4. The Ethics of Attention

CHAPTER 4

The Ethics of Attention

> " . . . that particular psychological mood of sympathetic nervous hilarity which can be so quickly changed by a crafty orator into passionate receptivity . . . a dream-heavy trance of curious felicity."
>
> —John Cowper Powys[1]

At the *Ulysses* censorship trial in 1921, the first witness for the defense was John Cowper Powys.[2] In testifying that *Ulysses* was "a beautiful piece of work in no way capable of corrupting the minds of young girls," Powys articulated the fundamental concern at hand: widespread fears about the vulnerability of young female readers. His testimony was valued, less because he was a judicious reader of James Joyce than because of his extensive engagement with historical and contemporary anxieties about female receptivity to mental influence and suggestion. Like the *Ulysses* trial, Powys's career contributed to the end of the centuries-long friction between the anxieties of moralists and the desires of supposedly vulnerable female readers.

Documented suspicions of the danger reading materials posed to all young and impressionable readers date from the first century, but the novel's rise in eighteenth-century England inspired fervent warnings and interdictions. The overriding concern was that girls and women were entirely passive readers: that their weak minds and limited experience rendered them incompetent to distinguish between fiction and reality. Novels could implant false, immoral, and/or overly exciting ideas directly

in a susceptible reader's mind. These ideas could induce in the reader an inappropriate yearning for more stimulation. Accordingly, they could introduce or exacerbate a woman's dissatisfaction with her circumscribed opportunities, they could disrupt family harmony, and they could lead a young woman to condone sexual feelings in herself. For more than two centuries, efforts to protect young female readers from such corruption followed two basic strategies: to control or suppress the dangerous elements of novels (such as sex, love, and other rousing themes), and to control or suppress the readers themselves. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, proponents of the latter strategy (including medical doctors and moralists) marshaled a formidable array of biological, medical, and social arguments to discourage the young female reader.[3]

Arguments about passive reading practices generated intense controversy as the nineteenth century progressed. Publishers, booksellers, librarians, teachers, and concerned parents, among others, contested various legal, pedagogic, and economic extensions of the issue. Novelists influenced the course of the debate as well. As Kate Flint has remarked, "By the mid-nineteenth century, the trope of fiction as a fast route to corruption was so familiar that it could be used not just in its own right, for didactic purposes, but as a way of encouraging readers to think critically about their own practices when consuming novels."[4] Flint claims that "[l]ike much Victorian fiction, . . . both sensation and 'New Woman' fiction mock within themselves the belief that women read uncritically, unthoughtfully: the very characteristics which their authors were themselves accused of engendering."[5]

At the start of the twentieth century, then, both conservative and progressive attitudes towards female readers remained in healthy circulation. From the late nineteenth century, Mrs. Grundy had been slowly passing into obsolescence. Yet legal battles over literary censorship persisted late into the century, including but not limited to famous cases such as those concerning *The Rainbow* (in 1915), *Ulysses* (in 1921 and 1933), *The Well of Loneliness* (in 1928), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (in 1960). At stake in every one of these trials was the supposed potential for literature to corrupt young and female readers.

Such attitudes were not unrelated, of course, to the debates over women's mental capacities that figured prominently in the suffragist movement. Recognition of women's intellectual capabilities was inherent in England's political decisions of 1918 and 1928, when women's suffrage was granted, first in part and then in full. But in Powys's work, feminist narrative ethics is not responsive to the political progress of the women's movement.

Instead, it is deployed as a means of transforming gender constructs. Specifically, Powys construes women's, and young girls', receptivity as an admirable strength and powerful asset.

Powys was no feminist. Nothing in his biography, personal papers, or novels suggests any investment in women's civic advancement; quite the contrary. In both fiction and nonfiction he represented derogatory, even humiliating attitudes toward women, consistently representing women as physically weak, narcissistic, highly sexed, and aligned with nature and revelation as opposed to the supposedly male faculties of reason and science. Of the four writers considered in this study, he endorsed by far the most retrogressive gender politics. However, like Woolf, Sayers, and Forster, he deliberately used formal innovation and feminist narrative ethics in his fiction to compel his audience to inhabit a specific, even progressive, ethical stance on a contemporary feminist issue.

While the entire history of the novel entails an adjacent discourse of female vulnerability, the immediate literary context of Powys's concept of receptivity signals a new interest in probing the limits and cultural constructedness of that vulnerability. Much fin-de-siècle fiction features, for example, themes of mesmerism, hypnotism, spiritualism, and other modes of mental influence that were fashionable at the time. These forms of influence, of course, were saturated with gender roles and expectations. Hypnotic control was a form of virility, whereas young girls were considered to be at the highest risk for moral and spiritual corruption by various contemporary dangers, among which the occult figured prominently. As I have argued elsewhere, Powys appropriated some occultist practices in his thirty-two-year career as a public lecturer, figuratively but also literally mesmerizing crowds and performing his own mediumship on stage.[6] In his lectures and, later, his novels, Powys's experimental collapse of boundaries—those between women and men, medium and subject, agent and recipient, audience and speaker, to name a few—violated many of his contemporaries' comfortable assumptions about power dynamics and gender roles. But about a decade before Powys's writing career began, authors such as Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, and George du Maurier had tested those very boundaries both thematically, in the plots of their novels, as well as dynamically, in the way they compelled certain readerly responses.

In Stoker's novel, for example, the cadre of men trying desperately to protect Mina Harker from Dracula's hypnotic control realize at last that her thrall makes her a potentially useful extension of the vampire. When Van Helsing himself hypnotizes Mina, she reports on Dracula's

whereabouts because she identifies so fully with the vampire. One way of reading this scene is as Van Helsing's counterattack: Mina has mentally penetrated into enemy territory. A more compelling (Powysian) alternative, however, is to read Mina's susceptibility as receptive mediumship in which she performs Dracula's identity by becoming part of him. The success of the endeavor depends in part on Van Helsing's men suppressing their doubts that hypnotism works in the first place, on squelching their fears that Mina's mental proximity to Dracula will corrupt her irremediably, and on learning to consider her passivity as productive.

Even as some late-century Victorians worked to dispel centuries-old misconceptions about women's vulnerability to reading fiction, the act of reading was newly figured as transgressive for both genders. Garrett Stewart has argued persuasively that "the violation of [a character's] 'privacy' constituted by reading . . . exposes reading as transmitting not only the feminized receptivity (we might call it masochism) of anxious participation but also a quasi-erotic 'sadism' . . . of penetrating access."[7] Certain fictions prompt readers to oscillate between enjoying privileged access to a character's thoughts, on the one hand, and feeling guiltily voyeuristic, but Stewart claims that fin-de-siècle texts such as *Trilby, The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and *Dracula* demand this uncomfortable oscillation with particular force. Just as Mina is both reading Dracula and being read by Van Helsing, fin-de-siècle novels prompt a double reading experience. In other words, the novels both read and are read by their readers, in the sense that they prompt a reflexive activity on the reader's part.

