly out of print,² and a thorough monograph on his work is still to be written.³ Whether this inattention is caused by some striking limitations of his work (such as the obsessively consistent use of the same narrative strategies and an equally prominent misanthropy on a thematic level), or by the author's relative neglect of publishing, publicity and writing circles, is difficult to decide. The size of Powys' oeuvre is

considerable, and its central part consists of over a hundred short stories, most of which were written in the 1920s and the 1930s (Hanson 104).⁴

- 4 It is not, however, only the time of their appearance that makes my placing of them in relation to the modernist short story a valid one. Above all, it is also justified by the author's systematic treatment of a similar subject matter (the ordinary), his modernist-like insistence on form, and his appreciation of values alternative (polemical, non-identical) to the values of modernism. These features make Powys' short fiction a good vantage point for the observation of the modernist short story. This analysis will focus on Powys' negotiations with realism ("some dissatisfaction, some difficulty" [Woolf 904]), with regard to two basic questions that modernism also attempted to re-evaluate—the problems of plot and character presentation. Additionally, though the dominant formal and thematic traits of Powys' stories may seem to be only of tangential relevance to the history of the modernist short story, throughout the present argument I want to insist that Powys' texts are rich, though perhaps unusual, examples of how varied the twentieth-century short story is, and how much the fiction of a non-canonical writer may offer striking commentary on aspects of the fixed dominant group of texts from a given period.
- 5 An important, if not altogether central, theme of T.F. Powys' stories is that of the ordinary. Presentation of the ordinary, in the most basic sense of the word (a sense quite different from the one we shall discuss later with regard to normative systems)—of human habit, routine, of laws of nature, of rules of the world, of recurrent situations—is not only a prominent thematic element in Powys' short narratives, but also of modernist short fiction in general. This fact is frequently overlooked in the face of the usual range of issues that criticism of the modernist short fiction is concerned with (Olson 3): modernist difficulty, its elitism, its "perpetual fixation on formal attributes of literature" (Mozejko 12), its "broadly anti-materialist critique of modern mass culture" (A. Hunter 45), *inter alia*. Critical discourse also abounds in well-established analytical concepts which, though perfectly valid and useful as such, have been disseminated so widely that they now tend to obscure some important features of the texts in question. As it is, modernist studies (including modernist short-story studies) in a variety of ways have pinpointed two crucial issues that we shall address here: that of plotlessness and that of the representation of characters' inner experience. However, as Dominic Head's audacious analysis of "the non-epiphany principle" in *Dubliners* shows (37–78), such concepts when related to modernism are both explanatory and misleading: the textual material itself seems resistant to generalising simplifications. Thus, any analysis of ossified assumptions about modernist short fiction will benefit from new contextualizing readings that include non-canonical writing.
- 6 Defining the ordinary is a challenge, but the theme has found several insightful commentators, including modernists themselves. "[Poetry] has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants," Virginia Woolf wrote in "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (906), where she prophesied the need for fiction to accommodate a new kind of the ordinary, different from the one responded to by "that cannibal, the novel" (907). To Woolf the ordinary seemed polymorphous, but at least one aspect of it required enhanced attention: "the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind" (908). Apart from criticizing the materialist orientation of the

Victorian novel in the essay, which insistently acknowledges neglected narrative material, Woolf draws attention to a major feature of the modern ordinary—its seemingly limited tellability (“Can prose, we may ask, adequate though it is to deal with the common and the complex—can prose say the simple things which are so tremendous? [...] I think not” [908]). Concerned with the ability of fiction to encompass the subtle elements of the modern ordinary, throughout her short fiction Woolf tests the limits of prose that she delineates in the essay.

- 7 The philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who made major philosophical attempts to define the ordinary, notices another aspect of the problem of tellability:

The quotidian is what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence; thus it is undated and (apparently) insignificant; though it occupies and preoccupies it is practically untellable, and it is the ethics underlying routine and the aesthetics of familiar settings. (24, qtd. in Olson 12)

- 8 Lefebvre’s observation about the “unvarying succession” inherent in the ordinary, compatible with the etymological origin of the word “prose”—from Old Latin *provorsus* “(moving) straight ahead”—poses a question about a different meaning of the tellability of narrative material. That is, does quotidian-oriented fiction possess the potential to generate readers’ interest? The questions of representation and of the purposefulness of representation are both critical to fictions of the everyday. Moreover, the problem of the interest value of a story material is necessarily linked to the difference between the ordinariness of what is represented and of how the representation is conducted.

