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"Limestone and the Literary Imagination: a world-ecological comparison of John Cowper Powys and Kamau Brathwaite"

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This paper represents an attempt to think through some of the connections – concrete and abstracted -- between the work of the Powyses, Caribbean literature, and world literary theory. It affords a chance to test out some theoretical approaches for reading literature of the English South West (often typified as local, provincial or even parochial) within a global, environmental framework. To begin, I want to introduce some of the salient features of world-ecological literary comparison: first, by recalling the most important and empirical textual link between the world of the Powyses and the Caribbean region (focussing in on Llewelyn Powys's perception of the connections between the islands of Portland and Barbados); and then, by bringing into fuller dialogue the work of John Cowper Powys with that of Bajan poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite. I suggest that this pairing of authors opens up new ways of reading literary works and also produces new ways of comprehending the connected ecologies of the limestone formations of South Dorset (Portland's quarries, say, or the chalk downland of the ridgeway and Maiden Castle) with the coral capped limestone outcrops of the Eastern Caribbean.

In recent years, concerns over climate change, species extinction, and global pollution have led to a groundswell of scholarly studies dedicated to rethinking environmental history. Furthermore, since the turn of the millennia the environment has been more broadly

conceptualized in the humanities not just as external to understanding social and historical change, but as vitally integrated into our cultural forms, modalities of thought, and social formations. In the field of literary studies, meanwhile, the concept of 'world literature' has become a topic of renewed debate. One line of enquiry to have emerged from this debate is that represented by the efforts of materialist critics to reconstruct the concept of world literature in terms of its relationship to global capitalism.[1] For these critics, *world* literature is to be understood as the literature of the capitalist *world-system* – as literature that has as its substrate the social logic of capitalist modernity. From this perspective, the pressures, effects, and dynamics of the world-system "will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being".[2] This "registration" of the world-system may well be explicit in a particular text, but it may also appear indirectly or unconsciously, visible only in the formal structures or narrative stylistics of a work. These debates have opened up exciting proposals for rethinking the way we compare literary texts from across the globe in light of the 'green turn' in the humanities and new theories of cultural ecology.

One productive approach for exploring the relationship between world literature and processes of ecological change has been to centre to concept of the commodity frontier as a useful unit for analysis.[3] Commodity frontiers can be understood as spaces of extraction or production (such as mines or cash-crop plantations) which reorganize land and labour in such a way as to send vast reservoirs of food, energy, and raw materials into the world-economy. They violently reconfigure landscapes and labour practices, expropriate populations, and exhaust environments. Often combining the latest technologies with relatively archaic social modalities (like forced labour), commodity frontiers are peculiarly uneven and unstable places and can be read as constituting the chief locations of capital accumulation.

Literature is ideally placed to register the affective modes (or, following Raymond Williams, the "structures of feeling") and processes of subject formation that emerge in such locations and socio-economic formations. We might usefully ask what new kinds of world literary readings are possible if we took the dispossessing dynamics of these frontiers as the basis for comparative analysis? In what ways have a diverse range of writers and literary works (those rarely, if ever, studied together) engaged with, or been shaped by, the political ecology of, say, the quarry and the limestone frontier?

For my purposes, the work of the Powyses is a pre-eminent example of a body of literature that encourages us to consider how the ecologies of specific commodities might have impacted on the literary imagination, and the representation of societies dominated by the production of those commodities. Furthermore, it asks us to consider how literature might provide access to the lived experience of ecological change, exhaustion, and crisis at specific moments over a long historical chronology. Following this line of inquiry, I want to attempt to think together writers who seem disconnected by time, distance and individual experience but for whom, nevertheless, the limestone ecologies of their respective landscapes and the process and relations of economies of quarry and extraction form an important substrate of their respective imaginaries.

Writing to W. E. Powys in a letter dated March 13, 1931, Llewelyn recounts his experiences of a brief visit, undertaken with Alyse Gregory earlier that year, to several islands in the Caribbean.

> My darling Willie, -- … I suddenly decided to go to the West Indies and this we did, visiting the Leeward and the Windward Islands as far as Trinidad. It was an extraordinary experience and I really did enjoy it […] I am now in bed with a cold in the chest. The West Indies was interesting. At the first island we found a secret bay

> like Ringstead Bushy bay with coral rocks […] Barbados is a healthy island and we may go to live there one day. It reminded me of Portland. The sea wind seemed to keep it fresh, though in the sugar canes it was breathless enough […] The palm trees used to look wonderful growing out of the white sand and the sea blue and bluer but you had to look out for coconuts falling on your head, and everywhere great buggerly crabs running to earth like rats.[4]