Stewart supplies other examples. Wilde depicts Dorian's visceral response to reading the unnamed, profoundly influential book given him by Lord Henry, while simultaneously suggesting an analogous response to *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Even after Svengali's death, Trilby is mesmerized by his photographic portrait; she reads the photo until she falls into a trance. Novels such as these command readerly engagement in part by depicting that engagement. Powys's novels, likewise, are calculated to absorb his audiences in part through their portrayal of absorption. However, whereas Stewart notes that the novels under consideration remind readers of their own physical presence as onlookers, holding books, Powys's novels are designed to draw their audiences into receptive rapture. Far from rewarding the reader's "penetrating access," his narrative dynamics thwart it. As I will demonstrate—and then complicate—later in this chapter, Powys despises the very idea of penetration. He consistently figures it as a violation that, though perhaps titillating for some,

is invariably trumped by an ethically superior receptivity. At first glance, the blatant gender coding of conflict in Powys's novels seems hardly a subtle instrument of meaningful rhetorical or ethical value. However, when recognized as a counteraction to the literary context of fin-de-siècle narrative dynamics, as a progressive comment on the history of women's reading practices, as an integral dimension of his feminist narrative ethics, and as the basis for an inventive new form of narrative progression, Powys's privileging of receptivity may be recognized for the first time as significant indeed.

Powys revolutionized plot dynamics for ethical ends in his most important novel, *A Glastonbury Romance*. He replaced conventional hermeneutic plotting (the gradual resolution of narrative instabilities) with what I call an *erotics of progression,* in which instabilities circulate freely and readerly attention is receptive rather than goal-directed. The novel's sexist representation of female characters makes it difficult to hypothesize feminist motives for the implied author's construction of this unusual narrative progression. But, like the nineteenth-century fiction Flint examines, Powys's major novels—foremost among them *Glastonbury*—reveal through both story and discourse a self-conscious, critical stance toward the long history of assumptions about female readers. Although he is not a feminist implied author, his rhetorical strategies demonstrate a progressive attitude toward the subject of gendered reading practices. Unlike his predecessors, Powys defines female receptivity as a form of active, assertive attention, an intentional, intermental connection,[8] something quite different from passivity. He perceived credulity and ingenuousness as assets, rather than liabilities, of the attentive reader, and he crafted novels that reward what he called "young-girl-like receptivity." As I will demonstrate, receptive attention to a Powys novel is an adaptive skill a reader develops through experience, rather than a default position resulting from naiveté.

Powys's formal experiments prompt attentive reading practices, explicitly coded as female, that require critical thought about gender roles. Moreover, his long novels of the 1920s and 1930s, which he called his romances, meld outmoded generic conventions established centuries earlier with late Victorian and modernist narrative techniques. Powys's striking generic blend of romance with novel suggests his sophisticated engagement with a long literary historical tradition. It suggests a degree of literary self-awareness rarely recognized in him by scholars. Those who do admire his work tend to account for his sprawling, meandering plots as being the direct result of his generic experimentation. But I contend that his model of young-girl-like receptivity is even more influential,

pervasive, and radical than his work with genre in these novels. His literal romanticization of both obsolete social norms and antimodernist narrative techniques starkly contrasts with his stance on contemporary political struggles over women's relationship to fiction as it is borne out through his rhetorical strategies. *A Glastonbury Romance,* in spite of—or in fact because of—its contradictions, cultivates in its reader ethical attentiveness and judgment and celebrates the capacity of reading like a girl.

IN THE COURSE OF arguing "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag claims that "[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (14). This challenge appears for the first time, without gloss or elaboration, as the last line of her essay. It is a compelling but vague call for literary scholars—and good readers in general—to do something outside their ken: take a work on its own terms without constructing a paratext in which all the symbols are unpacked, all the meanings laid bare. Sontag identifies "interpretation" as "presuppos[ing] a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. . . . The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a subtext which is the true one" (6). She also notes that "interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else" (10).

Many authors whom Powys particularly admired, such as James Joyce and Henry James, wrote novels that invite and reward careful hermeneutic explication. Sontag names Joyce and James in her short list of authors "around whom thick encrustations of interpretation have taken hold" (8). Their novels operate on several levels of significance simultaneously, developing intricate, intellectual relations between implied author and authorial audience, prompting the latter's interpretation largely through their progressive exploitation and resolution of various tensions and instabilities. But in response to the influence of his contemporaries, Powys composed several digressive, improbable, ecstatic fictions that employ a conspicuously unfamiliar system of narrative progression, baffling his reader's efforts at interpretation. The neglect shown to Powys's work by most scholars and teachers alike may be seen as a symptom of this bafflement.

Moreover, Powys constructed this effect on readers intentionally. With growing intensity, as Jerome McGann has noted, Powys's novels from *A Glastonbury Romance* forward self-consciously "break the spell"

of their own fictionality by "evacuating" the primary conventions of novelistic realism (such as probability, verisimilitude, organic integrity) and "metamorphosing" them with the conventions of the romance.[9] McGann claims that "Powys's historic importance in the history of fiction lies in this: that he worked to incorporate the novel back into its romance origins" (178). He argues that *Glastonbury* is like Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans,* Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* in having "been written not so much to be read as to explore and expose the scene of reading itself" (175), but his essay makes a historical, rather than narratological, argument. If we combine historical and narratological approaches, the "scene of reading" is revealed to have major implications for understanding the novel's gender politics. While McGann is content describing the reader's experience of *Glastonbury* simply as "catastrophic" (181), I want to examine that experience, specifically that of the authorial audience, in more detail. Powys's gender politics of reading in this novel gives it greater "importance in the history of fiction" than has been previously recognized.

Powys's rather perverse narrative progression in *Glastonbury* discourages many highly competent flesh-and-blood readers from joining the authorial audience and, often, from finishing the book. McGann cites the response of one such reader, Powys's editor, as representative. Referring to Powys's later novel *Porius* (which shares many of *Glastonbury*'s eccentricities), the editor complains, "[Y]ou seem to be resolved to slow up and obscure and entangle the progress and movement of your story in every conceivable way—by homilies, dissertations, diversions of all kinds ? [*sic*] by loading it up with non-essentials, inconsequent details, trivialities, sheer perversities by which I mean, for one thing, the constant playing with Celtic and Brythonic words, which you frequently drag in by the heels for your own pleasure and not for that of the reader, who cannot be expected to share your philological interests" (177).[10] The difficulty of joining Powys's authorial audience has largely obscured his value to narrative theorists.

