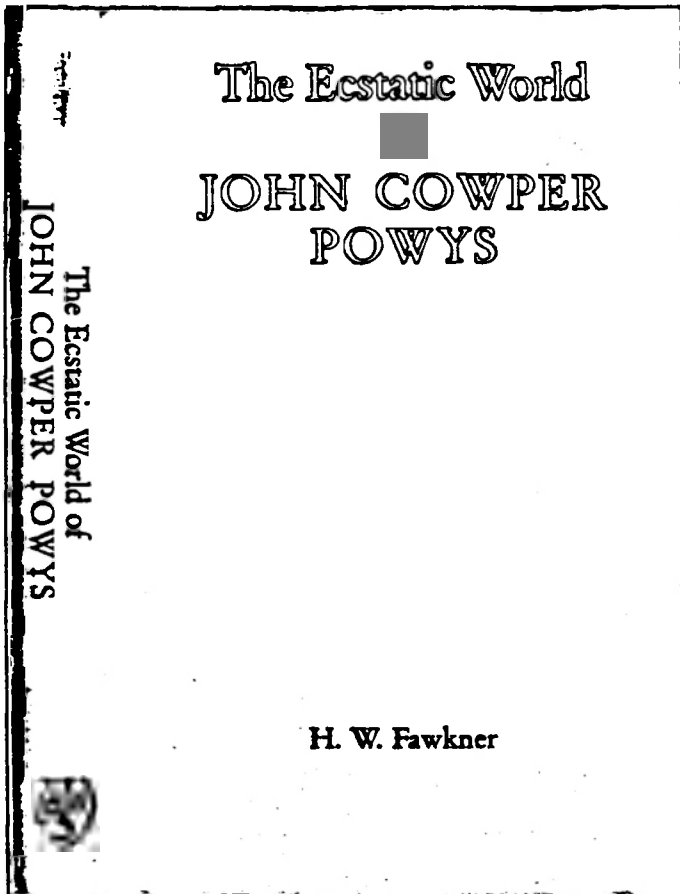


Powys Notes

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In this issue of POWYS NOTES we are pleased to offer a number of "firsts" for our humble but growing publication: W. J. KEITH's essay, "John Cowper Powys and the Regional Tradition," is the first conference paper that we have endeavored to present in its entirety, while on page 11 ANTHONY LOW provides our first ever review of a major study of Powys, H. W. Fawcner's The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys. Also in this issue, readers will find abstracts of additional papers given at the Toronto conference in June, together with publishing and membership news of various kinds.

As always, your comments are invited on any of these items.

W. J. KEITH:

JOHN COWPER POWYS AND THE REGIONAL TRADITION

When as literary critics we examine the novels of John Cowper Powys, we generally think of them either in relation to each other or in terms of the accepted history of English fiction over the past century. In either case, they appear as out of the ordinary, off-beat, singular to the point of idiosyncrasy--and so, of course, they are. But no literary work is completely sui generis, and I suggest that Powys's novels become a little less eccentric and more compatible with literary history if we consider them in relation to the tradition of regional fiction that was at its peak during his early years as a writer.

In very general terms, a regional novel may be defined as a fictional work in which a specific and identifiable setting becomes at least as important as most of the characters and exerts a palpable influence upon the action. Literary regionalism initially arose out of the popularity of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley series, which emphasized the associations of place and

combined a Romantic interest in picturesque natural landscapes with an equally intense fascination for the supposed glamor of the past. For various reasons of which improved communications and the consequent opening up of remote areas of the country to what we now call tourism are perhaps the most important, the differences between regions became a fruitful subject for novelists. Much of the regional fiction that followed was of poor quality and ephemeral, but among the local and regional work that became a part of our permanent literature were novels by the Brontes, especially Wuthering Heights and Shirley, some parts of the fiction of Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot, Lorna Doone (along with numerous other now forgotten romances by R. D. Blackmore), and of course the novels of Thomas Hardy that represent in many respects the high point of the movement. This brings us up to Powys's own time, and Hardy's example inspired a number of lesser writers whose names are still known but who are now comparatively little read. These include Eden Phillpotts, whose extended Dartmoor series appeared between 1898 and 1923; Sheila Kaye-Smith, who began publishing novels set in the Weald of Kent and Sussex in 1908; Constance Holme, whose remarkably perceptive books about estate-management and rural tradition in Westmoreland began appearing in 1913; Mary Webb, who had been publishing for over a decade before the sensational popularity of Precious Bane (1924); and, of course, D. H. Lawrence. The White Peacock (1911) was highly influenced by traditional regionalism, and traces of the same tradition may be found readily enough throughout his work, especially in the major novels such as Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, and Women in Love.

I am not suggesting that Powys was familiar with all these works, nor that he would have placed these writers in any well-defined and related sequence, but he would certainly have been aware of much of their fiction. There is little doubt, I think, that he was influenced by their preoccupation with the relationship between individual lives and--to employ one of Lawrence's phrases--the "circumambient universe" in which they found themselves. Indeed, in my view it was Lawrence and Powys who, alone of the British novelists after Hardy, were able to transcend this tradition (which was then past its prime), to draw upon regionalist strengths in order to write novels that advanced far beyond regionalism itself.

