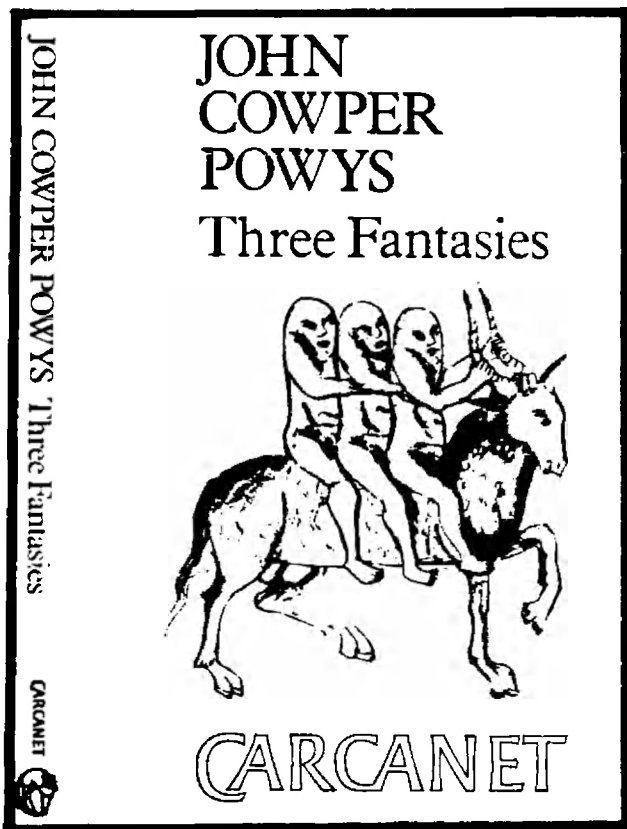


Powys Notes

A Publication of the Powys Society of North America: Spring, 1986



Paul Roberts reports that John Cowper Powys's Three Fantasies (Carcanet, 1985) sold out in the U.K. within two months, and that it is now being reprinted. Favorable reviews appeared in a number of newspapers, including The Guardian (April 11), The Columbus Dispatch (May 5), and The Irish Press (May 11).

Three Fantasies is available in North America from Carcanet Press, 108 East 31st Street, New York, N.Y. 10016, at \$14.95, postage free to members of the Powys Society of North America.

THOMAS SOUTHWICK, Lecturer, Barnard College, New York, provides his own review below, while PETER GLENN CHRISTENSEN of SUNY-Binghamton assesses another recently published Powys work, the play Paddock Calls (London, Greymitre Books, 1984; approx. \$13.50), on p. 2.

Also in this issue readers will find the Society's first-year membership list (for which we have had many requests), as well as

details of the Second Annual Conference to be held in Toronto from June 6 to June 8, 1986, and at which the Canadian author, MATT COHEN, will be the featured speaker.

PARADISIAC ORGAN: A review of Three Fantasies

Three Fantasies, by John Cowper Powys, only recently first published, are charming and mysterious little works from their author's 87th year (winter 1959-60). Told dead-pan, they keep the reader alert with non-sequitur turns in dialogue and surreal plot details. Most of each fantasy begins in space, but they begin with gossipy little gatherings on earth, among the friction and inhibition from which the spacetravelers rise: "Gor felt an ecstasy of happiness when Murdrawla responded to his outstretched arms. In five minutes they were locked together in a passionate embrace and for half a year they were flying and floating, sometimes between Cox and Maia, sometimes alone without the sight of a single star.

Their excrement, like that of a pair of enamoured horses or cattle slid down through the darkness, followed by their urine; and as wandering pedestrians in London's most frequented parks saw it, or perhaps felt it fall, rumours kept spreading that certain swiftly moving vessels were careless about their sanitary overflow." The last words explain correctly. The fun of this passage comes from their polite distance from the unashamed concreteness above.

Language exposes its speaker's situation. In Three Fantasies, Dido, Poe, Whitman, and the Devil expound on the soul, beauty, consciousness, and God. Though they may occupy the Dimension of the Naked Truth of life, they reveal, in each case, themselves--in the shape of wishes and defenses remote as the strollers in the parks from the source of phenomena.

Sex is Powys's customary theme. Though a vital, unconventional man, he was painfully guilty about his own sexuality and aggressiveness. Childhood taboos remain to disturb his writing about sexual intercourse. In Three Fantasies it is called "raping." Big Doll is terrified to think about doing it; how it would hurt Little Doll if he did it to her.