How does a narrative with no hermeneutic puzzle to decipher and no story-level problem to solve compel readers to keep reading to the end, particularly if it is over a thousand pages long? What are the consequences when a novelist manipulates tensions and instabilities in deliberately unsatisfying ways? How does the narrative progression of Powys's novel direct the reader's experience, and in what ways can a scholarly appraisal of his unusual form of narrative progression contribute to contemporary narrative theory? And what does this unique form of progression have

to do with gender? In addressing these questions, I join several literary theorists who have connected an erotics of art with models of narrative progression.[11] I suggest that Powys offers us a fresh theoretical opportunity to reconsider narrative progression, first by demonstrating some productive and compelling ways in which his narrative strategies diverge from our dominant narratological models, then by offering a rhetorical reading of the erotics of progression in *Glastonbury,* and finally by submitting a rejoinder to Robert Caserio's work on this novel. In this novel Powys accomplishes something narrative theorists have not anticipated, namely, that he separates the erotics of progression from the hermeneutics of progression, and does so without sacrificing narrativity.

SONTAG notes that an erotics of art should be developed through attention to form and structure. Concerned that the "arrogance of interpretation" arises from overemphasis on content, she suggests readers develop a "descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms" (12). Her suggestion found early influential responses in the work of Peter Brooks and Robert Scholes. Both scholars posit sexual arousal as the dominant model for narrative form. In "The Orgastic Pattern of Fiction," Scholes claims, "What connects fiction . . . with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. . . . [M]uch of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself" (26). He adds that "the abstractable content is not the meaning of a work of fiction. The meaning is in our experience of it" (28). Not only the structure of the book, but the reading experience itself, has an analogue in sexual intercourse, according to this argument.[12] Scholes notes that both reading and writing can be types of narcissistic self-gratification, but that superior literary experiences involve both reader and writer respecting each other's "dignity" by "assuming a sensitivity 'out there' that will match" that of their own (27). In other words, the pleasures of literary activity are maximized by imaginative, reciprocal contact between reader and writer.

Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* extends and complicates Scholes's premise, while explicitly acknowledging his initial influence: "Beyond formalism, Susan Sontag argued some years ago, we need an erotics of art. What follows may be conceived as a contribution to that erotics" (36). Starting with Roland Barthes's claim that readerly engagement is based on a "passion of (for) meaning," Brooks asserts that readers follow narratives with

interest because they are fueled by a desire for meaning and significance, which they can only attain by accumulation and synthesis of information in the plot (37). All narratives, he claims, are hermeneutic (34). Brooks's sense of the term *erotics* departs significantly from Sontag's, as his denotes interdependence between hermeneutics and desire, whereas hers repudiates interpretation in favor of ludic immersion. But the tension between these two definitions turns out to be productive, as I will argue, in a close examination of Powys's novel.

Drawing on Roman Jakobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy as paradigmatic and syntagmatic poles of language, Brooks claims that any given narrative begins with a "blinded metaphor of transmission" that must then be unpacked and explicated as metonymy in the course of the book, so that it may be reassembled as an "enlightened metaphor of transmission" by narrative's end (27). In other words, in Brooks's view, a narrative begins with a hermeneutic puzzle that must be worked out by the reader through time, culminating in the reader's recognition of significance. Or, according to his two thematic models (based on physics and male sexual arousal), it begins with potential energy ("initial arousal") that is exploited as kinetic energy ("expectancy") in the unfolding plot, culminating in a climax ("significant discharge") followed by quiescence (101).

Of course, examples abound of novels that do not follow Brooks's pattern, and readers' experiences stray widely from his model. James Phelan has demonstrated that because in Brooks's model "the dynamics of the plot itself merge with the dynamics of reading that plot, . . . Brooks is working with a model of a single-layered text" that fails to account for the "accompanying sequence of *attitudes* that the authorial audience is asked to take toward that pattern."[13] Phelan's double-layered, rhetorical model of narrative progression is one I regularly emulate in this chapter, but unlike Phelan I want to consider the erotics of that progression. Susan Winnett's critique of Brooks adopts that erotics as its central concern, rejecting his overreliance on male tropes that assume a male experience. While she accepts Brooks's basic premise that plots tend to be built and resolved on a tumescence-detumescence model, Winnett, like Phelan, suggests that Brooks's conflation of textual dynamics and readerly response is inadequate. Suggestive as Brooks's erotic model is, it precludes patterns of sexual arousal other than tumescence and detumescence, most conspicuously, female pleasure.[14] Winnett's salty rebuke to Brooks and Scholes notes that "[e]verything that the last two decades have taught us about human sexual response suggests that the female

partner in intercourse has accesses to pleasure not open to her male partner. . . . [S]he can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the 'conventional' heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that" (507).

Winnett criticizes Brooks for his insistence (we may note, against Sontag's particular recommendation) on prescription, rather than description, of male sexual arousal as *the* model for readerly investment in general. Brooks prescribes a single model into which he fits several examples, whereas a descriptive taxonomy would necessarily derive one or more models from a range of examples. But Winnett's primary objection is to Brooks's inflexible model of linear trajectory, in which textual significance and readerly investment build progressively from the story's very first incident and find a single, primary climax near the story's end. Winnett argues that not all sense-making must be retrospective, and points to beginnings and endings that take place in the middles of narratives, suggesting them as vital sources of pleasure and sense-making that may have nothing to do with a final climax. Brooks and Winnett are preoccupied by essentially the same thing: how narrative progression is related to the pleasure a reader takes in recognizing textual significance. But they are divided on the question of what happens in the middles of narratives to foster that recognition.

Brooks's discussion of textual dynamics depends upon the notion that each narrative is "a system of energy which the reader activates" (112). He accordingly thematizes this transaction, citing the nineteenth-century preoccupation with motors as emblematic of plot structures common to Victorian narratives: "I think we do well to recognize the existence of textual force, and that we can use such a concept to move beyond the static models of much formalism, toward a dynamics of reading and writing. In the motors and engines I have glanced at, including Eros as motor and motor as erotic, we find representations of the dynamics of the narrative text, connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force" (47). Metonymy, and the reader's response to it, together constitute the field of force in Brooks's formulation. Metonymy is a syntagmatic code that functions through contiguity. Metonyms may be linked together sequentially to reveal, or suspend, cumulative information in a narrative over the course of several pages. They are thus apprehended by the reader over time, and in that period of time they may be used to various authorial advantages, chief

among which (for Brooks) is the whetting of the reader's appetite, or desire, for resolution.

His choice of the word "force" also intentionally suggests a plane of resistance: as the reader's desire increases, the temptation of a short cut becomes increasingly appealing—one wishes to skip to the last page—but a strategic interplay of revelations and deferrals in the middle of a narrative counteracts this urge. "As Sartre and Benjamin compellingly argued, the narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end" (Brooks 103). The right death, then, is the one that rewards close attention to each twist and turn all the way through: the optimal experience of the middle defers the final release of energy and promises a satisfying conclusion.