Powys's regional consciousness developed early. While he was at school at Sherborne, he records in his Autobiography, he "began to grow conscious of a more definite response to different kinds of natural scenery"; this was encouraged by his father, who urged his sons "to note every undulation, every upland, every spinney, every ridge, every fen and the effect produced upon all these by every variety of season or weather."¹ We can recognize here the origins of the atmospheric particularity that is so important an ingredient in the landscape-descriptions in his novels, but it was not until he left Cambridge in 1894 that a full sense of regional differences was dramatically brought home to him. At that time he applied to a teaching agency and was assigned a position in a girls' school in West Brighton. Powys took the next train and, as he looked out of the carriage-window, was amazed by the subtle contrasts between the Sussex countryside and that of the Dorset-Somerset border that he knew so well:

Sussex scenery . . . was certainly different from any scenery I had ever seen. Those huge Sussex barns whose vast sloping roofs were encrusted with orange-coloured lichen that was as strange to me as were the 'orange-tipped' butterflies I saw on the railroad banks, in place of our Dorset 'marble whites,' those mellow Sussex cottages where old dark woodwork was cunningly mixed in with brickwork and flintwork, those Sussex bricks themselves that . . . gave a look to the whole scene so much warmer and sunnier than the Dorset thatch or

the Somerset stone, those enormous Sussex wagons, painted blue and scarlet, and of a size so large that they would have astonished a Somerset farmer, the trim, neat, picturesque Sussex villages themselves, where it all seemed as though everyone was so much more well-to-do than in the West Country, all these things struck me, sank into me, and abode with me.²

This is, I suggest, a central text for an understanding of literary regionalism. Not only does it isolate the details of architecture, building materials, the color and design of farm wagons--details themselves dependent on the more fundamental differences of geology and climate--but it conveniently demonstrates the extent to which generalized rural backgrounds (the kind of descriptions we find in George Eliot, for example) differ from the minute particularities noticed and lovingly reproduced by the committed regionalist. Powys lived in Sussex for a time after his marriage and used this newly-discovered landscape in After My Fashion, just as he used the East-Anglian background with which he was familiar in Rodmoor and the opening chapter of A Glastonbury Romance, but the importance of this period of Powys's life for his later work derives from the fact that it impressed upon him the unique qualities of his own landscape, of Montacute and its environs.

There is some uncertainty about the precise time at which Powys became aware of Hardy and his work. In a letter he wrote to Glen Cavaliero as an old man, he referred to "my passionate devotion to Hardy who taught me everything as a boy."³ In the Autobiography, however, he asserts that he had not even heard of Hardy until he left Cambridge.⁴ Personally, I find it difficult to believe that he could have grown up in Dorset and Somerset in the 1880s within a highly literate and intellectually curious family without hearing the name of the best-known west-country author, but that is a problem I will leave to the biographers. What is interesting and indisputable is that, when he wrote the Autobiography, he associated his first acquaintance with Hardy with the period in which regional differences had so impressed him. Thus he recounts how he bought his first Hardy book, Far From the Madding Crowd, at Hove. This discovery led to a (bad) poem in praise of Hardy included in his first volume, Odes and Other Poems (1896), which in turn led to his sending a copy to Hardy and receiving an invitation to Max Gate.

Years later Powys acknowledged himself as "a hero-worshipper of old Hardy,"⁵ a statement borne out by his account of how, on the day Hardy was reciprocating that visit, he announced to his family that "the greatest writer then living on this earth" was coming to visit them.⁶ And it is further borne out, of course, by the way in which Hardy is continually being recalled, either through indirect or specific allusion, in Powys's fiction. Above all else, Hardy gave him a landscape. The west country is always "Wessex" to Powys because he sees it through Hardy's eyes. Yet when, in his essay on Hardy in Visions and Revisions (1915), he writes that Hardy is identified "with that portion of England where the various race-deposits in our national "strata" are most clear and defined,"⁷ we can see that he is also capable of seeing Hardy's Wessex through his own eyes.

This process can be seen evolving in Powys's first novel, Wood and Stone (also 1915), which is fulsomely dedicated "to the greatest poet and novelist of our age THOMAS HARDY," and is clearly conceived within the established conventions of regional fiction. The introductory chapter, like The Return of the Native, focuses exclusively on the locality in which the action is to take place, and its two most significant features, the natural landmark of Leo's Hill and the human community of Nevilton, are

singled out for detailed attention. Particular stress is laid on geological and historical determinants, Leo's Hill (in reality Ham Hill) is the source of local and more than local building stone, while Nevilton (Powys's own Montacute) has important antiquarian links with the past of religion and legend. Considered in the context of Hardy's Wessex series, they closely resemble the two focal points of Hardy's regional world, the natural Egdon and the human Casterbridge. But Powys differs from Hardy and most other regionalists in emphasizing what he calls the "spiritual influence" of place. Leo's Hill is "the impious heathen fortress" while Nevilton, where a fragment of the Holy Rood is said to have been discovered, is "the consecrated repository of Christian tradition." Powys recognizes "a strange supernatural conflict" between them.⁸ The basic polarities are those intimated in the title, the qualities of stone and wood, and these are soon developed into representative symbols of a vast occult struggle between materialism and mystery which looks forward to the much subtler presentation of the same idea in A Glastonbury Romance.