It's significant that later in the essay, "Voyage to the West Indies" (first published in 1947 in Malcolm Elwin's *The Pleasure Ground*) Llewelyn should make the same comparative link between landscapes: "I found that Barbados in many ways resembled Portland. It stands further out to sea than any other of the Windward islands."[5] There is of course a geological homology observable here: the link between the limestone of the isle of Portland and that of Barbados, 85% of which is covered by Pleistocene coral reef limestone cap. With this in mind, it is tempting to read a bedrock of commonality which underwrites the imaginative connections that Llewelyn strikes up. Further to the connection drawn between Barbados and Portland, so many of the terms of reference he makes to the West Indies are grounded in experiences of the English south west: the pebbles of Dominica's beaches are like those on Chesil beach; lime trees like Somerset orchards; small churches in Trinidad calling to mind St. Catherine's chapel, Abbotsbury.

In his recollection of the visit to Barbados Llewelyn also writes of interactions with the local peasantry, hearing from farm hands and clergy that "'white folk' were 'not very sweet' and that wages were a shilling a day. There was much "sufferation on the island".[6] This "sufferation" was about to increase for the inhabitants of the island as the penury from the fall out of the economic crash of 1929 played out foremost on those who could afford it least. The long decline of the sugar frontier in Barbados had seen prices driven down by a number of factors going back to the end of the nineteenth century, including the critical drop in sugar

prices in Europe, in part a result of the subsidised large-scale saturation of the British market by sugar beet after 1884. The Great Slump hastened this drawn-out decline (which had been arrested briefly after the First World War) and proved disastrous for a local Caribbean economy heavily reliant on sugar: prices fell from 26 shillings a hundredweight in 1923 to 9 shillings in 1929 to 5 shillings in 1934, where they stagnated for 3 years. The effect of this steep descent was as harsh as it was predictable – increased poverty through reduced wages and redundancies as "the planters passed on the financial grief to the already impoverished labour force".[7] Indeed, the decade of the 1930s is understood a pivotal one in terms of the wider struggle for Caribbean sovereignty: the West Indies that Llewelyn visited in '31 witnesses the cultural and political forces of decolonization consolidating and cohering in dramatic fashion. Strikes, riots and other disturbances had flared significantly, yet intermittently throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. However, it was the widespread insurrections of the 1930s that were to prove crucial and which, by the end of that decade, would drive the process of political decolonisation forward and sow the seeds for future independence.

What is remarkable about Llewelyn Powys' brief trip (and even briefer report of it) is that, while it doesn't focus on the in slums of Port of Spain, the rebellions the oil-fields of Trinidad, or the disputes of sugar-workers, it nonetheless registers in no uncertain terms the dog days of British rule. The affective power of Powys' writing offers a glimpse into a genuine concern for those oppressed under conditions of colonialism – it is notable that the harsh labour regimes and psychic pressures of the plantation system are drawn to the forefront of his account. In the description of both a walk through the cane-fields in St Kitts, and the appearance of the "great plantation house" a clear-eyed authorial understanding of the violence of imperial economies of extraction emerges:

> We eventually decided to push straight through the plantation. We had not gone far before we realised that it was no easy matter to retain one's sense of direction in such a dense growth. For a long time we seemed hopelessly lost. It was very hot and we became weary of moving aside these tall bamboo-like stalks. There was an undergrowth of weeds also that impeded us. […] we felt great relief when we did emerge at last and walked up the grassy hill on which the ruined house was built. It had evidently been an imposing place. There was something sinister about it even in its present broken state. Surely no 'innocent' country house would require to be fortified by wall and by buttressed towers […][8]

Implicitly understood here is the incommensurability of modes of existence between those in the colonial periphery and those back home. This passage in particular illuminates the practicable impossibility in the Caribbean of the sort of stroll frequently undertaken across the tops of White Nothe or around the heath at Tadnoll that punctuated life for those residing at Chaldon Herring. The Caribbean landscape itself frustrates the meditative purpose of walking routes exactly because it is a space terraformed to the economy of sugar-production. The monoculture of the cane-field as the predominant production of space and of nature creates disorientation and unease rather than fostering any easy sense of connection or grounding. It is as if, for Powys, the landscape itself encodes years of enslavement and servitude. In similar vein, the securitized architecture of great planation house speaks, here, of the violence of power in the islands and also of the paradoxical anxiety and fear that is inculcated in those who wield it. We witness how Llewelyn's disenchantment with the colonial ruling class is palpable, as his experience of cane-field and great house collapses temporal distance between the plantation owners and the author's own touring party :

> Even in the full blaze of noon the atmosphere about the fallen stones seemed memory-stained. I felt as if there were only the thinnest separation between our lives and *their*