Fantasy creates worlds away from constriction and fears. In "Abertackle" Gor leaves home to fly with his magic stick on a horned spacehorse with the girl Maia and the artist Cox. He loves the spacedemon Murdrawla, and they rule earth. However their ally, the Devil, whom God's death has freed, with the sword Excalibur slays the monster Wow and her son the Unknown One. This "sudden inspiration" drops all back to repressive, familiar Abertackle. "Cataclysm" is the adventure of two devoted nine year-old spaceboys. It includes praise of "the more than voluptuous extension of the paradisiac organ of the imagination when the self alone with the self prolongs the self-play of luxurious erotic saturation." "Topsy Turvy" is sentimental about its virgin heroine and hero. The souls of two household objects, they are promised by Dido that they will live eternally and united because of the intensity of their love, as she and Aeneas do.

Fantasy, too, can recover the lost. Glen Cavaliero relates, in his sensitive afterword, that the picture Topsy's soul is said to occupy was one painted by Powys's sister Nellie, who died in 1893, when she was fourteen and he twenty. A younger sister Nellie runs away with Gor from Abertackle, and the voice of the dithyramb to masturbation in "Cataclysm" is Nellie Walleet, who joins with the spaceboys on their journey, to the very bottom of the Wall of the World.

THOMAS SOUTHWICK

POWYS AS DRAMATIST: A review of Paddock Calls.

The publication of Paddock Calls, written by J. C. Powys late in 1922 is a welcome event for Powys scholars and fans. However, I do not think the play is strong enough to be considered a major or important work by Powys.

The locale of Paddock Calls is Weymouth in 1921. We are presented with ten characters in five obvious pairs: (1) Sir Robert and Lady Sark, an unhappily married middle-aged couple; (2) Horton and Alice, their children, in their early twenties, obviously overattached to each other; (3) Betty Stalbridge and David Jones, the sweethearts of the two younger Sarks, but

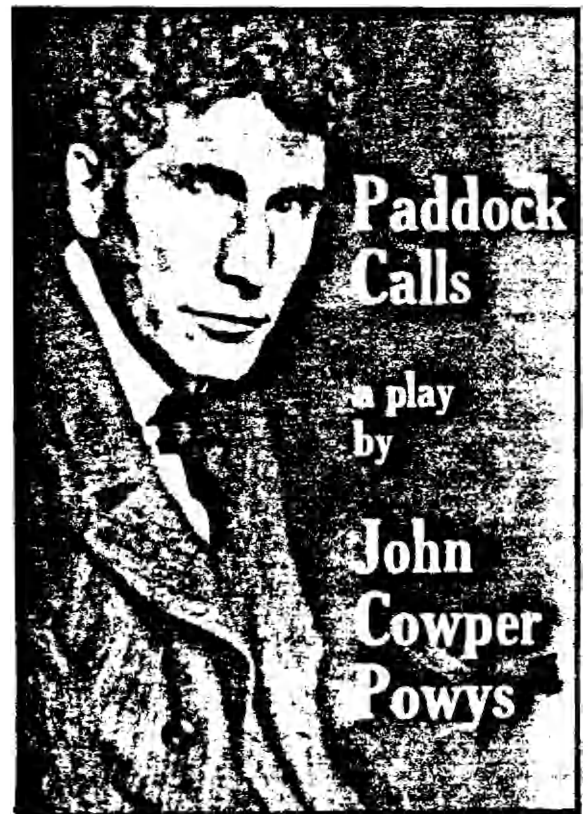
a pair more suited to each other; (4) Durnie and Jane Odcombe, the Sark's elderly retainers, who speak a thick local dialect; and (5) Rev. John and Undine Paddock, the Sark's neighbors, another overly attached brother-sister team. In the play, Undine has an affair with Robert. It is discovered and she drowns. Against the everyday backdrop of adultery, there is much talk of the power of evil spirits.

I find the play puzzling. To what genres does it belong? Clearly, a type of name symbolism is at work. Undine is straight out of German Romanticism. Sark, on the other hand, is derived from the Greek word for "flesh." Yet the play is not an allegory. The title is taken from the first scene in Macbeth, but no consistent parallels to Shakespeare's tragedy are apparent. Alice Sark refers to the Greeks of three thousand years ago--hardly the age of Aeschylus. Are we to think of a Greek tragedy with the fall of a noble house served by retainers who form a semi-chorus? The Oedipus and Electra complexes of the younger Sark's seem caught somewhere between tragedy and psychoanalytic reductionism.