But the main difference between Powys and his immediate predecessors in regional fiction is to be found in the extraordinary characters that he introduces against this background. Here his predilection for "romance" and imaginative fantasy holds full sway. Hardy's major work was at one and the same time concerned with universal problems and local, rural trends; Tess, for example, contributes to debates on "the woman question" and "the ache of modernism" but is also a Wessex dairy-maid, affected by the moral, economic, and historical movements of the west country. And Eden Phillpotts's characters are humble, often inarticulate people encountering the standard human temptations and dilemmas in their own way, playing out their lives within the context of isolated traditional communities. But Powys's characters are fantastics--obsessed materialists, hermit philosophers, eccentric poets--presented as chessboard figures in a cosmic, binary game. The background is often vividly evoked, but the connections between human beings and their environment exists for the most part on the level of intellect and emblem. He has not yet solved the problem (which he clearly recognizes as a problem) of how to present the all-important relation between human individuals and their local world.

Powys works on this problem in his subsequent novels. In Rodmoor (1916), for example, we note how Brand Renshaw is almost selfconsciously connected with his background: "His ancestors had lived so long in this place that there had come to exist between the man's inmost being and the voracious tides that year by year devoured the land he owned, an obstinate reciprocity of mood and feeling."⁹ In After My Fashion the leading character, Richard Storm, attempts unsuccessfully to gain "some foothold in his native land," while the artist Robert Canyon tries to catch in his painting "a spirit of the spot, carrying the mind down a long vista of obscure memories, gathering itself. . . into a kind of eternal vision."¹⁰

This same development is visible in the series of novels that begins with Ducdame (1923), in which Powys roots his own spirit of place in a west country conterminous with Hardy's Wessex. Wolf Solent (1929) is generally considered the most conventional and accessible of Powys's novels, and in some respects it is his most characteristic regional novel. As early as Visions and Revisions he had praised Dostoevsky for having less than any writer he knew "that tendency to 'describe scenery,' which is so tedious an aspect of most modern work."¹¹ His own practice generally stressed "aura" and "atmosphere" rather than description, but there are a remarkable number of conventional regional descriptions in Wolf Solent. He follows Hardy, and Lawrence, in giving disguised names to the central places in his novel (Ramsgard/Sherborne, Blacksod/Yeovil) but real ones to natural features and locations outside the immediate vicinity of the action (the Stour river, Weymouth,

Salisbury). At the same time, Wolf establishes a rapport with the landscape and has isolated what he calls its "autochthonous essence," can recognize "the actual smell of Somersetshire, as distinct from the smell of Dorsetshire"¹² and by the close of the book Powys himself has established what we might call an alternative Wessex to Hardy's, an olfactory region of Proust-like memories and essentially Powysian juxtapositions.

From A Glastonbury Romance (1932) onwards, Powys sets his eccentric characters against even more meticulously authentic backgrounds. It is not only possible but desirable, if the full effect of his obsession with topography is to be appreciated, to follow the movement of the characters in Glastonbury, Weymouth Sands, and Maiden Castle on streetmaps of Glastonbury, Weymouth, and Dorchester. Powys seems to have been influenced in this regard by his reading of Balzac (though it had become the practice of English regionalists including Phillpotts and Kaye-Smith) since he refers in the essay in Suspended Judgements (1916) to "that admirable Balzacian tradition of mentioning the Paris streets and localities by their historic names and of giving circumstantial colour and body to his inventions by thus placing them in a milieu which one can traverse any hour of the day, recalling the imaginary scenes as if they were not imaginary."¹³ The practice landed him in a libel case after the publication of Glastonbury and led to the topographical bowdlerizing of Weymouth Sands into Jobber Skald, but it represents a climax of the regionalist ideal.

But the mature Powys is preoccupied with psychic rather than merely local atmosphere. A casual reference to "the old heathen aura of the Isle of Slings"¹⁴ in Weymouth Sands is typical. A passage from Glastonbury develops the idea to a greater pitch of subtlety: "Everyone who came to this spot drew 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."¹⁵ Powys's transcending of the normal boundaries of literary regionalism will now be clear. In one sense there can be nothing more regional than Glastonbury, since the book recounts a sequence of events that, by definition, could only have occurred in that unique spot on the earth's surface. But he must also go beyond all regional limitations, extending his vision in both space and time. Spatially, this occurs in the famous (or notorious) opening to Glastonbury where we are poised between, on the one hand, Brandon railway station and on the other "the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems."¹⁶ Powys believes, and exploits the idea in his fiction, that a powerful human emotion or gesture can create, in the words of The Brazen Head, "a psychic stir in the whole surrounding atmosphere of any particular spot."¹⁷ This opens up Powys's subject-matter to encompass the whole of the apprehensible universe, but the "particular spot" none the less retains an unassailable importance.

