

NOTES

¹Julio Cortazar, *Ultimo round*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1970), p. 30. Further references will be noted in the text.

²Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971). In this work and the first and third of the series (*The Teachings of Don Juan* and *Journey to Ixtlan*, respectively), Castaneda is led into the experience of a new reality which neither he nor Don Juan is able to explain in terms of "normal" categories.

Beyond Yes and No: The Novels of John Cowper Powys

Forty-five years separate John Cowper Powys's first novel, *Wood and Stone* (1915), from his last, *All or Nothing* (1960). At first glance the world of Powys—its rural settings, descriptions of nature, episodic narration, and the three-decker format—appears as remote as possible from the momentous changes which occurred in literature, society, and technology as the novels were being written. What then is their contemporary relevance? John Brebner's answer is that the vision which informs Powys's novels—the juxtaposition of "a personal inner world reflecting doubt and disorder" against "an outer social world dependent on . . . necessity and chance"—is "urgently contemporary—prophetic at times."¹ In assessing Powys's literary achievement and contemporary relevance, Mr. Brebner has followed the inductive method, that is to say, he has arrived at his conclusions after a chronological examination of the complex web of each of the fourteen novels' plots and the relationships of the characters in them, and the ideas which unite the various strands of the narratives. He has avoided, wisely as it turns out, all extraneous references, including biographical ones, for such references are not compatible with the inductive method, and would have consequently weakened the force of Mr. Brebner's conclusions.

It is sometimes a difficult question to decide how much must be read of any particular author. Should one, for instance, exclude *Wood and Stone* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1915), *Rodmoor* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1916), and *Ducdame* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925)—the first three Powys novels which Mr. Brebner properly regards as failures—from any reading list, and concentrate on such masterpieces as *Wolf Solent* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1929), *A Glastonbury Romance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1932), *Maiden Castle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), *Owen Glendower* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), and *Porius* (London: Macdonald, 1951)?² Such a selection, however helpful to the lazy or the busy reader, will grossly distort one of Powys's most interesting achievements: the development of a theme.

The Powys theme is struck early, in what Mr. Brebner unhappily calls "the damning ambiguity" (p. 8) of *Wood and Stone*. In the Preface to that novel, Powys anticipates this particular objection and offers a defence which applies to all his novels: "The whole question is indeed so intimately associated with the actual panorama of life and the evasive caprices of flesh and blood, that every kind of drastic and clinching formula breaks down under its pressure" (p. viii). The

failure of *Wood and Stone* does not lie in its lack of a commitment, which is a philosophical matter, but in its lack of a focus, which is a technical defect. The law of "ebb and flow" (*Rodmoor*, p. 301) admits no distinction; the "blurred and woolly forehead of the wild goat Chance" offers no choice, not even one between the "horns of Fate's dilemma" (*Wolf Solent*, p. 707); and, in short, no single formula, however neat or inclusive, really clinches the issue on one side or the other. Each novel presents a fresh approach to the problem of reconciling the solitary individual to the duality of things: the will to power and the will to sacrifice; personal freedom and determinism; personal integrity and the pressures of economics and sex; an individual's "life illusion" or "mythology" and external manifestations of life; imagination and sex; and so on. Thirty years after the publication of *Wolf Solent*, in the 1961 Preface to the novel (London: Macdonald), Powys asserts that "the purpose and essence and inmost being" of it "is the necessity of opposites," and then goes on to stress the absolute necessity of resolving them in "felt-life" or "atmosphere": "Life and Death, Good and Evil, Matter and Spirit, Body and Soul, Reality and Appearance have to be joined together, have to be forced into one another, have to be proved dependent upon each other, while all solid entities have to dissolve, if they are to outlast their momentary appearance, into atmosphere" (p. v).

There is of course no simple or easy resolution. The ambiguity of *Wood and Stone* does not disappear in the later novels. Wolf's mythology remains vulnerable, and he resolves to follow the track "mapped out before him"—"follow it from moment to moment"—and offer no resistance (*Wolf Solent*, p. 851). Dud No-man's death-quest in *Maiden Castle* remains unresolved: "It was no good. He could not live, as this dead man had done, in a wild search for the life" (p. 496). The question which had so preoccupied him and had brought him to Dorchester in the first place, "Which of those two—his mother, with her inhuman egoism or Mona, with her weird unselfishness—held the secret that prevailed?" (p. 539), would remain unanswered. He too "must go on as best he could in his own way . . . must be decent to Nance . . . must be faithful, after his fashion, to Wizzie" (p. 539). He too, like *Wolf Solent*, must learn to live from moment to moment: "'Hold to the centre,' he said to himself, 'as you move on. The future is not everything'" (p. 539). Yet he must not "close one single cranny or crevice of his mind to the 'intimations of immortality' that in this place and at this hour were so thick about him" (p. 539). He "must hold fiercely to all those 'sensations' of his" (p. 539).