Winnett (uninterested in the physics metaphor) offers two alternatives to sex as a model for narrative trajectory: breastfeeding and giving birth. Both models are "*pro*spective, full of the incipience that the male model will see resolved in its images of detumescence and discharge. Their ends (in both senses of the word) are, quite literally, beginning itself" (509). Mary Shelley's plot structure in *Frankenstein* serves as Winnett's central example of this point. Noting the difficulty critics have shown in using "a traditional narratology" to account for the novel's innovative narrative progression, Winnett claims that the disruptive effects of that progression are dramatized on the level of character, in Shelley's depiction of Frankenstein himself. "That creation would demand anything of him *beyond* the moment when scientific genius culminates the trajectory of its intellectual self-stimulation seems never to have occurred to him" (510). She proposes that Frankenstein is reading his life for the plot exactly as Brooks would have him do—but for the fact that he's reading the "wrong story," with disastrous consequences (510). Frankenstein's anticipation of retrospective self-satisfaction blinds him to the fact that the conclusion of his labors will be not an end but the beginning of new responsibilities. Winnett argues that the reader's apprehension of significance through textual dynamics, as well as the pleasure she takes in that process, are both diminished by male bias. "Once we recognize how a psychoanalytic dynamics of reading assumes the universality of the male response," she argues, we can read Frankenstein's unpleasant surprise as a rebuke for his incompetent reading (511). The Creature's birth is an example of textual dynamics that "force us to think forward rather than backward," which Winnett sees as a first step in accounting for female readerly pleasure in relation to narrative dynamics (509).

POWYS'S *Glastonbury Romance* begins with a surplus of energy—an embarrassment of riches for the Brooks model. As an ordinary man, John Crow, steps innocuously off a train, he is immersed in a world of titanic force. The sun is endowed with a "conscious personality," full of inexplicable malice personally directed against the little man: "Roaring, cresting, heaving, gathering, mounting, advancing, receding, the enormous fire-thoughts of this huge luminary surged resistlessly to and fro, evoking a turbulent aura of psychic activity, corresponding to the physical energy of its colossal chemical body, but affecting this microscopic biped's nerves less than the wind that blew against his face" (21). Unbeknownst to Crow, the earth also possesses a consciousness, which likewise singles him out with deep, obsessive hostility. The novel's plot is thus apparently launched through an instability between supernatural consciousness and a thoroughly unexceptional man. But as Crow finds his way across the countryside to his grandfather's funeral, he meets ordinary people and conducts realistic conversations. Ironically undercutting the bombastic energies present in the novel's first few pages, these mundane events establish several local instabilities and carry the plot forward, while the potency of the sun and earth recedes in importance. The reader recognizes in retrospect that the initial conflict between Crow and the elements has very little to do with the novel's progression. Rather than signaling a conflict within the story world, the keen supernatural attention trained on Crow comes to represent Crow's worthiness of close attention, even fascination. When the sun, earth, and other superhuman centers of consciousness turn their rapt attention to other characters as well, their intense curiosity suggests that the details of everyday life in Glastonbury possess profound cosmic significance. Powys makes this move several times.[15] He converts conflicts with potential hermeneutic value into bald assertions that the characters and events of *Glastonbury* are intensely interesting in themselves, rather than in their relationship to plot.

Glastonbury progresses through a network of many tenuous narrative strands. A deceased patriarch's estate bypasses his expectant relatives and is given instead to a fanatical preacher. A father and son pursue the same married woman. A capitalist and a communist compete for control of Glastonbury. A sadist struggles to subdue his impulses. Queer and straight relationships begin, change, and end. All of these strands, Powys's narrator suggests, are extensions of Glastonbury itself. The narrator asserts early in the novel that "[t]he strongest of all psychic forces in this world is unsatisfied desire," and promises that Glastonbury, as a magnetic nexus of particularly powerful psychic energies, will be shown in the course of

the novel to be a crucible of desire (125–26). It seems that the erotic saturation of *Glastonbury*'s story-world would invite application of Brooks's or Winnett's models. As the characters' lives change and intertwine with one another, as the various narrative strands develop, adding interpretive depth to the novel, one might expect Glastonbury's psychic energy to grow and interest the reader, fostering readerly investment in the resolution of the plot.

The reader is advised that "[n]one approach these three Glastonbury hills without an intensification of whatever erotic excitement they are capable of and whatever deepening of the grooves of their sublimated desire falls within the scope of their fate" (784). But the flesh-and-blood reader may very well find her or his own response falling short of the narrator's standards. This is likely because, for Powys's narrator, "the most desirable of all electric vibrations is just this very sort of erotic desire, neither altogether gratified nor altogether denied" (623). We may safely treat this statement as a norm of the implied author, and see that the difficulty of joining the authorial audience is epitomized here. As the local narratives on which *Glastonbury*'s forward movement depends develop and change, they meander rather than seek resolution. Although desire in this novel is most powerful when it is "unsatisfied," it is also most "desirable" (in both senses of the word) when it is neither fully gratified nor fully denied. While this kind of desire can fuel plots, it is not the sort that seeks "the right end." In fact, the right end is impossible under these circumstances. Glastonbury's erotic charge may be read as the engine for the novel's narrative energy, but because that desire demands no resolution, it does not accumulate intensity in the ways Brooks prescribes.

A Glastonbury Romance fundamentally departs from Brooks's model of narrative plotting. Its plot is more "a measured piece of land" than a "plan or main story." The narrator describes Glastonbury as both a palimpsest of human emotions and a personality.[16] In other words, it is both paradigmatic and syntagmatic, located in a single space from which all its narrative energy radiates. Although a large number of local instabilities develop and intertwine in ways that prompt readerly interest, the narrative as a whole appears to progress very slowly, if at all. The novel offers no mystery or suspense at its outset, nor does it develop through metonymy. Instead it relies upon synecdoche. As a personality, Glastonbury embodies the personalities of all its inhabitants and visitors, past and present. "'I sometimes think,' said Mr. Dekker, 'that we don't realise half enough the influence we all have upon the personality of our town. Don't you feel, Elizabeth, that Glastonbury has a most definite personality of

its own?'" (519). The narrator helpfully corroborates: "Mat Dekker was right when he said that a town which has had so long an historic continuity as Glastonbury acquires a personality of its own" (540). The novel hosts over fifty characters, each with his or her own narrative trajectory. Any changes experienced by the characters in their own lives register in the encompassing personality of the town. The characters, then, may be read as synecdoches for Glastonbury: "Everyone who came to this spot seemed to draw something from it, attracted by a magnetism too powerful for anyone to resist, but as different people approached it they changed its chemistry, though not its essence, by their own identity, so that upon none of them it had the same psychic effect. This influence was personal and yet impersonal, it was a material centre of force and yet an immaterial fountain of life" (125).