- 9 Michel de Certeau, author of an important treatise on the commonplace (*The Practice of Everyday Life*), notices the artfulness of representation. He observes that “stories provide the decorative container of a narrativity for everyday practices [...]. As indexes of particulars—the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday—ways of operating enter massively into the novel or the short story” (70). The decorative indexing of detail, responsible for Roland Barthes’ *l’effet de réel* (141–148), is one of the bones of contention in the polemics of modernism with realism. What is to be contained in fiction that is supposed to generate a more authentic “texture of human consciousness and the nature of experience” (A. Hunter 45)? The transformation and distortion of the ordinary within the material of literature has seemed to many, including the Russian Formalists, to be the essential feature of art (Olson 4; Shklovsky 4). But the degree to which the ordinary can be free of artistic remoulding, seems imprecise.⁵ The disputes of modernism with realism frequently miss the problem of necessity. Rita Felski addresses this matter in “Everyday Aesthetics”:

On the one hand, the everyday is associated with habit, repetition, convention, the unthinking performance of routine activities—all those qualities frequently excoriated in modern art and criticism as indices of existential alienation or of conservatism and petit bourgeois complacency. On the other hand, an element of sheer necessity adheres to such elements of everyday living that the modern tradition of negative aesthetics seemed ill-equipped to capture or comprehend.

- 10 T. F. Powys’ short stories acknowledge the necessity mentioned above: they are strongly referential. Theirs is not, however, the straightforward referentiality of realism. On the contrary, problems of realism receive an unexpected treatment in Powys’ short fiction which, in many ways, offers an alternative to modernist approaches to plot(lessness) and character presentation. At the same time, Powys’ polemics with realist fiction are also

connected with other problems important to modernism—textual recalcitrance (difficulty) and social concerns (the mass versus the individual, critique of the bourgeoisie).

- 11 Anker Gemzøe writes that two reactions to realism could be noticed at the time when its conventions were questioned.

One tendency is the rejection of narrative in favor of realism: the very recognition of a mimetic obligation towards modern reality similar to the motivation of realism leads to a denouncement of realist narrative as a conventional form that does not transmit reality but stereotypes. This is in line with the impressionist aversion against telling—represented by the sovereign narrator in the finalized life stories of the Bildungsroman, conceived as a linear development, as well as by the “improbable” intrigue plots of the romance and the adventure novel. The preferred alternative is showing—a semi-dramatic form with scenes, dialogues and related devices such as interior monologues (or soliloquies). Epic narration is replaced by “phenomenological apperception,” an attempt at a direct rendering of impressions (from specific, subjective points of view) while avoiding a logical and analytical rearrangement of the impressions. There is no (strong) plot line and the world is dissolved into cuts between points of view, fragmented sensations and an unseizable manifold of unfinished utterances [...]. The complementary reaction is the rejection of realism in favor of narrative. The conventional conception of reality represented by the psychological and social realism of the nineteenth-century novel is problematized by the introduction of eccentricities and alternative worlds. This line continues and renews a long grotesque tradition including the fantastic tale of romanticism. (125)

- 12 These two kinds of reaction provide, indeed, crucial vantage points for the observation of literature that is sceptical towards realism. What I want to argue, however, is that Powys' short fiction offers yet another different approach to the matter, and an altogether original treatment of both realism and the ordinary.
- 13 Powys' stories are almost exclusively event-oriented. Summary of any random text will show that it contains at least one event of a high degree of eventfulness. In “The House with the Echo,” a friendship of two misanthropes is broken by the disappearance of one of them. “The Painted Wagon” features an unhappy lover who hangs himself from a tree. In “Suet Pudding,” a wife murders her sadistic husband. A moronic husband commits suicide in “His Best Coat.” Death, a total event,⁶ is presented in a great majority of stories. The principle of plot-orientation is not, however, as self-evident as it might seem. On the contrary, in every story the proportion of narrative material devoted to static exposition and that devoted to the presentation of change privileges the static passages. In other words, any event in Powys, in order for it to take place, requires a preceding thorough expository sequence to prepare the background for change. No norm is broken before it is carefully presented. Expository events are informative about state, not variation. The difference is discussed by Peter Hühn, who in his article on eventfulness develops definitions for both types of event: event I and event II:

We can distinguish between event I, a general type of event that has no special requirements, and event II, a type of event that satisfies certain additional conditions. A type I event is present for every change of state explicitly or implicitly represented in a text. A change of state qualifies as a type II event if it is accredited—in an interpretive, context-dependent decision—with certain features such as relevance, unexpectedness, and unusualness. (1)

- 14 The second category is, as Hühn himself notices, quite vague. It is closely connected with acts of reading:

The difference between event I and event II lies in the degree of specificity of change to which they refer. Event I involves all kinds of change of state, whereas event II concerns a special kind of change that meets certain additional conditions in the sense, for example, of being a decisive, unpredictable turn in the narrated happenings, a deviation from the normal, expected course of things, as is implied by event in everyday language. Whether these additional conditions are met is a matter of interpretation; event II is therefore a hermeneutic category, unlike event I, which can largely be described objectively. (5)