> lives, as if by a turn of the screw those past years would become part of my own experience. […] I would remember it all – the proud indolent lives that these white folk had lived, with their hospitable tables and well-filled cellars, and the unphilosophic acceptance of their privileges as though established by divine intervention, and the unyielding economic principle that lay beneath their stately courtesies.[9]

The reflections on the unyielding economy of historical enslavement connects with Llewelyn's equally disenchanted response to the contemporary colonial ruling class. His pen portrait of the governor of the Leeward Islands encountered on board ship is scathing:

> In his white clothes, with his eyeglass and walking stick, he presented a superb example of one of these English colonial bellwethers. When tea was being served I had an opportunity of saying a few words to him and I found that his mind was as hollow as his person – a kind of moving-picture governor, a mock strongman consumed with a pompous sense of his own importance. We disembarked at Antigua and, finding myself passing Government House, I stepped across the road to have few words with the coloured sentinel. I wanted to know what he thought of his master. "He is not much appreciated", was his guarded comment.[10]

Here, Sir Thomas Reginald St-Johnston is cast as emblem of the class that will be swept up and eventually swept away by the nationalist independence movements gathering on the horizon.

To return our focus now to the twinned images of limestone geology of the Eastern Caribbean and English south west, the rock formations and the poetics and politics of the commodity frontier invites us to consider, in more depth, the oeuvre of the foremost literary voice of Barbados. Born in Bridgetown, in the year before Llewelyn visited the island,

Kamau Brathwaite would become one of the world's most significant poetic voices of the late twentieth century. A career which, although it was thoroughly transnational, nevertheless always privileged the experience of the Caribbean and was, naturally, dedicated to Barbados. Experiences of studying and teaching across the Caribbean, Britain, West Africa and the US were formative and the dazzling range of his poetry is underwritten by a historian's expertise, a theorist's precision, and a musician's precocity. He was a key figure in articulation of Caribbean cultural diasporas and a defining influence on arts movements in Britain the Caribbean and beyond. His work across the decades has taken the seminal literary journal of his native island, BIM; the BBC in London and the formation of Caribbean Artists Movement; and musicology and history during that significant time as Ghana became the first African nation to win independence.

As Lynn Innes writes in her recent, moving obituary, the time spent in Ghana "profoundly affected [Brathwaite's] sense of Caribbean culture and identity". The poet has always stressed the importance of voicing a folk consciousness in his poetry and has sought to emphasise vernacular traditions, social conscience, and the communality of poetry. Innes continues:

> For Brathwaite, oral performance and a listening community were vital. Moreover, he insisted, the language spoken by Caribbean peoples should be regarded not as a dialect, or subsidiary and inferior form of English, but as a "nation language", capable of expressing the complexities of Caribbean culture and history.[11]

Primarily, for Brathwaite, the route to grasping these complexities must come through a poetic realisation of the long connection between Africa and the Caribbean. This connection had been severed by the historical fact of slavery and in his poetry Brathwaite attempts to resuscitate the African connection to the Caribbean. For him the process of creative writing

announces a re-establishment of the image of Africa in a New World context. As Brathwaite sees it, the challenge facing an emerging Caribbean national consciousness is that his generation and those that preceded it had been born into and educated within a fragmented culture. African resonances in the form of languages and cultural practices had been disaggregated by the systemic violence of the plantation. Later, after emancipation, the fact was that colonial education continued, in different forms and to different extents, what enslavement had instantiated, in that imperial tutelage frequently worked to efface African ancestry, to denigrate 'blackness', and to deny any cultural connections to an African past. Indeed, much literature from across the Anglophone Caribbean reflects this legacy – we might think of writing from the 'boom' period in the form of fellow Bajan author George Lamming's peerless *In the Castle of my Skin*, the early work of Trinidad's V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon, or later, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (also from Trinidad), and the powerful fiction by Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid.

Brathwaite's poetic mission then is, in part, a collective and a restorative one. He identifies Africa as being another way for Caribbean peoples to imagine an independence worthy of the name. The memory of Africa becomes: a counter-resource to imperial education; a way of overturning the value systems which vilified racial blackness; and an incisive way to plot the devastations that unfold over of the *long dureé* of historical capitalism. Writing in 1984, Brathwaite set out fully the concept of "nation language" in the influential long essay *History of the Voice*. Here, he poses the question: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the experience of human history in the Caribbean? Furthermore , he considers the ways in which poetry could express the *environmental* reality of the Caribbean and how one might account for the forbidden and submerged connection to an African past:

> Basically the pentameter remained [dominant in the English poetic tradition], and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane.