If this passage describes the "field of force" at the text's center, it also appropriately notes the unpredictable and inconsistent character of that force, which is altered by even incidental behavior of individuals in a large, disorganized group. Whereas Brooks's metonymy has a linear trajectory, synecdoche is centrifugal. While Brooks's linear model assumes an endpoint that fosters retrospective sense-making, Powys's circular model emphasizes the significance of each point along the path, orbiting but not connecting with a central, totalizing meaning.

Moreover, the passage comments on the superficial nature of changes to Glastonbury's chemistry. The narrator claims that the denizens of Glastonbury embody and enact their town's "psychic energy" (125), and by extension, the characters may be said likewise to manifest and promote the novel's narrative energy. But this is a superficial energy, enacted on the novel's surface; the essence—or personality, words Powys uses interchangeably—of Glastonbury remains unchanged. The narrator's choice of words suggests a larger purpose here: the superficiality of changes in Glastonbury represents the implied author's refusal to allow the reader to draw large hermeneutic circles of coherence. The characters do not represent larger concepts, and their individual trajectories do not dovetail into sweeping patterns of significance. Instead, the narrator presents tiny and insignificant events with dramatic flourish, suggesting their greater meaning, but invariably undermining such events before the reader may construct a full interpretation. Whereas narrative dynamics in other novels typically prompt productive, interpretive readerly participation, *Glastonbury*'s implied author circumscribes the reader's hermeneutic connections by restricting them to the surface of the text.

Because Glastonbury's personality (the composite of its various nar-

rative strands) appears to be static, and because the authorial audience's ability to make hermeneutic connections is particularly limited, the novel's narrativity may appear compromised. If Brooks is correct that all narratives are hermeneutic, and if the reader's anticipation of closure is a particularly privileged condition of narrativity, then *Glastonbury* has a very low degree of narrativity.[17] Assessed as such, the novel might appear to be an indiscriminate collection of characters and events that could accrue indefinitely. But this is not how the authorial audience is asked to experience the text. *Glastonbury,* read properly by the authorial audience, feels unmistakably like a narrative, even in the absence of any possibility of retrospective sense-making. Its forward movement, and consequent pleasures for the reader, function according to an erotics of progression, something that operates independent of hermeneutics. The novel's textual dynamics prompt the reader's attentive curiosity to the tales being told, even while preventing interpretive anticipation of narrative closure. Narrativity here is measured not by the optimal revelation of enlightened metaphor through metonymy, but by the reader's intense investment in the narrative's continuation. For the novel's characters, curiosity is often a sensual, even erotic sensation, and paying close attention generally entails a state of abandon, of receptivity, to a person or object. Powys's authorial audience is expected to emulate this state of attention, reading in a state of thrall to the implied author.

Powys thematizes this possibility by employing heterodiegetic authorities other than the narrator who observe events of the story-world with scrupulous attention. As a purported substitution for the reader's hermeneutic interaction with the text, the novel possesses a separate diegetic level that models patient contemplation, while denying analysis, through figures who suggest the story-world's worthiness of continual attention. In the second half of the book the narrator sporadically refers to "the Watchers of human life in Glastonbury" (557), figures whose role it is simply to be interested and imaginatively invested in observing the characters and events of the book. In one representative instance they heighten the reader's suspense by dramatizing their own: "This moment was a moment of such a fatal parting of the ways, that the Invisible Watchers who were standing at the brink of the deep Glastonbury Aquarium . . . had never crowded more eagerly around their microscope to learn what the issue would be" (1029).

The narrator also uses the Watchers to assess narrative events. For instance, as some characters decide on a site to build their new commune, the narrator remarks, "And yet to the invisible naturalists of Glaston-

bury, commenting curiously upon the strange history of the place, it must have been apparent that [the communists] were led to select this spot for the inauguration of their wild scheme by some kind of instinct" (721). Here the narrator attributes to the Watchers an assessment he easily could have made on his own. In their role as observers, though, the Watchers give voice to judgments readers might make if they were intimate with Glastonbury life. These are not complex interpretations; they are judgments based on observation. In this case, the discourse has provided too little contextual information for the reader to infer anything about the communists' instincts. Here, as earlier in the narrative, the Watchers see and know things the reader cannot, which suggests that the story-world brims with important information that overflows the narration, and that the reader should emulate the Watchers in their careful collection from all sources of information.

Although *Glastonbury* does not respond to Brooks's theory of narrative progression on a large scale, before discarding them it is worth trying to apply the models of Brooks and Winnett to this novel on a smaller scale, that of characters' particular stories. Even if the notion of Glastonbury as a totalizing personality, as a seemingly static composite narrative, is an accurate model of the text, it may not be the determining factor in the novel's progression, since the reader may choose to ignore the composite Glastonbury in favor of its individual parts. Is the source of *Glastonbury*'s forward movement its individual characters' trajectories, as Winnett demonstrated to be true of *Frankenstein?* Both Brooks and Winnett name ambition, for instance, as a characteristic theme of the novel genre and demonstrate the manifestations of character ambition in plot structure. Several of *Glastonbury*'s characters may be described as ambitious, and their ambition is surely mirrored by the structure of the plot. But these characters' accomplishments often appear in the narrative suddenly, without buildup, and are then unsystematically undermined by external circumstances or, in some cases, by the characters' own incompetence. Their trajectories meet with obstacles, as in both theoretical models, but Powys either deflates these conflicts with anticlimax, or uses the obstacle to deflect the character's progress onto a new trajectory altogether, thereby again preventing Brooks's "right end" to the original trajectory, and frustrating the authorial audience's investment in that progress.[18] Regardless of whether a conflict meets with anticlimax or a deflection of trajectory, however, the narrator invariably turns his attention away from a character immediately after the conflict, declining to explore the consequences

or significance of that conflict, and attends instead to another character's situation.

John Geard's rise in Glastonbury, for example, is a logical consequence of his surprise bequest of Canon Crow's substantial inheritance at the novel's outset. Geard (the aforementioned fanatical preacher) is arguably the most prominent character in the book, the most likely agent of change in the town, the one character all the other characters know, and the character most closely associated with the spiritual energy of Glastonbury itself. His upward mobility would be, in a conventional plot, the novel's central strand. But Geard's ambition to be mayor of Glastonbury, the manifestation of his social climb, is not narrated as an experience for the character. The reader first learns of Geard's ambition in the midst of a teatime chat between Mat Dekker and Elizabeth Crow (202). Elizabeth's nephew Philip also is given narrative time to muse on his resentment of Geard's ambitions (230), but the reader has no access to what Geard himself thinks. While the narrator attends to Sam Dekker's lust for Nell, Geard becomes mayor-elect in an unspecified, unnarrated event. Even Geard's ascension to mayor is marked by ellipsis and then anticlimax: instead of polishing his acceptance speech, Geard dozes off in a cave and sleeps through the entire event. The townspeople of Glastonbury gather, expecting to hear his address, but are regaled only by the opportunistic Philip, taking advantage of the audience to rail against Geard. Although at the moment of the speech the crowd cheers for Philip, the narrator describes the town's ultimate disappointment in Geard: "As the night fell on the roofs of Glastonbury it was as if She Herself, the historic matrix of all these happenings, had been thwarted and fooled at the critical moment of her mystic response. The generative nerve of Her body had descended into Her womb, but all to no purpose! Cold and hard and pragmatic, the words of the Norfolk iconoclast had cut off the consummation of Her desire" (343). Geard's wife and daughters presently return home to find him sitting in his armchair, phlegmatically drinking some gin. The narrative then turns promptly to Sam Dekker.