Temporally, in the novels succeeding Maiden Castle, Powys thinks back to earlier periods in English and Welsh history, and in Maiden Castle itself, where Uryen displays a mystic connection with the earthwork that associates him with a past occult tradition, he is more interested in the environs of Dorchester as "a region charged with so many layers of suggestive antiquity" than in its Hardiesque associations, though these are exploited whimsically on the level of plot. Maiden Castle itself exists as an enchanted realm, a place, in Uryen's words, of "mists and mirages and vapours,"¹⁸ all contributing to an atmosphere Powys will evoke in his Welsh novels. Indeed, while the writing of Maiden Castle was still in progress, Powys moved to Corwen in North Wales, which he describes as "the very heart of the Owen Glendower country."¹⁹ It was therefore natural at this time that his thoughts should turn to his Welsh origins, and from Hardy as novelist to Scott as regional romancer, since he became fascinated by the Scott-like possibilities for romance inherent in

the story of the Welsh revolt against Henry IV. But now topographical accuracy is far less important than a kind of atmospheric mysticism. The locales tend to exist on two levels--Hardy's phrase, "partly real, partly dream-country," from the preface to Far From the Madding Crowd being especially applicable here. Thus for Rhisiart ab Owen in the opening chapter of Owen Glendower, there is a "real" and an "ideal" Dinas Bran, the latter described as "that mystic terminus of every vista of his imagination." The point is made even more forcibly a little later: "Its foundations were sunk in the earth, but they were sunk in more than the earth, they were sunk in the mysterious underworld of beyond reality whence rise the eternal archetypes of all the refuges and sanctuaries of the spirit, untouched by time, inviolable ramparts, not built by hand."²⁰ Similarly, the character of Glendower fascinates Powys, in part because of his loyalty to the "ideal" rather than to the "real" Wales.

Two minor characters in Owen Glendower are Dorset soldiers with the names of Tom Hardy and Jimmy Trenchard (Powys's habitual mistake for Henchard); this suggests that the Powysian Wales is not wholly separated from Hardy's Wessex. But for the most part all is "enchantment," and this process is carried even further in Porius, set in Corwen in the last year of the fifth century A.D., where the most memorable scenes, the underworld refuge of the last of the Druids, and the mountain fastness from which the Giants descend, belong firmly to the imagination of romance rather than to the topography of reality. With Porius, indeed, Powys exploited the sense of a region only to overwhelm it. The novel can be read on two levels--as an almost shameless retreat into a world of "what might have been" or a sophisticated allegory of the modern pluralistic universe.

In regional terms, the circumscribed area that acts as microcosm appears yet again, albeit in an unusual form. If this book shatters the more traditional form of regionalism, it also depends upon it. It can hardly be a coincidence, however, that Powys's last writings, which abandon any regional specificity that readers can identify with, lose the immediacy that is so important an ingredient in his best work. Atlantis (1954) goes back to Homer's Ithaca, but it is a land to which neither Powys nor his readers can respond except through the literary imagination. More significantly, The Brazen Head (1956) returns to thirteenth-century Britain but its failure to emulate its predecessors is explained in large measure by its lack of regional connection. While it opens at an "ancient circle of Druidic stones,"²¹ the setting is never rooted within a recognizable topography. It remains a fabricated stage-set against which events take place; it cannot be identified, discovered on a map, visited. The result is a detachment very different from the imaginative remoteness that is so invigorating in Owen Glendower and Porius.

Powys is a figure of great literary proportions who, like Lawrence, could never be confined within the boundaries, literal or metaphorical, implied by the phrase "regional fiction." But, also like Lawrence, he needed a specific countryside to stimulate his best work. Moreover, it was necessary that this countryside or region reflected either his early memories or those of the childhood of the race. Late in life, he looked back with loving nostalgia to "the particular lanes, ponds, orchards, water-mills, gates, ditches, rivers, hills, woods round about the villages of Montacute, Tintinhull, Stoke, Norton, Martock, Ilchester, Thorn, Brympton, Odcombe, Coker, Batemoor, and Ham Hill."²² This is the area that might be termed "the Powys countryside." But he wrote these words in Corwen, and found there his second countryside, with its deeply embedded sense of his (possibly adopted) country's history. "Not a field," he wrote, "not a river-bank, but there emanate from it, wavering, fluctuating, ebbing and flowing like mountain-rain, legends and rumours of an unbelievably remote Past."²³ In one or other of these two regions of both reality and romance he produced an idiosyncratic but brilliant body of literature that is, in his own words, "deeply local, and yet as wide as the world."²⁴

NOTES

1. John Cowper Powys, Autobiography [1934] (Hamilton, N.Y.: Colgate U. P., 1968), p. 151.
2. Ibid., p. 208.
3. Glen Cavaliero, "Recollections of John Cowper Powys," in Belinda Humfrey, ed., Recollections of the Powys Brothers (London: Peter Owen, 1980), p. 253.
4. See Autobiography, p. 181.
5. Letters from John Cowper Powys to C. Benson Roberts (London: Village Press, 1975), p. 15.
6. Autobiography, p. 229.
7. Visions and Revisions [1915] (London: Macdonald, 1955), p. 161.
8. Wood and Stone [1915] (London: Village Press, 1974), pp. 1-2.
9. Rodmoor [1916] (London: Macdonald, 1973), p. 73.
10. After My Fashion (London: Pan Books, 1980), pp. 11, 124.
11. Visions and Revisions, p. 191.
12. Wolf Solent [1929] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 188, 290.
13. Suspended Judgements [1916] (London: Village Press, 1975), p. 128.
14. Weymouth Sands [1934] (Hamilton, N.Y.; Colgate U. P., 1963), p. 252.
15. A Glastonbury Romance (Toronto: Saunders, 1933), p. 112.
16. Ibid., p. 1.
17. The Brazen Head (London: Macdonald, 1956), p. 33.
18. Maiden Castle [1937] (London: Macdonald, 1966), pp. 19, 250.
19. Obstinate Cymric [1947] (London: Village Press, 1973), p. 81.
20. Owen Glendower (London: Bodley Head, 1941), pp. 9, 12.
21. The Brazen Head, p. 9.
22. Rabelais (London: Bodley Head, 1948), pp. 96-7.
23. Obstinate Cymric, p. 79.
24. Rabelais, p. 294.