> The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience [of the Caribbean]?
>
> It is nation language in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English […] And this brings us back to the question: can English be a revolutionary language?[12]

Most often when critics consider Brathwaite's literary ecology it is to this essay that they turn, and to the poem *Shar* which foregrounds the notion that Caribbean environmental experience is encoded in the fact and image of the hurricane. However I want to consider instead an earlier publication, *Mother Poem*, from 1977. This magisterial long poem (the first instalment of his second trilogy) reveals the fact that Brathwaite had always been a poet of the stone as much as of the force of the winds. The foundation of his Caribbean experience is the geology of Barbados; his understanding of historical and social relations grounded in landscapes of coral limestone.

Mother Poem is a meditation on the island of Barbados, situated as motherland in sharp contradistinction to the infantilising rhetoric that depicted England as mother country to the colonies. It is also an evocation of Brathwaite's own mother (Beryl Gill) who is able to represent both a distinct personal history and to also offer a point of departure from which to consider more, broadly, the gendered division of labour under colonialism and the wider experience of women's work on the island. The preface to the poem explains:

> This poem is about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados: most English of West Indian islands, but at the same time nearer, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the protestant pentecostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina. The poem is also about slavery (which brought us here) and its effect on the manscape.[13]

The porousness of limestone becomes as significant as the revolutionary potential of the hurricane for better comprehending and articulating and the complexities of Caribbean culture and history. In this figuration, the limestone geology becomes: a conduit for the historical memory of enslavement; a metaphoric vessel through which the memory of Africa can permeate into the collective imagination; and the basin in which syncretic forms of Caribbean spirituality might assert themselves. The connection between mother and motherland is established in the following lines:

> So we find my mother having to define her home as plot of ground – the little she can win and own – and the precious seedling children planted for the future. But that plot and plan is limited and constantly threatened or destroyed by the plantation and the fact that the males of her life have become creatures, often agents, of the owner-merchant.[14]

Here we have a vision of the "reconstituted" Caribbean peasantry. Following the work of anthropologist Sidney Mintz, the Caribbean peasantries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be understood as "reconstituted" having "begun other than as peasants – in slavery, as deserters or runaways, as plantation laborers, or whatever – and becoming peasant in some kind of resistant response to an externally impose regimen".[15] This peasant class found itself integrated with the plantation in "a dialectic and antagonistic relationship" -- they were "interdependent, yet economically, politically and even psychologically

counterposed".[16] The complex lyrical formulations of Brathwaite's *Mother Poem* expertly register the tensions in this reconstituted set of relationships between peoples, labour and landscape. In the preface to the poem, an image of Brathwaite's mother manifests as the embodiment of the struggle to resist the entanglements of power brought to bear by the plantocracy of the colonial masters.

The peasant sensibility here then is not depicted as any sort of romanticised union between soul and soil, but rather as a position from which to speak of a history of dispossession. The distinction between "the plot" (a small portion of cultivatable land, the provision grounds) and the overbearing weight of the plantation foregrounds the legacies of landless labour and recalls a history of hard-won land rights.[17] Here we might be tempted to recall the singular instance of Llewelyn's own disorientations in the canefield. Moreover, we might even to conjecture on the connections between Brathwaite's representation of peasant experience -- redolent as it is with the precarity of landlessness in the face of agents of financial control – with the world of John Cowper Powys' *Weymouth Sands* with its evocation of Lodmoor and the lives and livelihood of Gypsie May and the suggestively named Larry Zed…

From the outset limestone operates as a structuring principle through *Mother Poem* appearing in multiple valences: the body of the island itself, its caves and coral, the marl of its roads, the dust of the chalk-stick of the schoolteacher, the lime plaster on the walls of buildings.

> The ancient watercourses of my island
> echo of river, trickle, worn stone,
> the sunken voice of glitter inching its pattern to the sea,
> memory of foam, fossil, erased beaches high above the eaten
> boulders of st philip
>
> ('Alpha')[18]

[…]

> so i move down into the old watercourses

echo pebble trickle of worn stone
snaken voice of coral curling its own pattern to the sea

memory of foam, of fossil, eroded beaches high
above the eaten boulders of st Philip

and i become dry pool: dead eye; frog's mudden jump: carb's
skeleton:

hag riddled with sea salt: dumb
mouth: unmothered mother

through the stars dry away, waterwheels depart down the limestone
and clay
and the bills must be paid for the food I can hardly afford

for the padlock, for the roof destroyed by the last season's fever
an I mussn't forget that I ax the teacher [Chalkstick the teacher] to stop in an see me
tomorrow

('Fever')[19]

In these early poems, the memory of the erosive capacity of ancient watercourses and the formations of stone that remain, registers the deep scars of social history and experiences of drought and hunger. As the poet explains:

> *st philip*: the largest most southerly parish of Barbados. Here is wide, bleak, wind-beaten plain, moving in terraces up the twelve steps of the island to the 'Scotland' district in the north-east (Bathsheba, Cattlewash, Chalky Mount) where the poem ends. Because of the porous limestone, and because the water flowing down the ridges does not have more than ten miles to travel, the island, though garden-canefield green in most places, has no distinctive river and very few lakes.[20]

The poem also suggests a transformative link between limestone, the memory of waterflows and the fluid history of political resistance on the island. The parish of St. Philip recalls the location where Bussa's slave rebellion of 1816 began.