This sequence reveals Powys's resistance to conventional plot progression (with his use of ellipsis and anticlimax), as well as a sketch of the alternative he employs in this novel. Glastonbury is explicitly female, and her desire is profoundly receptive. She is not passive, for she is ready for Geard's speech with a "mystic response" of her own. Glastonbury thinks and acts with intermental accord:[19] "Every person," claims the narrator,

"was conscious that something deep had been stirred up, ready to respond to Geard of Glastonbury's communication, and this Something had been suppressed" by Philip's speech (342). As in multiple crowd scenes throughout the novel, this audience epitomizes Glastonbury by becoming profoundly receptive. The narrator places special emphasis on the group's collective, eager readiness for experience, for communication, and particularly for communion with John Geard. Geard's magnetism is at once sexual, rhetorical, and spiritual, making him the appropriate center of Glastonbury's rapt, intermental attention. But Philip's usurpation, figured as tantamount to an opportunistic seduction, leaves Glastonbury with "a queer, vague, irritated sense of uncomfortable remorse"—not a feeling of violation, but rather of pique and dissatisfaction (342).

This response indicates that Powysian receptivity is a form of assertion: an intentional quest for experience. This could suggest that Winnett's model of reader response is an appropriate reference point. Like breastfeeding and birth, Powysian receptivity requires interaction of two figures or parties, while refusing the subjugation of one to another. By this point in the novel, the authorial audience is well trained in responding to anticlimax with equanimity rather than frustration. And Geard's inauguration is precisely the sort of beginning that Winnett wants to champion in novels: it should be a moment that launches new significance, new sources of investment for the reader. But even this event provokes no advance in the reader's interpretation of textual significance. Philip's speech tells the reader nothing new about his personality or his relationship with Geard, and the would-be turning point for Geard's forward momentum is carelessly squandered by Geard himself. Winnett's model of speculative, forward-thinking reading is inapplicable when the reader can only react to the story's twists. Here is more evidence suggesting that Powys does not, in general, exploit narrative events to encourage the reader's interpretation. Rather, he uses them to intensify the reader's attention to the surface details of the text. This scene encourages the reader to focus attention exclusively on Glastonbury's surface: that is, not to make inferences by connecting textual detail with meaning or significance. While Geard sleeps in a cave, literally underneath Glastonbury's plot, the action takes place on its surface.[20] Because he is below, he misses the entire point of the event. His effort to think hard at a deep level results in unconsciousness. "[E]very time he deserted his vague, rich, semi-erotic feelings and tried to condense his scheme into a rational statement," Geard's mind fails him, a condition only exacerbated by his trying mentally "to call up that audience of people and to imagine their response to what he said."[21]

The narrator foregrounds Geard's anticipation of his audience's reception because, in this story-world, receptivity is what matters most to all the primary characters.

THE NARRATIVE PROGRESSION of Powys's novel demands an erotics of reading that self-consciously denies the pleasures of hermeneutic involvement. Powys's alternative to Winnett's prospective and Brooks's retrospective models, I contend, is what he called young-girl-like receptivity.[22] Drawing on his own conceit of young girls as presexual, innocent, open, absorptive, yielding, and curious, Powys envisioned a connection between implied author and implied reader not dependent on the tumescence-detumescence model. He exploited this model both thematically and structurally in *Glastonbury.*

Instances of receptivity as a theme are easy to find in this novel. Geard's predecessor, Mayor Wollop, for instance, exists constantly in a state of receptivity.

> The Mayor was obsessed with a trance-like absorption of interest; by the appearance of our world *exactly as it appeared.* What worries some, disconcerts others . . . had no effect upon the duck's back of Mr. Wollop. . . . Below the *surfaces* of appearances he never went! . . . The appearance of things was the nature of things; and all things, as they presented themselves to his attention . . . fed his mind with slow, agreeable, unruffled ponderings. Bert [a young boy] and Mayor Wollop diffused the projection of their amorous propensities over the whole surface of their world; and their world was *what they saw.* (219–20)

Mr. Wollop, Bert Cole, Nancy Stickles, and Mr. Geard all share this capacity for entranced absorption of superficial information. It allows all of them to remain in exceptionally contented frames of mind for two reasons. First, because their "amorous propensities" are outwardly directed, Mr. Wollop and his ken do not suffer from the intense, Romantic self-scrutiny that comes with repressed or narcissistic desire, such as that of Mr. Evans or Crummie Geard. Second, those in trances of absorption are not troubled by other people's vagaries, with which Glastonbury is brimming. As a mayor and religious leader, Geard is depicted as more effectively altruistic for being able to concentrate his attention on a single task at a time, even if this makes him impervious to the needs of everyone else around him.

Receptivity in explicitly erotic encounters in *Glastonbury* is fueled by the sympathy of one person for another. Girls in a state of receptivity to their lovers may be seen as analogous to the properly attentive authorial audience. Girls read their lovers, both women and men, by sympathetically apprehending both the lovers' external details and their identities. For instance, when Nell and Sam consummate their love, the narrator remarks: "She has reached a level of emotion where everything about him is accepted and taken for granted; and not only so, but actually seen for what it is, without a flicker of idealism" (298). At the height of their passion, while "she for him had become absolutely impersonal—a woman's flesh in empty space—he remained for her the *actual, personal, conscious man she loved*" (310).[23] For girls in this novel, the personality or essence of anything—a person, a tree, family lineage—is of paramount importance. The apprehension of that essence is achieved through sympathetic identification with the other person, even to the extent of self-forgetting. But personality without superficial detail loses meaning in this novel. The narrator comments on Nell's attention to Sam's personality, but amply supplements this with description of Nell's sexual response to Sam's body. Likewise, Glastonbury is at its heart a historic, mystical convergence, but without its swarms of townspeople in the narrative present-day, it holds little but symbolic significance.