- 15 Seen in a larger sequence, numerous happenings that are narrated in Powys' short stories do not manifest the features of type II events. Much of what is presented in the stories escapes some narratological definition of event.⁷ The actions are either trivial activities similar to procedures rather than to situation-changing events, or they are examples of a character trait. But their role is significant. The commonplace background of repetitions increases the level of unpredictability (and thus of general eventfulness) of the actual event of type II. Fictional norms (determining which happenings are plausible and which are not) are established in the expository sequence.
- 16 Thus (and we are dealing here with a vigorous polemic with traditional realist plot-oriented narrative), type I events are the markers of the ordinary that Powys formulates in extreme terms by consistently promoting them as being as important as changes.⁸ He does so by highlighting frequency in the most rhetorically prominent part of almost every story—in the beginning. The exposition of “The House with the Echo” (1928) already offers plenty of examples: “I don't know why, but I can never make myself respectable”; “I always rested at ‘Pidden Gap’”; “Mr. Dove and his daughter Jane were always the same, always loving and kindly”; “I knew that none of the so called ‘upper classes’ ever visited at Mr. Dove's,” we read in “The House with the Echo” (*House* 1–4). The rhetorical effect of this insistence on frequency, and on the inescapability implied in the expressions, is that the attention paid to the mechanics of the everyday seems reasonable—if stasis is what dominates, the focus of narrators on it is easy to understand.
- 17 Type I events dominate in “The Clout and the Pan,” in which a family's life, observed by kitchen utensils, seems shockingly simple. It is concerned with the moving of chairs carried out by spouses: “Mr. Keddle would have moved his hands as if to help her, though at the same time he used to move himself out of her way, and then sit, with a smile of relief, when the chairs were altered, as if it were he who had moved them” (*Fables* 6). Each day, we read, “as like to each as brother to brother—passes by in Enmore as well as all over the world” (8). The attention to regularity of habit is striking, when we realize that the main issue in the story is the silent conflict of the spouses, arising from their pedantic, maniacal attitude to the interior of their house. The procedure becomes, for them, an everyday practice and an anxiety-generating necessity: “Every morning Mr. Keddle let his hand rest upon the wrong chair a little longer, and Evelina, though she moved it at last, was slower in doing so” (8–9). The triviality of the situation and its commonplace repetitiveness point to Powys' interest in trifling typicalities, but also illustrate Ben Highmore's observation about the everyday as being based on the “repetition-of-the-same [that] characterizes an everyday temporality experienced as a debilitating boredom” (Highmore 8).
- 18 The sense of destructiveness that the iteration introduces is visible in the story precisely when the decisive event takes place. The expository sequence is broken by the death of the husband. The event is introduced as laconically as possible: “When Mr. Keddle had by a few months overreached the span of life that is allotted to man, he caught a cold and

died of it" (*Fables* 9). The disproportion between exposition and the narrative passage presenting the event draws attention away from the crucial happening. The debunking of eventfulness is all the more visible when one observes the state that follows the event to be another solid equilibrium. "The chair will stay by the window and the porridge will never be cooked again," the dish clout ends the narrative in a way that manifestly rejects the possibility of change (14). At the same time, an escape from past habit is shown to be a simple solution to the wife's miserable condition. The experience of the characters seems regular and simple (something always happens, then it never happens), and its presentation is dogmatic and untainted by doubt. Nothing could be more distant from a modernist dislike of clear-cut causality governing clear-cut event sequences. However, when one considers the story's focus on an absurdly mechanical mania and its de-emphasizing of death as event, one notes that the definitiveness of event is undermined by irony. Foregrounding repetition in event sequences has the paradoxical effect not of adding to the eventfulness of the happening that breaks the norm (as it would do in realist narrative), but rather of pointing to the stability of situations. As it is, the wife goes on to live another series of repetitions.