In poem's final phase, the body of the island and the mother's experiences of labour – in all senses of the word -- combine to become the bodily and imaginative basis for taking possession of a history of deprivation and degradation:

> But my mother rails against the fearlures of these comforts
>
> she stifles a dream as the whip raids her
> and she calls on glint, echo of shell
> the protein burning in her dead sea eyes
>
> on those who will say no to distortions
> who will pick up the broken stones
> and sloping them with chip and mallet out of the concave quarries
>
> who will sharpen them to blocks, to bricks, to unwracked boulders
> who will build bells, space that the hands shape, koumforts
>
> for her history is long and will not always bleed on other people's
> edges
>
> […]
>
> if it be so
>
> let it be clay that the potter uses
> and he will curve her hollow cheek and carve her darkness […]
>
> re-echo of the stream and bubble
> re-echo of the cliff and scarface mountain
>
> past the ruinate mill and the plantation stable
> past the bell and the churchwall, the chapel […]
>
> the ancient watercourses
>
> trickling slowly into the coral
> travelling inwards under the limestone
>
> widening outwards into the sunlight
> towards the breaking of her flesh with foam
>
> ('Driftwood')[21]

The final stanzas of Brathwaite's poem consolidate this sense of affinity between woman and topography and suggest the fusion of limestone landscape and human body as we are left with a final vision of the mother/island.

At this point it is instructive to move on to consider the ways in which, in the fiction of John Cowper Powys, a similar close connection between limestone landscape and female subjectivity is figured. The conclusion to the novel *Maiden Castle*, in some ways counterpoints the conclusion to Brathwaite's poem as Wizzie Ravelstone herself becomes connected, in the imagination of Dud Noman, to the landscape surrounding Dorchester:

> It was no consolation to her that he thought of the modelling of her limbs as he walked round Poundbury, or that he mingled the curves of her 'lurin figure' with the *valla* and *fossae* of Maiden Castle! But the diffusion of her desirability through the earth he walked on, through the grass and the rocks and the stones and the trees he passed, became now that he had lost her, a perpetual reminder of her […] [22]

It is possible to read Wizzie as the character who represents something of an ethical centre for the novel and, following Jeremy Hooker, she certainly to be considered Powys's "triumph of characterization". In this respect she corresponds to some degree with the organizing maternal presence of Brathwaite's poem. The representation in the literary imaginary of limestone-women in these texts, each subject fused with the contours of their respective landscape offers up many interpretative challenges.

In *What is Nature* , her seminal work of ecocultural thought, philosopher Kate Soper contends that representations in literature that work to "feminize" the land or, alternatively, seek to naturalize women's bodies tend to do so as a way of exposing both, land and woman, to systems of control and forms of exploitation. The issue is, of course, to what extent does any particular piece of work critique this connection by holding it up for inspection and to what extent might it be complicit in these processes of gendered and environmental exploitation.[23]

Presenting a close bond between women and the earth runs the risk of re-inscribing a form of a politically atavistic essentialism. In textual terms it can become an act of reduction, or even base objectification, which entails a de-centring of the lived experience of women and a deliberate displacement of women's labour, in favour of finding masculine narrative resolution or wish-fulfilment. In Brathwaite and Powys though, whilst the possibility of such reductionism must be acknowledged, other possibilities may also be discernible. There seems to me to be in each case a textual recognition – overt in the case of *Mother Poem*, implicit in the case of *Maiden Castle* – of the precarious and constricted social position of the female subject, and, further, an awareness of the unacknowledged or under-acknowledged labour undertaken by the women concerned.

Does the notion of "porousness" that Brathwaite suggests as an enabling way to read his text also offer up a way of thinking through *Maiden Castle*? Wizzie is the foremost example, but what of the narrative more broadly considered? Does limestone porousness help us to better grasp, say, how the water meadows and undergrounds streams of the novel lead to what Hooker has called the "semi-aquatic world" of Powys into which individual souls might can sink?[24] Indeed, its representations of ancient and contemporary watercourses (the River Frome and the chalk-beds) enable Dud's psychic journey to develop more fully. The river, the earthworks of the amphitheatre Maumbury rings, the Portland stone of the graveyard monuments all, at different points, act as triggers for his own soul-searching and his attempts (fairly abortive attempts, it must be said) to write historical fiction. Is there as case for reading Dud Noman himself as something of a porous vessel for ersatz historical memory; a figure through which different world-views, and beliefs, pass or sink without trace…?