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Further Presentations at the Powys Society of North America SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE held at Glendon College, York University, Toronto, June 6 to 8, 1986, Richard Handscombe, Convenor.

JOHN A. BREBNER, St. Thomas University, "Opening Remarks."

"My impression is that a trend has existed over the past few years which attempts to "de-mystify" and normalize" J.C. Powys and his work. (Moline Krissdottir's book, John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest is an exception). As evidence of this, we've seen much emphasis placed on Wolf Solent, Weymouth Sands, A Glastonbury Romance and, to some extent, Maiden Castle to the exclusion of novels like Rodmoor and especially the late fictions.

And, in certain ways, the normalizing tendency has had its good points because the Powys name was long associated only with the odd, recondite, and sometimes ridiculous. Louis Wilkinson's splenetic (mischievous?) novel, The Buffoon, may have set the ball rolling on this course. Nor did JCP's own self-deprecating and numerous references to himself as clown and zany do much to rectify the picture. Even G. R. Wilson Knight, whose monumental contribution to Powysian studies I am the first to acknowledge and respect, placed his

subject outside the pale, as it were, by insisting on spiritualism, the occult, the masturbation message and so forth as central to the Powys oeuvre. For some of us, the appearance at the Centenary Conference in Cambridge of the Chief Druid of Britain may have been the icing on the cake.

So, the pendulum swung. To-day we see Powys examined according to the principles of postmodern criticism, in reference to other and quite different writers, in historical contexts, et cetera. And this is fine. . .but we are in danger of losing something very important. We may clip the eagle's wings to study its form: unfortunately, we will also deprive it of flight.

I would like to exhort, to challenge the delegates to this Conference to confront again the oddities, the eccentricities, the "otherness" in the work of John Cowper Powys as essential to his unique position as writer and thinker. We need to look at those "embarrassing" aspects of The Brazen Head, Atlantis, and The Inmates to fully appreciate the scope of Powys's vision. Strains, for example, of anarchism and nihilism run in shifting and anguished perception from his earliest novels to those posthumously published stories. If we fail to accept Powys's multiverse with its simultaneous sanity and perversity, we do him huge disservice. In fact, we will damn JCP to mediocrity and elicit the sort of response which led Vernon Young to entitle as "The Immense Inane" his recent review of Wolf Solent and Weymouth Sands by a man he called "Poice"--"it is Welsh and pronounced to rhyme with voice."

John Cowper's personality, ideas, and style are complex, individual; perplexing and illuminating. He wrote largely: we must read openly."

[These challenging remarks prefaced Brebner's paper, "Wolf Solent and Black List, Section H: An Enlightenment," the full text of which will appear in the next issue of POWYS NOTES].

RICHARD MAXWELL, Valparaiso University, "The Lie of the Land, or, Plot and Autochthony in John Cowper Powys."

Abstract: There is a certain kind of Powysian narrative where events emerge from place and issue in peace--as though it were possible to live in an eternally-serene moment, a moment which somehow included narrative unpredictability and suspense while keeping it under control. Powys thus finds a way to remain at rest within an exciting world. The paper gives one typical example of this arrangement, from A Glastonbury Romance, then turns to several cases where the system breaks down. The dominance exerted by the spirit of the place, the genius loci, can be challenged by "autochthonous aboriginals": monstrous creatures who have sprung from the soil and can thus combat the genius on its own terms. A plot that includes autochthons disrupts the chance of forgetfulness and escape. The act of disruption turns out to be one of the novelist's most fruitful subjects, allowing him and his characters a passage back to the mainstream (or perhaps the nightmare) of history. This is especially clear in A Glastonbury Romance and Porius, the books where a revolt of autochthons establishes the independence of plot from place. [RM]

J. LAWRENCE MITCHELL, University of Minnesota, "The Education of T.F.Powys."

Abstract: To date very little information has emerged about the education of T. F. Powys. Louis Wilkinson has contributed a few anecdotal recollections of Theodore from their Aldeburgh days, John's Autobiography contains some tanta-

lising glimpses of his younger brother at Sherborne Prep. (or, rather, out of it), and biographers of the family have done the best they could with the scraps available. By any conventional standards, of course, TFP's education must be judged a failure; and for him it must also have been something of an embarrassment.

I attempt a detailed reconstruction of TFP's education on the basis of my examination of all the evidence, published and--far more important--unpublished. My paper derives its authority from scrutiny of manuscript material in the collection of E.E.Bissell, the TFP letters to Louis Wilkinson at Colgate, and the manuscripts and letters at the HRC, University of Texas. With the help of these documents, it is possible to correct the chronological errors and mistaken assumptions which have been made. Moreover, I present the actual record of Theodore from the archives of his Aldeburgh school (Eaton House).