- 19 The distinction presented by Hühn leads us towards a second problem. Proportion (stasis-ekstasis) aside, the type II events that actually introduce change are not always completely eventful. As a hermeneutic category, an event of the second type is only seen as such (as highly eventful) in the process of readerly judgement. Such judgment, to use Wolf Schmid's thorough categories, is based on seven aspects of a narrative happening: reality, resultativity, relevance, unpredictability, persistence, irreversibility, and non-iterativity (9–12). Two of the seven features—relevance and unpredictability—largely depend on the rhetorical dynamics of the text (they are based on different normative systems, against which the reader confronts information about the event). In other words, a change of state functions in the narrative as (more or less) eventful only if it is of utmost importance to the fictional world (seen both against the backdrop of its intratextual doxas and of the norms of the real world) and if it violates a pattern of expectations (also constructed on the basis of various norms). The other five aspects remain purely textual—the way they are judged is not affected by extratextual norms.⁹ Moreover, dealing with eventfulness means thinking about what precedes and follows the happening, that is, about the stability/instability of the situation changed and generated anew. To talk of these criteria within the boundaries of a rhetorical analysis of a story's progression is to actually measure its plot-orientation or plotlessness.
- 20 Examples of ambiguous eventfulness of happenings are easily found in Powys. In "Squire Duffy," the realisation of a mistake is not explicitly shown to be of consequence (that is, it is not resultative) other than in the final sentence: "The Squire groaned" (*House* 25). In "No Room," the death of Barker is no event at all; the condition of unpredictability is unfulfilled because the character, as all other inhabitants of the fictional village of Tadnol, has impatiently expected to die, and—when the time has come—he does so with pleasure. In the same story the final event is problematic because of its lack of completion. When Truggin, the sexton who looks after the local graveyard, diagnoses himself as having an illness, he expects to die and goes to take his place in the grave he had prepared for Barker. The norm of the fictional world is that everybody wants to die. However, the sexton does not complete the act of dying within the boundaries of the narrative. The narrator does not claim that he is dead. Indeed, it is most often the case that Powys' laconic treatment of the decisive event results in an opening of interpretive

possibilities. Hardly ever does the ending offer complete information on the resolution of instabilities. Happenings are mostly highly eventful—they conform with the general pattern of violation in Powys' stories by destroying a previously established equilibrium, but their consequences are hardly ever discussed. A strong sense of definiteness adheres to events, but their consequences are inferable only on the basis of implicit information. It seems that there are things not to be talked about.

- 21 As these examples show, Powys' treatment of event is laconic and subversive. Where states are presented, examples abound. When a decisive change takes place, brevity dominates. When a crucial happening seems to solve a number of textual instabilities, it is ultimately shown to be less consequential. Such an ironical attitude, in turn, is much closer to modernist practice. Head is polemical about the oft-trumpeted "plotlessness" of the short story in British modernism:

It is true that plot is deemphasized in the stories of Joyce, Mansfield and Woolf, and this distinguishes their work from the more carefully plotted short fictions of, for example, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. But this de-emphasis is not a rejection: on the contrary, the adaptation of well-plotted story types is an important feature in the stories of Joyce, Mansfield, and Woolf, in whose works a consciousness of conventional story forms provides structure and referential landmarks, even where such conventions are subject to revisionist or ironical treatment. (17)

- 22 Similarly, plot (or event-sequence) is not a clear centre of Powys' short fiction but rather a material which undergoes severe revision, also in connection with the rules of the ordinary. Alternating stages of equilibrium and disequilibrium show how prone each state is to change, and how volatile the change itself seems.
- 23 A similarly subversive treatment is given to characterisation. Powys' characters are predominantly poor, humble, and in some way incapacitated.¹⁰ Again, extremity is a principle and, again, it is evident from the very beginning. Where modernists are said to render a varied, subjective representation of the inner experience of characters, Powys transforms the "old stable ego of character" (D. H. Lawrence, qtd. in Hanson 56) into a maniacally unchangeable skeleton of several attributes, or usually just one dominant feature. In "In Dull Devonshire," we read that "Rev. Robert Herrick was an amiable man" (*House* 25). Other examples are easily found: "Mr. Duffy was proud of his name" ("Squire Duffy," *House* 17); "Dr. Snowball lived at Bolen. He had lived there for ever" ("The Two Horns," *House* 144); "The Reverend John Gasser was a believer; he was also a man" ("The Dewpond," *Bottle's Path* 203); "In all the world there lived no one who thought more of weddings than did Miss Hester Gibbs" ("The Seaweed and the Cuckoo-Clock," *Fables* 43). Nothing could seem more definite than the authoritative declarations made by the omniscient heterodiegetic-intradiegetic narrators that predominate in Powys' short stories. A fixed and permanent characteristic, announced usually in an adjectival predicate, is to be explored from that point onwards.
- 24 Because characterisation through definition is direct—it ascribes features to character in a textually overt way (Jannidis) rather than offering material for inference—it uses an informative pattern that promotes telling over showing, diegesis over mimesis, and critically depends on narratorial reliability and narratorial judgements. The rhetorical strength of the definitions in Powys is, therefore, considerable. Still, each narrative offers examples of characters' behaviour to support further the validity of the characterising definitions. The examples are not sources of implicit information, but confirmations of narratorial claims. Additionally, in opening sentences as well as in entire beginnings, Powys makes use of totalising expressions (such as "never," "always," "for ever," "no

one”) and of aphoristic statements in the gnomic present (“Human beings are glad to be alive, some for one reason and some for another” [*Fables* 125]). Both kinds of utterance highlight the complete validity of expository information and enhance the static aspect of the stories.¹¹ This simplicity is rarely departed from; hardly ever is there any detailed description of psychological complexity, appearance or mental processes. Where definitions about characters are presented, nothing else counts. Application of Joseph Ewen’s three axes of character analysis (“complexity, development, penetration into the ‘inner life’” [Rimmon-Kennan 43]) will inevitably produce an image of a Powysian character as stable and simple. If a character [X] is said to be [Y], there is hardly an exception to this rule in what follows in the text.