Brathwaite's excavations of Bajan limestone and Powys's novel set against the backdrop of Mortimer Wheeler's excavations in Dorset offer further opportunities for cross-comparison. Thinking through the poetics of excavation and extraction as both mode and motif of

historical recovery in both literary texts, lead us to future directions that might include the specific ways in which each text is concerned with delving into legacies of different world-historical manifestations of violent colonialism in order to unearth sources of metaphysical power and comprehension.

If we can see *Maiden Castle* as a novel underwritten by the limestone landscape and invested in excavating the aesthetics of historical memory, the novel *Weymouth Sands* is its material counterpart – a novel of extraction and the extractive industries. And it is here where a reading of the limestone commodity frontier can be usefully foregrounded. This might seem counterintuitive. After all, on my first reading I can admit that I found *Weymouth Sands* to be a curious novel through which to attempt to read registrations of the depredations of finance capital and economies of extraction. All the more curious perhaps as it is a novel written by a figure not primarily concerned – "with man's place in society, but with man's place in nature and his relation to cosmic forces".[25] And yet this is, I believe, a novel which – despite itself perhaps – points accurately to the socio-ecological transformations of the local region during the period of the Great Slump. In so doing it captures something of the essence of the commodity frontier formulation as laid out by environmental historians Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore:

> A frontier is a site where crises encourage new strategies for profit… They are always, then, about reducing the costs of doing business. Capitalism not only has frontiers; it exists only through frontiers, expanding from one place to the next, transforming socioecological relations"[26]

In foregrounding the processes of commodity extraction, specifically the reorganisation of the local quarry industry after the crash of1929, and read slightly against the grain of Hooker's assessment then, Powys offers a compelling account of the relationship between economic

depression and forms of capitalist modernisation. He articulates in his own brand of modernist aesthetics, crucial contemporary transformations in landscapes, labour and psychic structures taking place in the limestone frontier amidst the crisis-driven expansion of the forces of capital.

Depicting how labour practices are reconfigured to the will of a class of land owners who have been able to consolidate power through financial speculation and predation, *Weymouth Sands* provides a localized optic on the effects of a depression that were unevenly felt across Britain. (By 1930 the virtual halving of the value of British exports pitched many industrial areas into poverty. As a result, the industrial centres of the North and of South Wales were harder hit than, say, the Home Counties surrounding London. However, while popular historical orthodoxy has often insisted on reading a North/South divide in its assertion that the 1930s were a relatively prosperous time for parts of the British Isles, this picture risks oversimplifying the effects of the depression. While the narrative of the prospering of the South may hold for parts of the South East of England, the picture when we look South West is manifestly less clear-cut. Limestone certainly feels the consequences of the crash in commodity prices, and the organisation of quarrying and masonry on the island of Portland undergo a seismic process of transformation during this period.

Weymouth Sands offers a view on this period of upheaval and reconfiguration in the Portland stone quarries as small family-owned operations were forced to shut, and were then bought up, amalgamated and reopened by wealthy speculators frequently from the metropolitan centres. Such amalgamation, coming as it did within the same historical moment as increased mechanisation (the first mechanical excavators, bucket crane loading lorries, were introduced on the island in 1933), compounded the financial grief for workers with lay-offs, reduced wages and the overall ceding of control and quarry ownership. All of this culminated in a transfer of wealth out of the local area (Hill and Bowers Masonry Yard, for instance, was

forced to shut in 1931, while conversely Bath Stone Firms reopened one of the quarries at Easton in 1933.)

In the novel, the fictive plunderer taking advantage of the historically low prices of both land and materials during the Slump is Dogberry Cattistock, the wealthy brewer-turned-financier, who buys up quarries in the face of workers unable to resist. He takes the opportunity to purchase a large basket of 'nature's gifts' with a relatively small amount of capital, and the novel turns on the central struggle between Jobber Skald – a dispossessed small-scale quarryman, seething with intent of murderous retribution – and Cattistock. In this agonistic relationship, we can discern the struggle between finance capital and a legacy of a particular configuration of nineteenth-century labour practices.

Skald himself is a representative of, as Raphael Samuel puts it, that 'closed, hereditary occupational community' that was typical of many stone-working communities, 'neither exactly labourers, nor yet artisans […] their work was "handicraft" in character even when it was being carried on in the service of large-scale industry'.[27] James Wilkes – writing in his study about Purbeck artist Eric Benfield – makes a similar point: quarry workers were proud of their independence in the face of "factory hooters or others who rush to work before the foremen".[28] Powys's novel foregrounds this sense of labouring independence and Skald is frequently described as an "oolite man", with stone in his soul.