Fortunately for the reader, in his ten-page introduction, Charles Lock points out that in his correspondence Powys saw his play in the context of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, authors who were all dead when he was writing the play. Without this information, the play would seem even more peculiar. The editor at Greymitre might have supplied some more background information: I would like to know, for example, where the manuscript has been all these years and whether in later life Powys himself thought of Paddock Calls as something he wanted in print. A three-act play does not seem to be the ideal form for him because it lacks space for the authorial intrusions, the description, and the leisurely character development which we find in his greatest novels. Apparently, a half-dozen plays submitted to the Little Theater in Chicago (1913-1917) remain lost, and his adaptation of The Idiot (dramatized in 1922) remains unpublished.

Powys's association with theatrical life is predominantly American, rather than British. American theater before Eugene O'Neill is, rightly or wrongly, generally dismissed out-of-hand. We can mention O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon (1920), Djuna Barnes's three short plays in A Book (1923), and Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine (1923). Powys's depiction of family torment certainly fits in well with some of the best of American theater: Long Day's Journey into Night, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Death of a Salesman, The Antiphon, and A Delicate Balance.

Not having read Powys's three earliest novels nor his correspondence, I turned to his early critical essays to get my bearings on Paddock Calls. Strikingly, both Visions and Revisions (1915) and Suspended Judgments (1916) emphasize poetry and the novel at the expense of drama. Contemporary dramaturgy is almost ignored. Yet in June, 1916, Powys and Frances Gregg published a five-page essay on Strindberg's novels and plays in Forum (Vol. 55, pp.661-65).



Here Powys feels obligated to compare Strindberg and Ibsen at the Swede's expense:

. . . when, to sum up, you have said that man is the symbol of consciousness, and woman of emotion, you have said all that Strindberg, with a great deal of tortured misinterpretation of his observations, and much futile bitterness, has indicated in almost ten volumes of plays and stories.

Ibsen had said all this forty years ago, and being both prophet and seer, had seen women as the source of all the lyric passion in the world, as the light that was to irradiate consciousness; he had seen the mystic value for all time of "He humbled himself to be born of a Virgin;" Woman was the body, Man the soul. Ibsen pointed the way to the health of the body. There you have original and constructive thought.(p.663)

Here we see Powys's concern with the nature of women, which is manifest in the figures of Alice and Undine in Paddock Calls and in most of his novels. Yet it is only by overcoming such simplistic dichotomies that real characters can be created and insight into the human condition can be gained. Powys's early literary criticism is a grab bag of impressionistic appreciations which tell us of Powys's concerns.

In Paddock Calls the Strindberg and the Ibsen sides of Powys are not at odds. They merge. The play is unlike The Father, Miss Julie, and The Dance of Death in that the quarreling and hatred of a man and woman is not at the center of the play. Nevertheless, Mrs. Sark is a monster mother like Laura in The Father, and the fates of young adults are in the balance as in The Dance of Death. When Alice torments David we may well think of Miss Julie and Jean, the valet. In The Father, as in some later Ibsen plays, spirits are mentioned. Undine is sympathetic, if pathetic, and her status as "water being" reminds us of Ellida, "the mermaid," in The Lady from the Sea. The themes of self-deceit, the stifling of life, and the retreat from experience are pervasive in Ibsen's later plays. Charles Lock points out Powys's specific interest in Rosmersholm.

No, the problem of the play is not in getting Ibsen and Strindberg to blend, but in reconciling these influences with the world of Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare, where Powys's greater sympathy lies. As he says in Visions and Revisions, "the ultimate drama of the world, a drama never-ending, lies between the children of Zeus and the children of Prometheus; between the hosts of Jehovah and the Sons of Morning. God and Lucifer still divide the stage." Well, in Ibsen and Strindberg (in the phases which influenced Powys) they don't. And in Paddock Calls they don't either. Durnie sees Paddock responsible for witchcraft. Paddock suspects Sir Robert. Horton and Alice liken the Paddocks to the weird sisters. The end result is a failure to link the spirits of Shakespeare (or perhaps Aeschylean furies) with the family romance. It is not that it can't be done in theory; simply, Powys is not up to the task. This domestic drama is heavily laden with a supernatural trapping. Eventually, Powys proved in A Glastonbury Romance and Maiden Castle that he could combine the seen and unseen worlds effectively. To do this, he had to change his points of reference to Thomas Hardy, Emily Bronte, and D. H. Lawrence.

PETER GLENN CHRISTENSEN

Professor Bayley's Review: A response from Charles Lock.

[Although Charles Lock's letter to the Editors of The New York Review of Books did not receive publication, it nevertheless offers important information on Powys's work and career. For that reason it is appropriate that it should be published here.]

To the Editors:

As an admirer of John Cowper Powys I appreciate the space given in your columns (March 28 [1985]) to the re-issue of his novels, Wolf Solent and Weymouth Sands. There are, however, a number of errors in Professor Bayley's review that ought to be corrected.