- 25 Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan notices that in non-traditional, post-Victorian fiction, “the economy of definition is grasped as reductive” (63). This statement is clearly true about Powys’ stories, where characterising definition is omnipresent. Still, as we shall see, the consequences of the proliferation of such economy are not the same in Powys’ short stories as in realist fiction. An extreme example of the reductionism introduced by characterological definition can be found in “Squire Duffy.” The story not only announces its interest in a fictional person in the title, but also declares it in the first sentence (“Mr. Duffy was proud of his name,” *House* 17), and it highlights the focus by devoting the entire first paragraph to an elaboration on the defined feature. That the simple statement is used in the opening establishes a norm in the fictional world. It is important because of the primacy effect—what comes first, is important.¹² The feature, which seems to be the only trait of the character’s personality that needs mention, is later dramatised in a number of expository examples, which take the form of type I events and only confirm the undeniable—that the character is obsessed.
- 26 The heterodiegetic-extradiegetic narrator is typically authoritative (“he *naturally* had more than one question to ask” [17, emphasis added]), but manifestly allies with the character, as in the reported dialogue, where the narrator imposes his perspective on the words of the character: “During lunch at his club, Mr. Duffy inquired in confidence whether any other nobleman or gentleman named Duffy lived in the neighbourhood of Stonebridge. ‘He only asked this,’ he said, ‘because he did not wish his letter-bag to go wrong’” (18). The one-dimensionality of Duffy is highlighted by the presentation of his wife, who is equally obsessed: “Her only pleasure in life was the playing of hymn tunes upon the grand piano with one finger” (19). Humorous examples of the initial definition follow: “Mr. Thomas Duffy [...] arranged his morning letters in row so that he could see his name written ten times. After doing so he nodded in a friendly way to the typed ones, as though to say, ‘That’s how it shows the best.’ [...] He commanded Mrs. Duffy, in a tone he was practicing for the bench, to get some new calling cards printed with a more distinctive ‘D.’” (20). The routine of obsession is uninterrupted up to the point when it turns out that a local lunatic called Cooty, who has just died, was in fact called Thomas Duffy, and was therefore the squire’s namesake.
- 27 The progression of the narrative from a definition of initial equilibrium based on unchangeable personality to examples that prove the validity of the state and to its ultimate violation, is typical of Powys’ work. Despite the lack of any narratorial comment on the consequences of the significant moment of revelation (other than the ultimate “The Squire groaned”), the story (through its rhetorical progression) promotes the event (the discovery of an insane namesake) as decisive. Still, however, one has to notice how relatively unimportant the revelation-event is to the state of the fictional world. The

realisation that the lunatic and the squire have the same names is not said to cause any change to the situation, nor even to the character's personality. Obsession has led Mr. Duffy quite far, but not to the point of reconsideration. A similar solidity of personality features is manifested by characters in different stories in all Powys' collections.

- 28 Severe reductionism in the treatment of fictional figures excludes any psychological complexity. This, and other principles that govern characterisation in Powys, are indeed very distant from those accepted by modernists, e.g. from Woolf's "ideas about the fragility of understanding and the intangible complexity of personality" (Head 10). I want to claim, however, that they are essentially predicated on the same assumption—that the human consciousness is difficult to penetrate, and the realist treatment of material manifestations of the personality is not sufficient. While Powys conducts a perhaps less ambitious task of not representing the content of the human consciousness, he takes an antagonistic position towards the conventions of realism so powerfully undermined by modernist fiction. In his short stories Powys renders the realist referential assertiveness completely untenable by "resolutely resisting [...] the blandishments of realism" (Malcolm 157).
- 29 The use of direct definition is related to communicative clarity and, consequently, to textual recalcitrance. The issue of difficulty, so prominent in the modernist writings, is, again, treated in an extreme way in Powys. Despite their linguistic simplicity, and the dominance of explicit information in narratorial utterances, Powys' stories contain a surprisingly large number of lacunae. A truly singular text, "The House with the Echo," one of very few stories in Powys' large oeuvre that make use of a homodiegetic-intradiegetic narrator, contains some strikingly underspecified points.
- 30 The beginning of the opening story of Powys' first short story collection of the same title (*The House with the Echo* [1928]) characteristically focuses on the despicable.