Among the points I make are the following (in summary): Theodore did attend Dorchester Grammar School, but not at so tender an age (eight) as Graves suggests (drawing from statements by Francis), and not while the family was living in Dorchester, as one might reasonably have expected. He certainly never sat in the same desk that Hardy once occupied, because Hardy never attended the school! Nor, therefore, did he carve his initials underneath Hardy's. [Such cumulative stories are part of the mythologising of TFP; or his fictionalising. Remember most of his friends were writers.] There were periods of ill-health, sometimes physical, sometimes mental, when TFP did not attend school at all. But he did not even begin school until he was ten. In between, he was taught by the family governess (Frances Beales) taking lessons along with Gertrude for at least one period, and thereby cementing their friendship. Theodore's mother was certainly acquainted with Mrs. Wilkinson, wife of the headmaster of Eaton House, but it is misleading to describe them as "friends in girlhood" (as LW does) since they were far apart in age and probably never met until after Mrs. W. was married. Although Eaton House was a Prep. School, TFP would not have been unusually old to have been there. Contemporary photos of the boys show some sporting moustaches. The regulation by age in Prep. schools was not that strict in the nineteenth century. TFP did thrive at the school, and at different times won first prizes for English History and Scripture History. However, Louis (who was only eight to his fourteen) excelled. He began two classes behind, spent one term in the same class (or form) as TFP, and moved up. There were a number of other Wilkinson relatives (cousins) in the school, and TFP became friendly with them. Of particular importance is the McDougall family, since it was from their father, Arthur, that TFP first learned farming. Mrs. Wilkinson obviously served as a mother figure for TFP, and may have had much to do with his contentment at Eaton House. In later letters to LW, TFP always remembers her with affection and gratitude. I have identified one of TFP's copy-books which survives in Bissell's collection. It includes poems by Macaulay, Longfellow, and Kipling. TFP's dormitory room was emblazoned with a series of morally uplifting biblical injunctions, which seem curiously apt for the writer he became. His sense of failure as a scholar had much to do with his decision to take up farming, and with the special, lonely, path he chose to tread. [JLM]

MARGARET WOOLF, University of Winnipeg, "The Autobiography: John Cowper Powys as his Most Endearing Fictional Character."

This paper discusses Powys's Autobiography in the light, specifically, of the Letters to his Brother Llewelyn. Powys's work is unusual even within a form as flexible as autobiography, for it deliberately omits information which

conventional autobiographies emphasize. Powys rarely mentions his writing, for example, and for a history of Powys the writer, his aims and his achievements, we must look elsewhere. Moreover, in a striking reversal of the usual process, Powys presents himself in the Autobiography as an irresponsible charlatan, and wildly exaggerates his deficiencies and peccadillos. Yet his correspondence, particularly LBL, clearly reveals that "sense of goodness" which so impressed the young Malcolm Elwin. In contrast to Powys's writing, it is usually posthumously published letters and diaries which first reveal unpleasant truths about public figures. Thus, we are shocked when we learn that Virginia Woolf was a snob and Karl Marx an anti-semiter.

One can only speculate as to the reasons for John's self-disparagement in the Autobiography; but I am not prepared to accept Louis Wilkinson's suggestions of masochism as the only, or even the most important, reason. There are other, perhaps more cogent, reasons for the discrepancies between the writer of the Autobiography and the Powys we know from other sources, particularly the man revealed in the letters he wrote to Llewelyn, with whom he had a special intimacy. For example, a major problem for the autobiographer is that the truth of the past he records has changed, distorted by memory, into fiction. When, as here, we have contemporary evidence such as LBL, which we will, for the sake of this discussion, call "fact," it will undoubtedly differ in many respects from the "fictional" product of the author's memory. But, as Powys proposed to write a "story" about the "struggle of a soul," rather than a record of achievement, and believed that "Interest, drama, meaning, purpose are qualities given to events by the individual mind" (Auto., p.4), he turned the potential dangers of the form to advantage.

The John of the Autobiography is sadistic, lecherous, selfish, malicious and irresponsible—a caricature sinner. This "master trick" of caricature in fact, provokes the reader's disbelief in the sinner, and instead enlists his sympathy for the delightful eccentric. The LBL reassure us that our sympathy was not misplaced. Here we see John as son, brother, father, husband, lover, friend. In most of these relationships his behaviour is exemplary. His love and concern for France Gregg Wilkinson is as authentic as his later, enduring, love for Phyllis Playter. His complete lack of malice towards Louis Wilkinson, who had lampooned him in The Buffoon, is only one example of his loyalty and generosity to friends. His strong family attachments and his concern for his wife and son belie the irresponsible, insincere clown depicted in the Autobiography. The LBL show that it was John's sense of responsibility which drove him on his gruelling lecture tours, and which kept him in America at times when he yearned for England; but there is no suggestion in the Autobiography of the dreadful toll on his physical health and creative energy these tours exacted. Then, too, the vices and perversions hinted at in the Autobiography, prove in LBL to be nothing worse than an immature attitude to sex, associated, as John admits, with impotence.

The reader expects, reasonably enough, that LBL will provide the information excluded from the Autobiography about the women in John's life. But, although we learn the identity of the "boy-girl," we learn little more of the author's mother or of his wife. Oddly, we do learn a great deal more about the father who also dominates the Autobiography.

Those who hope to find in LBL hard facts with which to fill in the gaps in the Autobiography will be disappointed. For, just as the Autobiography was a chronicle of a man's inner life, it is just this inner life which is most illuminated by the Letters. They provide a running commentary on that "struggle of a soul...with the obstacles that hinder its living growth" which is delineated in the Autobiography.

In addition to the works already cited, this paper draws on personal communications from and conversations with Lucy Penny and Mary and Gerard Casey.