The reasons for Powys not divorcing his wife--one of the major biographical enigmas--are many and complex, but have nothing to do with the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church of which Powys was never a member. He had, indeed, been very interested in Catholicism--and particularly the Modernism associated with George Tyrrell--in the first decade of the century, but the misapprehension probably arises from the fact that his son, Littleton Alfred Powys, having followed his grandfather as an Anglican priest, became a Catholic in the late 1930's.

Ducdame was not Powys's second novel. It was his third to be published, in 1925, after Wood and Stone (1915) and Rodmoor (1916), but since the posthumous publication of After My Fashion (1980; written c. 1920) Ducdame is regarded as Powys's fourth novel.

That Weymouth Sands was first published in England under the title of Jobber Skald had nothing to do with the Corporation of Weymouth. Powys was involved in a catastrophic libel-suit, brought by one Captain Gerald Hodgekinson, M.C., who claimed to have been the model for the vulgar industrialist, Philip Crow, in A Glastonbury Romance. By accepting all the royalties from that great and popular novel, as an out-of-court settlement, Hodgekinson demonstrated that the likeness, though quite unintentional, was remarkable. Weymouth would have had Cattistock's double.

It should also be pointed out to Professor Bayley and your readers that those who regard Powys as a major author do not constitute "a little church of devout acolytes." Meetings of the Powys Society in Great Britain have nothing to do with seances or ley-lines, and maintain a high academic standard, as reflected in the Society's journal, The Powys Review. Contrary to popular-scholarly opinion, Powys had very little interest in the occult--far less than Yeats, of course, and probably less than Thomas Mann--and that lack of interest is shared by almost all of his serious readers, the pre-eminent exception being the late G. R. Wilson Knight.

When Professor Bayley compares Powys with Jane Austen he is moving in the right direction, but he is wrong to think that Powys's "devotees" insist on confining comparisons to prophetic, mystical and revelatory authors. The relevant, demonstrable influences on Powys's style and technique are not Jane Austen, nor Dostoevsky, but Turgenev and James.

In the context of Harper's publication of these two novels, it should be emphasised that this is the first time that Powys's novels have been published in paperback in America. Powys lived in the United States from

1905 to 1935 and throughout that period he was close to the center of American literary culture. His departure for Britain--caused chiefly by the financial ruin of the Glastonbury libel suit--together with a change of editors at Simon and Schuster, cut Powys off, at a most unfortunate time, from the readers and critics who admired and respected him. Powys's reputation is slowly being recovered, and in that recovery these Harper paperbacks are of considerable significance. Concurrently, the Powys Society of North America was founded last year, and is holding its inaugural conference at Colgate University, June 7-9, 1985: all the speakers teach at respectable educational establishments; some might even count themselves among the "smart academic critics" who, Bayley tells us, avoid Powys, and all, I am confident, would find it very hard to follow, or to find, Bayley's reasoning when he expresses the hope that "splendid novels" (his gracious admission) should "never be taught in English literature departments."

Charles Lock, D. Phil.
English Department
University of Toronto
3 April, 1985

A CASUAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following are relatively recent items that appear to be unindexed or which might otherwise have escaped notice.

John Cowper Powys

Glen Cavaliero, "The Novels of John Cowper Powys," Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, April, 1982; 4: 65-69.

Frank Gloversmith, "Defining Culture: J.C.Powys, Clive Bell, R.H.Tawney and T.S.Eliot," pp. 15-44 in Gloversmith, ed., Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s (Brighton, Harvester; Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Humanities, 1980).

Dom Claude Jean-Nesmy, "Sagesse de John Cowper Powys," Revue Generale, Feb., 1981; 2: 3-15.

Elmar Schenkel, "John Cowper Powys: Die Ungeduld der Phantasie," Akzente, 1981; 28 (2): 110-122.

Michel Pouillard, "Nouvelle et implicite: Deux exemples." In N.J.Rigaud, L'Implicite dans la littérature et la pensée anglaises (Aix en Provence, PU de Provence, 1984), pp. 123-135. On the short story, "The Ass and the Rabbit."

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Esther McCoy, "Patchin Place: A Memoir," Grand Street, v. 5, no. 1: 86-103. Glimpses of JCP and Phyllis Playter. Published at 50 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10024; \$5.00. [Item courtesy of Eddie Jenkins].

John Rosenberg, Dorothy Richardson: A Critical Biography (London, Duckworth, 1973). JCP, Phyllis Playter and Dorothy Richardson, pp. 122-125, and *passim*.

Robert L. Blackmore, "John Cowper Powys," A Dictionary of Literary Biography (Detroit, Gale, 1983). A 17-page illustrated article.