I don't know why it is, but I can never make myself respectable. I have an inane friendliness to mould and to all those who touch and handle this primeval substance. The others, the many who have to do with the paper niceties of life, look disdainfully at me. This may be because I live in a mud hut, drink tea without milk, and have only once had a friend.

I cultivate my garden. An uncle upon my mother's side sends me a few shillings sometimes, that is all I have to live upon. My hut is as lonely as ever a hut could be, and my nearest town is Stonebridge.

I have many peculiarities, one of the queerest being my interest in religion. Not in the religion that is preached in the churches, but in the religion that moves with the boots of a man. The religion that makes a mark of a nail in the mud. As to my friend, I must tell you about him. (*House* 1)

- 31 Despite the general linguistic clarity of the passage, substantial questions arise. Typically, the main characterological trait of eccentricity, which underlies all other themes of the story, is announced in a prominent place—the first sentence. The narrator's admission of his lack of understanding of his own predicament parallels the initial situation of the reader and thus works as an implicit appeal for interpretation. However, even in the light of the textual material offered within the same paragraph, the validity of the self-definition is dubious. The narrator's claim that he has had a friend seems to undermine his own previous statement about non-attainable respectability. "What friendship is possible without respect?", one could ask.
- 32 The difference between the narrator and the rest of the fictional world seems to explain the inconsistency. Disparate norms are juxtaposed. What these norms are is not explicitly

said, but the narrator seems to be at a loss in the coordination of them. As we learn later, he builds his own categories of people on the basis of the normative systems that they follow. Although the clash between “mould” and “paper niceties of life” is clearly open to interpretation (who belongs to each category?), it locates the narrator outside a larger social group (“the others, the many”), which appears to be associated with weaknesses implied in “paper.” It seems, however, that despite his separateness from mainstream society, the narrator partly relies on its norms, when he claims his “friendliness” to be “inane,” and believes his alienation to be related to a different way of conducting such a mundane activity as tea drinking. Both the mould and the tea without milk draw attention to the simple, tawdry kind of the ordinary that Powys presents in most stories. The problem of friendliness closely relates to the only friend, who thus appears likely to be connected to “mould” as well. Very clearly, some “earthly” domain is presented here. What it is, and how these specificities are to be developed, are impossible to decide when the first paragraph ends.

- 33 The interest in mould seems financially motivated, as it turns out in the following sentence that the man lives off the land. The image of the character is soon, in the third paragraph, complicated again by a completely idiosyncratic, obscure theology. Separateness dominates (“not in the religion that is preached in the churches”), but the actual nature of the religion is not precisely specified. The figurative statement that defines seemingly very concrete beliefs (“the religion that moves with the boots of a man”) is not helpful at all. A completely different effect is produced by information about geographical setting: “My hut is as lonely as ever a hut could be, and my nearest town is Stonebridge.” The statement underlines the separateness that has already been stressed several times, and supplies information about the town that, as it later turns out, does not add anything to the narrative, apart from the name itself. A signal of Powys’ parodic anti-realist convention, the minute detail is syntactically and structurally separate from the rest of the utterance. Thus, the *effet de réel* receives an ironical treatment: details abound, but they do not ornament or ground, but pose questions.
- 34 Self-contradictory utterances of the narrator appear at other places in the story and they indeed create a confusing rhetorical effect. When the narrator mentions his trip home from his uncle’s town (*House 6*), he offers topographical information with the diligence, it seems, of an ideal narrator of a realist narrative. However, he says he was going westwards, although from the previous paragraph it is known that his actual movement was from the north to the south. In the same passage, the speaker says that he was returning home when the summer had finished. Immediately after that he claims that it was “a wild autumn evening,” and adds that the rain was “of a winter’s night.” This preoccupation with the passing of time (change of seasons, the sun setting in the west) is characteristic for most characters in Powys’ death-obsessed world. The inconsistency is at the same time typical for the narrator, who makes claims that are only valid for an omniscient narrator: “My knocking reverberated through the house; it sounded in all the rooms as a knock will when a house is empty” (7). If we remember that the narrator did not enter the building, the factual status of the claim is doubtful. How can he possibly know the reverberation within the rooms if he remained outdoors when the noise of the heavy rain and strong wind must have been very loud? Similarly, in the last scene of the story, the titular echo responds to the second question asked by the narrator, but remains silent to the first. Questions arise again, and they are typically left with no answer. Still, they point to the original, complicated creation of the narratorial figure whose paraleptic

features undermine the mimetic logic of the narrative,¹³ and put into doubt the narrating competence of the speaker.