It is not hard to imagine why Skald's position, that of dispossessed worker whose livelihood depends as much on manual dexterity as physical strength appeals to Powys as a novelist. The romance of the Portland quarryman very much fits into the larger, hyperbolic, position that the island and processes of working with stone occupied in the imagination of Powys and his literary circle. Powys was, of course, ever-conscious of writing in the shade cast by Thomas Hardy and his novel *The Well-Beloved*. *Weymouth Sands* even picks up on one of the

narrative motors of Hardy's novel –the social and romantic tensions arising from the process of family quarries being brought out with some being brought to ruin while others are raised up – we even see a figure in the text see reading Hardy's novel). Llewelyn Powys, was to write in his Dorset Essays of 1935 that Portland possessed a "wealth of romance" and in wildness and danger provoked artistic stimulation.[29]

In John Cowper's novel, it is as if all the essence of wild energy issuing from the landscape becomes embodied in the obsessive nature of Skald's jealousy, which stands in contradistinction to the desiccated imperviousness of the aloof and untouchable Cattistock. However, I want to suggest that the foregrounding of the dispute between Skald and Cattistock is actually symptomatic of the way the novel works schematically to relegate comprehension of the class struggle over the stone industry. The seething motivations of Skald become not merely a reflection of the boiling currents of the surrounding sea, but are partially evaporated to provide material for Powys's meditation on the human psyche, nature and sexual appetites, which can be read in the novel largely through the philosophising of Magnus Muir or the preaching of Sylvanus Cobbold. One of the most intriguing aspects of Powys's novel for me, in fact, what might be seen as the defining compelling tension in Weymouth Sands, is that it is able to grasp so clearly the periodic reconfiguration of socio-ecological formations, to register acutely the uneven effect of the Great Slump (the erosion of worker's rights and the consolidation of wealth and power that occur), and then, that it resolutely, but rather strangely, works to efface all this in the world it presents, displacing it into a realm of perverse eroticism or using it as the basis for establishing instead a kind of mysticism that can mask or, even, reject modernity. Thus, the labour dispute between Skald and Cattistock becomes an emblem of an eternal struggle of the soul. Or, in a similar move, the violence underpinning the class conflict within the town of Weymouth (and, further, between the town and its island periphery) can be read primarily through the depiction of

sexual pathologies and domination or, say, the spectre of the Sanitarium (the vivisection house on the hill). At once, the reconfiguration of structures of power during the Slump is evident and yet, paradoxically, becomes obfuscated, servicing first and foremost Powys's investigations into what he understands as the universal truths of a human psyche.

That these authorial concerns of Powys emanate from the reconfiguration of the quarry industry captures neatly both what can happen when a region or society becomes dominated by a particular commodity frontier, and how the aesthetic registration of the stone frontier is bound up in the notion of the ghostly, the intangible, and even the insubstantial. Jeremy Hooker has identified the operative interplay between a "duality of elemental and ethereal atmosphere" animating all Powys's novels.[30] Certainly, *Weymouth Sands* turns on the interplay between the evidential material solidity of its framing narrative and the shifting psychic structures which Powys opens up to enable his readers to imaginatively inhabit the specific sets of lived social relations he depicts.

While the tale of Portland limestone grounds the text, the novel troubles the expectation of the stone as marker of physical solidity. Its fate as commodity on the financial markets de-materialises the supposed solidity of rock as the basis of the livelihood of the workers and becomes suggestive of the novel's ghostly or de-materialised apprehension of history. Although through its use Portland stone is a commodity that can be seen to bear the weight of the British Empire within it – we might think of the Cenotaph, St Paul's or the British Museum to understand its empirical link to national memory – the novel uses this monumental significance to contemplate a sense of disembodied timelessness. As one of the principal ways in which Powys articulates the interplay between ethereal and elemental, the monuments of the town – the plinths and the statues of monarchs, the clocks and towers, even the Isle of Portland itself – are all repeatedly and elaborately depicted as shrouded in mist, their edges blurred and their foundations concealed from view. The church spire and the

statue of Queen Victoria, for instance, are "both so nebulous in the street lights that they assumed an almost ghostly appearance […] Both these monumental objects receded as he gazed upon them into some remote psychic dimension'.[31] As this coastal fog coalesces round markers of national and imperial history, it underscores for Powys the sense of a community floating unmoored in time and comes to represent a mass of townspeople unaware of a larger historical stage. It also, I suggest, aptly describes Powys's own ultimate unwillingness to read the history of the west country as fully part of the world-system, or, indeed, as connected to the processes of empire.