Theodore Francis Powys

French Editions. J. LAWRENCE MITCHELL reports the availability of the following editions which might be of particular interest to Canadian (or Louisianan) members:

T.F.Powys, M. Bugby fait peur aux oiseaux (Innocent Birds), trans. with intro. by Patrick Reumaux (Paris, Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, 1983), 69F.

T.F.Powys, Bruit et Silence (Mr. Tasker's Gods), trans. Reumaux (Godefroy, 1984), 79F.

In addition, Le Bon Vin de M. Weston, De Vie à Trépas (Unclay), and Le Capitaine Patch are apparently still available from Editions Gallimard.

On T.F.Powys there is: R.B.Watson, "T.F.Powys: A Reappraisal," Tract, No. 27. Available from Gryphon Press, 38 Prince Edwards Road, Lewes, East Sussex, U.K. One pound sterling, plus postage.

Littleton Powys

Brief but interesting mentions in Robyn Marsack, The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (London, 1982), pp. 2-3, 83. LRP as headmaster, and character in long MacNeice poem.

FROM THE DESK OF GERALD POLLINGER. . .

. . . comes news of significant progress on a number of fronts. This information is subject to change, however.

FORTHCOMING: From Jeffrey Kwintner's Greymitre Press: The Journals of John Cowper Powys, 1929-1932, transcribed by Sally Powys, to be bound in separate volumes. No date.

Three items from John Wilkie: John Cowper Powys, Six Lectures on Literature; Paul Roberts, "The Poetry of John Cowper Powys"; Paul Roberts, John Cowper Powys: Letter Writer. No dates as yet.

IN PREPARATION: The Letters of JCP to Professor Ichiro Hara, Anthony Head, editor.

John Cowper Powys, Letters to, and Letters From, Emma Goldman, David Goodway, editor.

UNDER CONSIDERATION: JCP, Letters of JCP to Louis Wilkinson, 1957-1961. JCP, Letters to Hal Trovillion, ed. by Kenneth Hopkins and Paul Roberts.

UNDER DISCUSSION: A complete publishing program by Chatto and Windus of works by T.F.Powys, including his short stories all of which have been located save two [See Powys Notes, Fall, 1985].

Also in preparation: A Glastonbury Romance, adapted as an opera by Richard Tony Arnell.

PAGES 8-9 (MEMBERS AND ADDRESSES) OMITTED

THE POWYS SOCIETY SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE, June 6 - 8, GLENDON COLLEGE

This year's Conference will be held in the attractive setting of Glendon College, Toronto. Friday evening commences with a post-prandial presentation by John A. Brebner, author of that well-known study of John Cowper Powys, The Demon Within (1973). On Saturday, there will be two morning sessions. The first features William Keith, Richard Maxwell and Peter Christensen talking on various, though thematically related, aspects of the work of John Cowper Powys. The second session is devoted to T.F.Powys: J.Lawrence Mitchell will give an illustrated address based on recent research in the U.K., and we are almost certain that there will be at least one other TFP speaker. Saturday afternoon remains open for recreation or ad hoc seminars. Our "banquet" of Saturday evening will be followed by readings by MATT COHEN, the young Canadian novelist whose most recent work, The Spanish Doctor (Penguin, 1985), has been widely and favorably reviewed. Sunday will see another JCP session, devoted largely to the Autobiography, with Margaret Woolf and Thomas Southwick as speakers. PLEASE JOIN US: This looks to be another great Powys weekend, and all for just \$130.00 Canadian! Members may wish to photocopy the Conference announcement and to display the original in a library or bookstore.

OF NOTE

Inquiries regarding the POWYS COLLECTION at Colgate should now be directed to G. David Anderson, newly-appointed University Librarian, whose address is: Case Library, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY. 13346.

Margaret Woolf writes that she is planning a biography of FRANCES GREGG WILKINSON and that she would be grateful for "any scraps of information, however small," that members can provide. 304 Bower Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 0L3, Canada.

Asked to contribute to an article entitled "Neglected Classics" in a forthcoming issue of Vniversity, ANTHONY LOW at first mentions R.C. Hutchinson's Elephant and Castle and J.G.Ballard's Empire of the Sun, but then gives the full weight of his authority to the major works of John Cowper Powys. But where to begin? Says Low: "There is much to be said for tackling the major novels in order, beginning with Wolf Solent. But if I had to recommend a single work to someone unfamiliar with Powys, it might be Weymouth Sands, his great novel of the seaside town and its inhabitants. . . . Not everyone finds Powys accessible. But for those who do, he is an elemental force, who can change the way we look at nature, other human beings, and ourselves."

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