The authorial audience's responsibility, then, is to extrapolate Glastonbury's personality from its superficial details. The reader is actively discouraged by the text's teeming sprawl from making large hermeneutic connections. Instead, the implied author cultivates the reader's young-girl-like receptivity to the narrative. Evocation of sympathy is a common enough tactic in novels, but what makes this sympathy unusual is the paucity of justification for it. Powys's characters are not particularly compelling as objects of pity or compassion. They have bizarre peculiarities, they are not roundly or consistently characterized by the narrator, and it is often very hard to see the characters for themselves when the narrator's voice is so much more prominent and compelling. The novel is, in fact, rather crowded and impersonal, for all the narrator's efforts to emphasize individuality and minute detail. How, then, is young-girl-like receptivity an appropriate (or even remotely pleasurable) response to this novel?

The novel suggests answers to this question in Geard's Glastonbury Pageant, the novel's *mise en abyme* and a prime example of young-girl-like receptivity in a crowded, impersonal setting. Here the book's characters, both Pageant performers and members of the audience, gather and forget themselves in an orgy of attention to the semireligious, semimystical

Pageant. During the Passion Play segment of the program, Mr. Evans, dazed and enervated by his long stint as Christ on the cross, falls into a trance of receptivity. "The pain he endured turned his pedantic acquisitiveness into a living medium, acutely sensitive, quiveringly receptive, through which the whole history of Glastonbury began to pour" (615). Evans as medium absorbs the "revenants," or essence, of Glastonbury's history. He feels himself become Christ, even become Glastonbury itself. Evans hears a voice speaking to him, condemning his sadistic impulses, and he responds to it. While this conversation ensues between Evans's personality and that of Glastonbury/Christ, the narrator notes that Christ's voice "was like a wind stirring the horns of snails and touching the hairs in the throats of night jars, and moving the antennae of butterflies, and lifting the gold-dust from the cracks of puff-balls, and blowing the grey dust from the droppings of weasels" (617–18). Throughout the long passage, the narrator juxtaposes superficial details of the Pageant with the inner world of Evans, who, at the heart of the Pageant, is the figure most deeply receptive to the Pageant's essence.

The dazzle and confusion of the Pageant—fulsomely described by the narrator, excessively plotted and planned by Geard, overflowing with too many performers and too many audience members—may be seen as analogous to the novel's energetic but chaotic structure. The chapter's events make it clear that a proper, though risky, response to the Pageant is full receptivity to it. At the Pageant's outset, "a cumulative wave of crowd-hypnosis shivered through these assembled people, straightening their shoulders, lifting their heads, turning their faces toward the grassy terrace on the slope above them" (556).[24] As the day wears on, however, the crowd's attention divides and wanders, signifying an improper response (one that the novel's reader may find familiar).[25] Several production mistakes in the Pageant as well as many disruptions in its vicinity distract the large audience, whose attention—unlike that of Evans—is divided repeatedly and disastrously throughout the long event, suggesting a less-than-optimal reading experience. As a contrast, the steadfast young-girl-like receptivity enacted by a handful of girls—Morgan Nelly, Persephone, Angela, and Cordelia—highlights the redemptive value of credulous, close attention: "Perhaps in that whole vast assembly only Father Paleologue and one other realised the full poignancy of the acting of Judas. . . . Morgan Nelly's heart leapt up in sympathy as she followed the figure of Judas wandering among some small thorn bushes. . . . In the end he disappeared behind the western pavilion, and long before he had disappeared the main interest of the Pageant had shifted from him altogether; but the little girl's

heart was still with him. She knew who it was" (599). Morgan Nelly's identification not only of the actor's name but of his personality, his self, is her reading of the Pageant. The event means more to her than to others because she is able to feel sympathy for the character simply by paying attention and being receptive to the actor on stage. No one more than a young girl has the privilege of such a connection in this story-world. Meanwhile, Persephone renders herself receptive to Evans's consciousness as she embraces the base of Evans's cross: she feels "vibrating through its dense oaken veins the wild triumph of his tense tormented nerves, the savage rapture of his self-immolation" (611). Persephone's sympathy for Evans's agony is so extreme that she becomes ill, infected by his torment. And obsessively watching Persephone's figure on stage is her lover, Angela, whose "face was white and her whole body was trembling with excitement. The soul within her yearned to that beautiful form that now with uplifted arms was embracing the feet of the suspended Figure" (601). These examples illustrate ardent, attentive readers of the Pageant in the throes of passionate absorption in their text. Their ardor and ecstasy allow the novel's reader no doubt of the Pageant's orgiastic quality. In this chapter the narrator highlights the corruptive potential of close reading, particularly for young girls, and he depicts the overtly chaste narrative of the Passion Play as a vehicle for seduction.

What makes receptivity appropriate as a readerly response, despite its risks, is the fullness of experience it offers.[26] Powys compels his authorial audience to decide between resisting the novel altogether or surrendering under pressure to absorbing the novel's myriad details. Its sheer length and scope discourage the reader who would skim the text, since the novel's rewards lie in extrapolating Glastonbury's personality from a full absorption of its surface. The immediacy of contact between the receptive reader and the implied author in a situation such as this has overtones of erotic proximity. In *Libidinal Currents,* Joseph Allen Boone considers the eroticism of "that delirious process of surrender into otherness" that some novels encourage in readers: "Truly close reading demands that we give ourselves over to the 'closeness' of the relationship that texts elicit in readers, acknowledging the affective dimensions of reading that are not caught up in a reading for mastery but that seek an understanding of what it means to occupy, however temporarily, the place of the other as part of oneself" (20, 25). Herein consists the pleasure of young-girl-like receptivity: the erotically charged stimulation of surrendering to another consciousness. For all of his uninterest in conventional narrative constructs,

Powys works hard to cultivate a story-world that demands this particular sort of attention from its readers.

MANY CHARACTERS spend a good portion of the book in various states of receptivity. Although this behavior is often coded as positive, since it engenders sympathy and communication between characters and suggests an optimal reading strategy for the novel itself, receptivity is also shown to be potentially crippling when it lacks an ethical purpose. For instance, Mayor Wollop is a curiosity for his absolute absorption in the inessential, but he also must be a shockingly incompetent mayor. Total absorption in one's own sensations is not just unethical; it is also selfish and antisocial. Likewise, after Sam has cruelly deserted the pregnant Nell and turned to a life of private asceticism, he wanders about town in a trance-like state of absorption, thoroughly relishing his freedom from domestic responsibilities as he concentrates on twigs and rodents in his path.[27]

But the antithesis to receptivity in this novel is not inattention; it is intermental penetration, invasive mind reading. As a means of interpersonal connection, and as the privileged site of assertive agency in the novel, young-girl-like receptivity trumps penetration. This marks an advanced stage in the flesh-and-blood Powys's decades-long, intense struggle with the dualism between penetration and receptivity. He enacted his struggle early in the twentieth century on the university extension lecture circuit and in his earliest novels. He analyzes this struggle in his *Autobiography,* written just two years after *Glastonbury.* Powys's radical philosophical experiments with gender and sexual identity attest to his deep-seated desire to supersede normative sexual tropes of activity and passivity. *Glastonbury,* unlike Powys's previous writing, offers young-girl-like receptivity as an efficacious alternative to phallic aggression. Penetration—physical, mental, spiritual—pervades the novel, but the narrator codes it in all but a few cases as an unwelcome intrusion, if not a hostile violation, and figures it, rather than a human character, as the primary villain in the novel.