While *Weymouth Sands* does explicitly register a sense of unease at the transformation of solid stone into finance capital for Cattistock Company, and while it is able to reflect on the cannibalistic nature of financial speculation (with Cattistock himself cast as a man-eater - p.75), Powys eschews presenting any vision of social collectivism as basis for political resistance. Rather, the novel deploys the vapourising of seemingly solid foundations as a refrain through which to symbolise a broader sense of the horror of modernity. While it is possible to read in Powys the chilling vivisection storyline, and the florescence of sadism and sexual predation as a representation of a communal psychic response to economic crisis, ultimately, the novel is not interested in challenging the workings of global capitalist modernity. Rather, it works both to provide a lament for a world that has been cast as hitherto insulated from modernity and to create, typically for Powys, a troubled yet nostalgic view of the English semi-periphery.

Reading the literary modernism of *Weymouth Sands* as a response to the lived experience of a new moment of modernisation – the renewed penetration of capital – points us in a to consider the ways in which the text encodes both thematically and at the level of form, a sense of 'unreality' generated by the reconfiguration of labour regimes, and the wider

decomposition of the stabilised structures of nature–society relations, all of which appear determined by the cyclic boom-bust logic of the limestone commodity frontier.

Such a world-literary comparative reading sketched out here forms only part of a larger study, situated between the Caribbean and Britain and focussing on the aesthetics, the excavations and the extractions of commodity frontiers. Widening the focus to consider more deeply the range of limestone literature from Barbados and from Dorset might entail similar cross-cultural readings which might bring into dialogue would writers and artists as diverse as the Bajan and Harlem Renaissance author Eric Walrond, film maker Joseph Losey, poet and novelist Anthony Kellman, and musician PJ Harvey…. There remains, too, much more that could be said on the Wessex writing of the Powyses and the frontiers of limestone and tin. This longer project, to which the writings of the Powys circle will be central, hopes to investigate how fiction, poetry, film and music might all mediate differently the lived experiences corresponding to frontier-led ecological transformations in multiple global sites, and, further, hopes to shed new light on how cultural imaginaries have been impacted by or contributed to these transformations over the "long C20th".

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[1] See for instance: Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Neil Lazarus, "What postcolonial theory doesn't say", *Race and Class* (53:1) 2011, 3-27; Benita Parry, "Aspects of peripheral modernisms" in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, (40:.1) 2008, 27-55; Stephen Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2008).

[2] The Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p.33.

[3] Drawing on the work of environmental historian Jason W. Moore, literary critics have been quick to examine the cultural implications of his world-ecological perspective and its use of the commodity frontier. See Jason W.

Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2015). See literary studies such as: Sharae Deckard, '"The land was wounded": war ecologies, commodity frontiers, and Sri Lankan literature' in *Ecocriticism of the Global South.* Eds Slovic, Rangarajan and Sarveswaran. (Lanham: Lexington, 2015); Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett (eds), *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

[4] *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, ed. L Wilkinson. (London: The Bodley Head, 1943), pp. 159-60.

[5] Llewelyn Powys, "A Voyage to the West Indies" in *Llewelyn Powys: A Selection of his Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hopkins. (London: Macdonald, 1952), p.246.

[6] Llewelyn Powys, "Voyage", p. 246.

[7] Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 234.

[8] Llewelyn Powys, "Voyage", p.237.

[9] Llewelyn Powys, "Voyage", p.238.

[10] Llewelyn Powys, "Voyage", p.238-9.

[11] Lynne Innes, "Edward Kamau Brathwaite Obituary" *The Guardian*, Wed 5 Feb 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/05/edward-kamau-brathwaite-obituary

[12] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon, 1984), p.10-13.

[13] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Mother Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.ix.

[14] Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, p.ix.

[15] Sidney W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), p.132.

[16] Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, p. xx.

[17] For the pre-eminent discussion of the plot/plantation dichotomy, see Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 95–102.

[18] Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, p.3.

[19] Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, p.17-18.

[20] Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, p.119.

[21] Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, p.112-6.

[22] John Cowper Powys, *Maiden Castle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936) p.468.

[23] Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1995) p.102.

[24] Jeremy Hooker, *John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973) p.32.

[25] Hooker, *John Cowper Powys*, p.63

[26] Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (London: Verso, 2018), p.18-9.

[27] Raphael Samuel, *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers* (London: Routledge, 1977) p.xii.

[28] James Wilkes, *A Fractured Landscape of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014) p.128.

[29] Llewelyn Powys, "Portland" in *Somerset and Dorset Essays* (London: Macdonald, 1957) p.199.

[30] Hooker, *John Cowper Powys, p.* 54.

[31] John Cowper Powys, *Weymouth Sands* [1934] (London: Picador, 1980) pp.63–4.