Nothing in experience is ever discarded. The position of the Powys hero remains ambiguous, for he makes no choice. The opposites do not disappear in a new-found unity, but in the act of living itself a wholly irrational adjustment takes place. As the individual matures he comes to recognize the necessity of the opposites and learns to find his personal integrity within himself. The concluding paragraph of *All or Nothing* (London: Macdonald, 1960), as Mr. Brebner notes, is a valedictory which contains the seed of Powys's life-vision: ". . . remember when you hear those two disputing . . . that All is not Nothing, neither is Nothing All, but both of them have one home-star, where they can sink to eternal quiescence, or mount to everlasting activity, and that home-star, my children, is the heart in every one of us. So goodbye, my dears" (p. 219). The anguish experienced in this movement towards greater self-realization is mitigated, however, by a sense of near masochistic enjoyment—perhaps Nietzsche's phrase "*gut geniessen*" suggests the quality of this experience. There is no resignation, no despair, nor any stoic acceptance of an inevitable choice, rather a slow maturing process in which the various components of a person's total experience combine to establish his particular *raison d'être*.

In this concern for an individual's predicament in a world in which institutions have broken down, Powys appears to us more modern than many of his contemporary novelists who were more innovative in technique and subject matter, or who, like D. H. Lawrence, dealt more directly with social and class realities of the time. Powys broods over the problem of the solitary man coping with conflicting ideas and experiences, plays with its many ramifications with an insatiable curiosity, and, for all his remoteness from the phenomena of modern civilization, remains close to what he so aptly terms the "tang and salt and bitter-sweetness of the actual pell-mell of life" (*Wood and Stone*, p. x).

To appreciate the full range and depth of his concern, as well as its urgency and integrity, perhaps no selection of Powys's novels will be quite adequate. They must all be read: the early novels in which Powys deals with his theme tentatively, and in which ideas are not perfectly integrated into plot and characters; the successful middle novels; and the last novels in which a final crystallization of the theme occurs in the form of allegorical fantasies. In *The Demon Within* Mr. Brebner has accomplished this task expertly. It is the first significant book devoted entirely to a close study of all of Powys's novels in their chronological sequence. Sometimes provocative but always interesting, Mr. Brebner's exposition of the ideas and theme in the novels is perceptive and often brilliant. In the course of the book, he has mentioned topics outside his immediate scope which scholars will do well to pursue. One of the most important areas may be a systematic discussion of such philosophical writings of Powys as *The Complex Vision* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1920), *A Philosophy of Solitude* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933), and *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1935).

Powys is no longer a neglected novelist, and the risk of his becoming a cult-figure, the exclusive reserve of a fantastical few, has consequently become minimal. Since G. Wilson Knight's *The Saturnian Quest* (London: Methuen, 1964), books on Powys have begun to appear with some regularity: H. P. Collins' *John Cowper Powys: Old Earth Man* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1966); Belinda Humfrey, ed., *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972); and two other books in 1973, Glen Cavaliero's *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) and Jeremy Hooker's *John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press) in the "Writers of Wales" series. *John Cowper Powys: A Record of Achievement* (London: The Library Association), a comprehensive bibliography prepared by Derek Langridge, was published in 1966. The Modern Language Association of America has held two seminars on Powys so far, and a third is planned for 1974. The annual *Powys Newsletter* (Robert Blackmore, ed.) issued by Colgate University Press, and meetings and special conferences organized by the Powys Society in Cambridge, England, have fostered, and responded to, the growing interest in the work of Powys. Nor is this interest limited to English-speaking nations. Works of Powys are beginning to be translated in France, India, and Japan. The French journal *Granit* (Paris) devoted its entire 1973 issue of 474 pages to Powys. All this is to the good, for Powys, in spite of an occasionally cumbersome style, is a novelist of massive power.

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¹John A. Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels* (London: Macdonald, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), see pp. 227-8.

²All page references in the essay, unless stated otherwise, are to the first editions of the novels.