Phallic aggression, like young-girl-like receptivity, is an imaginative power. Its force and direction are generated by a character's mind. In its more intense form it is an obsession with physical assault, held by both men and women who harbor antisocial impulses such as bloodlust or sadism: Owen Evans, Mad Bet, Red Robinson.[28] Its nonviolent form

motivates characters' efforts to influence each other through suggestion or even hypnotism. The narrator characterizes both Geard's and Philip's powers of oratory as phallic, and Paul Trent's ineffectual efforts to convert the townspeople to communism are described as failures of his phallic energy.[29]

Several critics have focused on phallic aggression in Powys's novel without accounting for the implied author's ubiquitous valorization of receptivity.[30] Philip's aforementioned oratory, for instance, which the narrator dubs a "Dolorous Blow" to Geard's mayoral ascendancy, is important enough to give the chapter its title. But Philip's performance is focalized through Glastonbury, keeping the reader's attention on Glastonbury's reception of Philip rather than on Philip's experience of oration. At considerable length, the narrator describes the crowd's perception of Philip, and then grants just one paragraph to quoting the phallic rhetoric. In defiance of its title, the chapter concludes with an extended meditation on Glastonbury and her humbled hero, Geard.

One particularly compelling voice on this subject is Robert Caserio's, in his argument that the phallic aggression of *Glastonbury*'s villains fuels what little forward movement the plot offers. Further, he argues, the novel suggests a reader's response on the same model of phallic aggression. Whereas in my reading the reader is asked to enact young-girl-like receptivity in response to the novel, Caserio asserts that the novel's structure "stimulates the reader to penetrate the text's mass, to break into it or spear it, so that the spirit of analytic reading moves into alignment with the characters who are figures of aggression."[31]

In his close reading of the novel's politics, Caserio rightly connects the sadistic impulses of Owen Evans and Red Robinson with phallic symbols such as iron bars and lances; notes that Red's cohorts, a couple named Spear, complement his aggressive rhetorical attacks; and argues that phallic penetration thematizes sadistic aggression in the novel. He deduces the "reader's partisanship with sadism" from a characteristic of the novel I have analyzed above: "the reader's progress from one episode to another is an ever-thwarted attempt at movement in an ocean-like crowd of divaricating elements. The result for reading is a loss of analytic orientation: in the continuous crowd of elements one scarcely can discover in which direction analysis ought to go" (98). If the reader can cognitively penetrate the text, by this model, s/he can interpret it. Like Geard's miraculous healing of the cancer patient Tittie Petherton, in which he imaginatively plunged "that Bleeding Lance of his mind" into the tumor, textual interpretation can be "vital and curative" as a "break or disruption in the crowded banality of things" (Powys 709; Caserio 99).

Caserio's argument assumes that the novel offers the reader "the promise of buried truth to be discovered in the narrative's elisions," and that this stimulates the reader's intervention, but he offers no evidence for this claim (98). I cannot find any such promise in the novel's structure: the "divaricating elements," seemingly digressive or unnecessary subplots or narratorial asides, are not tumors to be eradicated, nor do they conceal a secretly healthy masterplot trajectory. To understand what these elements do, and to appreciate what the novel asks its reader to do, is to comprehend the dynamics of *Glastonbury*'s narrative progression. A refusal to penetrate the text analytically is precisely what Susan Sontag calls for.

Furthermore, the model of penetration as a model of readerly investment bears examination beyond Caserio's thoughtful analysis. Though he does not argue that all penetration in the novel is sadistic,[32] Caserio notes that even "vital and curative" penetration, such as Geard's healing powers or the reader's interpretation, qualifies as a "certain sadism" (99). He identifies Geard's daughter Cordelia's emergency seduction of her husband, the deeply troubled Owen Evans, as a form of sadism. But the novel offers evidence to the contrary. All examples of "vital and curative," or ethical, penetration involve large amounts of sympathy and intense attention to detail. As she faces her miserable husband, Cordelia can choose to be "cold, chaste, inert, irresponsible, absorbed in her own personal condition," or she can decide to be "warm, alluring, unchaste, and self-forgetful, thinking only of her love for the unhappy man before her!" (1029). Noting that "she wasn't the daughter of Geard of Glastonbury for nothing," the narrator describes Cordelia's "incontinent" flood of sympathy for and attention to Evans. She absorbs every detail of who Evans is at that moment. The "annihilating ray" Cordelia directs at Evans to eradicate his misery is indeed penetrative, but it is rooted in her sympathy and young-girl-like receptivity (1035).

As Geard of Glastonbury attempts to heal to Tittie Petherton's cancer, in one of the novel's most dramatic moments, "his face twisted in a spasm of physical pain," and he suffers acutely in his body the pain she feels in her own (290, 506). Like Cordelia's, Geard's phallic force is energized by compassion. Many townspeople distrust this extremity of sympathy. Mary Crow, a reliable commentator, remarks that "I believe he's got some weird nervous sympathy . . . mind you I don't like him. . . . [H]e has some nervous peculiarity which makes him *imitate* every infirmity he meets" (547). Geard and Cordelia's receptivity is threatening, of course, because it allows them to read, to inhabit other people's minds. Its dangers—as well as its powers—are akin to those of mesmeric or hypnotic control, or

those of losing oneself in a novel. But this kind of receptivity is also fundamentally ethical, and its resemblance to the authorial audience's proper reading of *Glastonbury*'s indicates that for Powys, receptive reading is an ethical enterprise.

Powys's *Glastonbury* offers scholars of novel history and structure a new form of narrative progression to consider. In this extremely long and digressive novel, the "plane of resistance" Brooks identifies in a traditional plot is distended almost beyond recognition, with no clear trajectory of revelations and deferrals to keep the reader's attention focused on a particular resolution. But *Glastonbury* does function according to a double-layered progression traceable through both narrative dynamics and the implied reader's response. This progression depends upon the authorial audience's sustained surrender to the implied author's rules of engagement, which, though unconventional, nonetheless operate consistently and reliably throughout the novel. Powys's novel not only offers an opportunity to refuse, utterly, the temptation to "excavate" and "destroy" through interpretation. Its structure and discourse work together to cultivate an erotics of art as the only appropriate response.