- 35 The clash between linguistic clarity and interpretive ease is a prominent feature in Powys' short stories. Analysing similar problems of narration on the sentence level, Susan Lohafer refers to Francis Christensen's distinction between dense and thin sentences (Lohafer 44). It is specifically the neglect of sentences "with a high quotient of embedded information—and particularly of added free modifiers" for the sake of those with a lower quotient that makes Powys' narratives seemingly simple (44). This simplicity, it often turns out, is highly recalcitrant in terms of interpretation. For example, contrary to what it seems, in the rhetoric of the whole narrative (i.e. in the light of what follows) the clarity of an opening sentence turns out to be only relative.
- 36 Lohafer addresses this issue when she writes that "the first sentence is, no matter how obvious in its referential function, almost totally composed of anticlosure elements; one could almost say that however clear its sentence meaning, its story meaning is opaque" (54). Story meaning for Lohafer is equivalent to deferred cognitive closure, that is, an understanding of the overarching meaning of the whole narrative. While physical closure (the end of the act of reading) and immediate cognitive closure (the understanding of the surface of the narrative) are easily achieved in Powys (language is simple, stories are short), deferred cognitive closure is unlikely to be complete at all. Here, then, we deal with another disjunctive parallel between modernist short stories and the work of Powys. "The cost of narrative information" (Barthes 143) in the "difficult" short stories of modernism is very different from that in Powys' work, specifically because of his use of definition-like statements and of simple diction. This does not, however, mean that the textual recalcitrance of Powys' stories is limited. It functions in a different way—it poses lacunae where it is difficult to expect them—and perhaps opens as many interpretive possibilities as modernist stories do.
- 37 Powys' fiction is thoroughly problematic, especially when it comes to the issues of plot and characterisation, and to its general re-evaluation of realist narrative. The proliferation of passages devoted to the presentation of static material (uneventful states rather than eventful happenings) undermines the notion of event as central to the stories. The fact that "something happens" does not automatically and unproblematically qualify his narratives as plot-oriented. Also definition-based characterisation does not necessarily make Powys' characters prototypically realist. On the contrary, the degree to which characterisation in Powys seems one-dimensional, ridicules the realist belief that personality is graspable in language. Additionally, the ordinary as a theme, seemingly unchangeable and obvious in assertive, linguistically simple narratorial utterances, is presented in narratives that contain impenetrable lacunae. The definitiveness of narratorial declarations becomes the object of ridicule of the implicit, ironic narrative communications of the implied author. The authority of the paradoxically very authoritative narrators is often doubtful. Furthermore, the simplification of the world is a source of comedy in the stories, but also of a bitter commentary on the human condition. A marker of Powys' distancing from realism, the strategy of reduction is reminiscent of the conventions of the folktale. For instance, Powys' *Fables* openly treat humans as faulty and worth laughing at. Both in these supernatural stories, and in other texts, the norm is always unstable.
- 38 To use the conventions in the ridicule of conventions—this modernist paradigm works perfectly well, if largely differently, for Powys. Originality in the treatment of characters

and events has a de-automatizing effect for the implied reader, who is bound to detect narratorial inconsistencies, and see the representation of the world as based on mistaken promises of truthfulness that lie at the foundations of realist fiction. At the same time, the insistent referentiality of the stories offers a fresh view of the necessary component of narrative—the ordinary. The intensive focus on this subject, in turn, is flavoured with an inconsistent, but distinctively alienated approach to society. If realism is, as Astradur Eysteinnsson puts it, “a mode of writing in which the subject ‘comes to terms with’ the object, where the individual ‘makes sense’ of the society in which there is a basis of common understanding” (195), what could reject the literary and social context of realism more explicitly than a story in which an idiosyncratic, unreliable narrator loves mud and an echo responds only to random calls? The Powysian treatment of literary context is, indeed, as bizarre as are his fabular ideas. By bombastically exaggerating the markers of an exhausted convention, Powys separates from realism in a different way than modernists do in their preference for the psychological, the inward and the minute.

- 39 As this essay has shown, reactions to realism are not limited to the two kinds Gemzøe presented. Partly rejection, partly adaptation, the stories of the ordinary we have discussed are a response that cannot be called a modernizing one. Powys' response simplifies, reduces, ridicules and rejects in a critical mode. Claiming that the author is not a modernist is hardly sufficient; his short stories offer plenty of material to classify them as extremely distant from central ideas of the time. Yet it is fruitful to observe the short stories both on their own terms and against the backdrop of modernist short fiction. Such a juxtaposition may show that both Powys' and modernists' respective stories address, in innovative ways, some issues connected with plot, character presentation, the theme of the ordinary and the heritage of the realist narrative. While modernist treatment of these matters is predominantly based on rejection of the conventions of realism (and thus results in an aesthetic largely dissociated from them), Powys' approach relies on a critical escalation—on a strikingly different application of what has already been exhausted. All in all, what these two kinds of fiction have in common is the manifest thematic and formal distinctiveness within their immediate literary and social contexts. Incidentally, such distinctiveness is not that distant from the modernist idea of the autonomy of a work of art.