[MW]

The following papers were also read at the Toronto conference:

BEN JONES, Carleton University, "The Look of the Other in John Cowper Powys's Wolf Solent."

PETER GLENN CHRISTENSEN, "The 'Dark Gods' and Modern Society: Maiden Castle and The Plumed Serpent."

A. THOMAS SOUTHWICK, "'The People We Have Been': Childhood in Powys's Autobiography."

ANTHONY LOW:

DIGGING AT THE ROOTS

A Review of H. W. Fawcner, The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys.

Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986. 257 pp. \$32.50.

Because H. W. Fawcner seems determined that his Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys should be more than just another piece of literary criticism, his is a peculiarly difficult book to sum up. Fawcner is convinced (and I'm inclined to agree with him) that something went wrong with western thinking and basic philosophical methodology at some point in the early modern period. Descartes, if not the sole villain, is at least representative of the difficulties and complications that have arisen since. Although, until recently, literary criticism has not typically thought it necessary to begin at the beginning--to define, as it were, the nature of the universe before proceeding to discuss writings about that universe, nevertheless all criticism must stand on basic axioms, at least surreptitiously or unconsciously. A few critics--Owen Barfield or Jacques Derrida, to name two disparate voices--have dug at the roots; but most of us prefer to leave such matters in abeyance.

Criticism of John Cowper Powys may, however, be a special case. Not only is he a philosophical novelist (in the best sense of that slippery term), whose manner invites his critics to philosophize too; he also represents what may be the most perplexing anomaly in modern English criticism. A truly major writer in a period that is largely characterized by minor talents, he still has no place in the canon, in the generally accepted "tradition" or stream of influence, or in what has usually been thought the central literary and artistic movement of his time, "modernism." If Powys is right as a novelist--as I think any sensitive reader of his works must agree--then not only the literary establishment but many of the implicit philosophical axioms on which its judgments are based are wrong. In other words, in order to see Powys rightly, it may be necessary for critics, even society as a whole, to see the world differently. Fawcner's revisionism is not quite so bald or so brief as I have put the matter here; yet he explicitly raises some of these issues, and I do not believe I have misrepresented his implicit message.

So it is hard to know what readers will make of his book. Its chief weakness, if it is one, is that Fawcner does not attempt to "read" any of the novels through. His interest is rather in what he considers to be Powys's underlying principles. The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys is organized by topics, and each topic is illustrated by extracts taken variously and often very briefly from the novels and the nonfictional writings. So the reader is obliged to discover for him- or herself whether Fawcner's theories will make a difference to future readings of, say, Wolf Solent or A Glastonbury Romance. This restraint is not necessarily bad. One of the critic's major tasks is to open doors and to change perceptions, and at that Fawcner succeeds brilliantly.

In my opinion, he is wrong to slight Porius (which he considers inferior to its predecessors), and somewhat unfair also to Weymouth Sands (which, without explanatory comment, he nearly ignores); yet, as I read his book, I find myself constantly remarking how well his ideas illuminate both novels in spite of this silence: so the essential work is done.

As his title indicates, Fawcner believes that ecstatic experience and ecstatic perception of the world are central to Powys's novels. There is, however, small room for ecstasy in traditional western thinking or in the Freudian psychology that dominates our literary criticism. Therefore Fawcner suggests that certain other philosophical and psychological approaches may be more appropriate to Powys—and perhaps also truer to what we have recently learned about ourselves and therefore more genuinely "modern." First, Fawcner distinguishes between the terms "ego" and "self." Briefly, Fawcner's "ego" is "I" in its worst aspects--selfish, possessive, and destructive; and his "self" is "I" at its best--as the creative center and source of deep communion with the outer world and with other selves. Although Powys never developed a clear vocabulary using these (or other) particular words, Fawcner demonstrates convincingly that they are remarkably apposite terms to describe what his novels and philosophical writings are really about.

Second, Fawcner suggests that the best way of thinking about the human mind in Powys's world is not in terms of Freudian consciousness and unconsciousness, as we are generally accustomed to do, but in terms of "left brain" and "right brain," or of "logical consciousness" and "altered consciousness." The left brain governs what are usually thought of as our ordinary mental processes: day-to-day decision-making, conduct of business, "getting and spending," in Wordsworth's phrase. The right brain is the province of intuition, daydream, and ecstasy. As, by definition, in Freudian psychology the conscious mind can never see into the unconscious, so in this alternative psychology the left brain never can see or understand the right brain, and the right brain is equally cut off from the left. A kind of "fall line" interposes between the two halves of the brain and the two different modes of thinking. Human life, Fawcner suggests, is lived as a series of swerves from one side of this fall line to the other. When we are on one side of it, the other is invisible to us. Once more, Fawcner's terms, which he borrows from recent speculative psychology and (with creative misprision) from skiing, are not Powys's; yet once more they fit remarkably well the theories toward which Powys seems to grope in his philosophical works and (more important) what is going on in his major novels.