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NOTES

1. "The Short Story and Short Story Collection in the Modernist Period: Between Theory and Practice," a conference organised in Rome in September 2013, acknowledged the need for a new, more extensive view of the short story of Modernism. *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English*, a collection of essays edited by Jorge Sacido, offers an equally fresh view.
2. Faber & Faber has released a series of Faber Finds, which at present includes Powys' short story collections (*Fables* and *God's Eyes A-Twinkle*) and novels (*Innocent Birds*, *Mark Only*, *Mockery Gap*, and *Mr. Tasker's Gods*). Previously to this, however, only small independent publishers such as Brynmill Press published Powys' work after his death.
3. One has to mention, however, attempts at a systematic treatment of the biography and work of the author, for example, William Hunter's *The Novels and Stories of T. F. Powys* and Henry Coombes' *T. F. Powys*, as well as several publications in the periodical of the Powys Society (<http://www.powys-society.org/>).
4. Most of them were published between 1928 and 1947. A portion, however, including three important collections (*The Market Bell*, *Mock's Curse* and *The Sixpenny Strumpet*), appeared posthumously, late at the end of the twentieth century (1991, 1995, 1997), through the efforts of Elaine and Barrie Melcher.
5. Liesl Olson is equally evasive about the problem, when she claims that "The ordinary is not always transformed into something else, into something beyond our everyday world; the ordinary indeed may endure in and of itself, as a 'final good'" (4).
6. In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin introduces a way of seeing death as a motor that efficiently fuels narrative. "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death," he writes (94). Death is a key theme to Powys—it is referred to in a great majority of stories, frequently either ends or opens sequences of events, and, above all, supports the implied author's misanthropic image of man.
7. See, for example, the definition of event offered by Mieke Bal: "An event is the transition from one state to another state" (5). Other theoreticians define event in different ways (e.g. Prince 62; Lotman 233; Schmid 24), but the essence of their observations remains similar—the opposition of change and state.
8. At the same time the promotion of type I event underlines the repetitive nature of the ordinary.
9. Schmid explains that relevance and unpredictability are "particularly dependent on interpretation. This dependency has two facets: (1) reference to textual entities and (2) context-sensitivity" (14). What Schmid points to is the co-functioning of textual and readerly dynamics

that comes into play in connection with these two elements. The other requirements (reality, resultativity, persistence, irreversibility, non-iterativity), on the other hand, can be determined on the basis of textual phenomena alone. If they cannot, as often happens, this is the result of information lacunae in the text, not of contextual possibilities.

10. The presentation of characters expresses some dissatisfaction with the condition of human kind. Most of the figures present manifest symptoms of mania, or of complete mental illness. This image of man is vaguely similar to that of the modernist protagonist, as described by Georg Lukács in "The Ideology of Modernism" and recalled by Jorge Sacido, who defines characters of Modernist fiction as "typically self-encapsulated heroes (undeveloped, insubstantial, lacking individual history) who inhabit a nightmarish 'ghostly' world and find no way out but a retreat into 'psychopathology,' 'Angst' and 'morbid eccentricity'" (Sacido 6). Failure, limited power of action (Frye 33) and madness are typical of Powys' characters.

11. "Definition is akin to generalization and conceptualization. It is also both explicit and supra-temporal. Consequently, its dominance in a given text is liable to produce a rational, authoritative and static impression" (Rimmon-Kennan 62).

12. "Primacy effect: our tendency to accept as valid the information we are initially given, even when that information is contradicted later in the same message," Emma Kafalenos writes (151).

13. The mimetic dimension is undermined again at the end of the story, when the echo responds only to some questions, as if entering into conversation with the speaker.

ABSTRACTS

La qualité fixe du canon de la nouvelle moderniste britannique est claire – l'influence de Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, Lowry, et Beckett est si évidente que toute discussion de leurs contemporains amènera à convoquer les géants qu'ils sont devenus et à utiliser des commentaires qui ont été formulés à leur propos. De manière à agrandir l'image que l'on se fait de la nouvelle modernistes, cet article se propose d'étudier un auteur en marge du canon littéraire, un auteur qu'il est d'ailleurs difficile de qualifier de moderniste. En analysant les nouvelles de T. F. Powys – en particulier le traitement de l'intrigue, les personnages et le thème central que constitue l'écriture de l'ordinaire – ce travail présente un ensemble de textes brefs et introduit une alternative aux réévaluations modernistes de la nouvelle et des conventions liées au réalisme.

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