Powys, we might add, is hardly alone in addressing the intuitive and ecstatic. Milton spoke of writing his poetry with his right hand and his prose with his left, nor can he or Wordsworth be better than half understood by those who refrain from applying their "right brains" to the task. Yet it may be that Powys neglects, like a good burglar (to borrow Eliot's suggestive analogy) to throw enough meat to the reader's watchdog critical faculties in order to satisfy them while his novels do their real work at a deeper level. If so, this is not a difficulty peculiar to Powys. To cite a similar case, I have known many well-educated, intelligent readers who, to their great loss, never could get below the surface awkwardness of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." Indeed, as Fawcner might argue--or at least as I will argue for him--Powys is so preoccupied with ecstasy and its importance to our individual mental health and to the well-being of society as a whole that such technical prestidigitation and deliberate literary sugar-coating, to which the politic Eliot ironically confesses, become illegitimate for him. For it is one of Powys's perhaps impossible ambitions to bring the unknowable and the ungraspable into some degree of consciousness, and thus to change the reader's

individual life and the quality of the society in which he participates.

Fawkner takes these ideas further. "Self" is connected with intuition, "ego" with pedestrian logic. Although the self never can understand the ego or the ego the self except indirectly, it may be possible for one to learn how, from the vantage of one "swerve" of daydreaming or altered consciousness, to recall another, and thus to recapture and merge many moments of peak experience or ecstasy. But Fawkner's whole argument is far too complex to sum up in a review; it should be read and judged as a whole.

The nature and meaning of Powys's novels are, in all likelihood, intimately bound up with their problematic critical status. Fawkner puts the difficulty clearly:

Through its peculiarly ecstatic-poetic impact, the Powys world forces us to consider and reconsider the validity of the whole theory of the novel as it is today actualized in the standard mode of interpretative awareness. This Powys world also asks more profound questions, affecting the ideas of academic respectability mentioned above. How is the sober, essentially non-ecstatic world of professional scholarship to come to terms with the ecstatic world of the hallucinatory vision? Is the scholar to descend from that prolonged hypnotic trance in which literature is felt as a total experience? Is the critic to remove and alienate himself from the first ecstatic reading, so that with repeated readings the vision cools, evaporates? Or is in fact the ecstatic to be seen as an integral part of the literary experience and therefore as an integral aspect of the theory of criticism, of the act of criticism? A commonsensical view of the commonsensical makes sense, but a commonsensical view of the ecstatic does not make sense at all. This is the dilemma. How to avoid a trivialization of John Cowper Powys. (p.34)

Of course, we recognize in these questions some central and recurring dilemmas of twentieth-century criticism. These are the very questions we and our students often ask--and ought to ask; though it may be that we have learned too well to repress them. In his major novels Powys lends these familiar questions renewed force and pertinence, and in The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys Fawkner goes far to suggest why that should be so. Some readers may find this a difficult book; others may find its methods upsetting. But anyone who admires Powys or is bemused by the present state of literature and of criticism should find much to learn from it.

ANTHONY LOW is Professor of English at New York University. He is the author of a number of seventeenth-century studies. His most recent work is The Georgic Revolution (Princeton, 1985).

1987 CONFERENCE

The Executive Committee is pleased to announce that the 1987 Conference of the PSNA will take place on the weekend of June 5 to June 7, at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, under the direction of A. Thomas Southwick. A preliminary announcement is being mailed to all members.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Essential Reading: CHARLES LOCK's excellent essay, "Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and A Glastonbury Romance," University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Spring, 1986), pp. 261-281. Much expanded version of the author's presentation to the PSNA Inaugural Conference.

On a related note, JEFFREY KWINTNER, the well-known publisher of JCP, seeks to encourage exploration of Powys's work in the light of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. Interested parties can write to Mr. Kwintner at 12 Venetian House, Warrington Crescent, Little Venice, London, W9 1EJ.

REPRINTS. Excerpt from Guide to Reprints: An International Bibliography of Scholarly Reprints (Kent, CT, 1986), p. 708:

- Powys, Albert R. From the Ground Up. AN/15.00
 Powys, John C. Suspended Judgements. FOL/35.00
 _____ . Dostoevsky. HA/32.95
 _____ . The Meaning of Culture. GNP/24.75.
 _____ . Morwyn. AN/24.50.
 _____ . Visions and Revisions. CC/23.75.
 Powys, Littleton C. Powys Family. HA/22.95.
 Powys, Llewelyn. Baker's Dozen. AN/17.00.
 _____ . Earth Memories. AN/19.00
 _____ . Ebony and Ivory. AN/14.50.
 _____ . The Pathetic Fallacy: A Study of Christianity. FOL/17.50.
 _____ . Rats in the Sacristy. AN/17.00.
 _____ . Thirteen Worthies. AN/15.00.
 Powys, Marion. Lace and Lace Making. GR/48.00.
 Powys, T.F. Two Thieves. . . AN/18.00.

LEGEND: AN = Ayer Publishing C., 99 Main St., Salem, NH. 03079

HA = Haskell Booksellers Co., Box FF, Brooklyn, NY 11219

GNP = Greenwood Press, 88 Post Rd. West, Westport, CT 06881

FOL = Folcroft Library Editions, Box 182, Folcroft, PA 19032

CC = Core Collection Books, Inc., 11 Middle Neck Rd., Great Neck, NY 11021

GR = Gale Research Company, Book Tower, Detroit, MI 48226.

All prices in U.S. dollars. If ordering, mention the Powys Society of N.A.

NEW on T. F. POWYS: Marius Buning, T. F. Powys; a Modern Allegorist (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986). 272 pp. \$29.95.

To be reviewed in the next issue of POWYS NOTES.

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