

Poetics of Place in John Cowper Powys's Wood and Stone

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John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) belongs to a literary family, though literature, unlike music, does not run in families. But there are some exceptions in English, among the English exceptions to this general rule, the Bronte' sisters and the Powys brothers⁽¹⁾. No study of John Cowper Powys, Theoder, or Llewelyn can afford to disregard the family to which they belonged. The three brothers stand in varying degrees a part from the literary world of their time; and this detachment can to some extent be accounted for in the intense feeling which linked them each other and gave them the sense of belonging to a self-sufficient world⁽²⁾.

Although Powys was born ten years before Joyce and thirteen years before Lawrence, he survived the former by more than twenty years and the latter more than thirty years. The works on which Powys's reputation is based were all written after his fifty-seventh years. Thus, while his age places him with the generation which shaped the modern novel, the dates of his fiction place him with the next generation, with the writers of the thirties, forties, and fifties⁽³⁾. Powys's theory of fiction remained Victorian, while the age more and more demanded experimentation. Powys explored the psychology of man in terms of his relation to nature and place, the world

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outside, just as Freud's theories were making familiar territory of man's inner world. George Streiner has argued that “only a full approach to Dickens, Melville and Joyce makes possible a just to the novelist whom (I) take to be, after Hardy and Lawrence, the eminent master of Modern English fiction – John Cowper Powys”⁽⁴⁾.

This paper attempts at exploring the poetics of place in Powys's first novel *Wood and Stone* (1915). Place may be vaguely defined and indicated by only the most casual description. In realist fiction, though, and especially in naturalistic writing the environment is presented as a strong determining force in the characters' lives, the description of place may be very detailed to give a sense of verisimilitude or to characterize a location which is, in effect, a participant in the action⁽⁵⁾. Place may in some way advance the themes of the story as we are going to see in *Wood and Stone*. Or it may advance themes either by providing appropriate atmosphere or by symbolically reflecting relationships in the action or plot. An extreme, but hardly unusual, the use of place is the *microcosm*, which may be described as an imaginary “little world” summing up in graspable form the relationships which the author thus alleges to exist in the more complex *macrocosm*, or “big world”⁽⁶⁾.

Place is generally used to indicate the social and cultural context in which the action of a literary work takes place. It can be referred to both the created fictional context and to an actual historical or cultural place. Recent critics have been suspicious of the idea that ‘place’ can be neatly abstracted from other elements of a work, thus the ‘London’ of Daniel

Defoe's is different from the 'London' of Charles Dickens or Virginia Woolf, and not just because these novelists are writing at different times⁽⁷⁾. The term can also be used to describe the use of scenery description. It is worth mentioning here that John Cowper Powys used his birth place in Somerston and Dorest as the place and the background of some of his novels including *Wood and Stone*. John Cowper and his brothers Llewelyn Powys are intensely autobiographical writers, whose virtues and faults spring alike from their obsession with their own feeling. John Cowper Powys announces in his *Autobiography* that "Nature from the start made (him) an actor"⁽⁸⁾. *Wood and Stone* is full of memorable pictures of Nature. The theme of the novel is built on the two 'mythologies' power and sacrifice which are objectified in the materials of stone and wood. The story's instance: Leo's Hill, a "brute mass of inert sand stone", is a focus of spiritual and economic power; opposing it is a thickly wooded Nevilton Mount where the Holy Road of Waltham, a Christian standard of sacrifice, was reputedly discovered⁽⁹⁾.

At the foot of the Mount lies the small village of Nevilton, whose inhabitants gain their livelihood by working in the nearby sand stone quarries. They are thus united by residence and by occupation to the conflicting ideology. *Wood and Stone* is not a simple confrontation between Pagan (evil) and Christian (good) forces⁽¹⁰⁾. It examines people living in a tightly enclosed society, striving to establish new or to retain old relationships with one another. Mortimer Romer, owner of the stone quarries, is a central figure in this struggle. His position of wealth and power enables him to exert

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considerable influence in both public and private spheres of the village. He is a successful politician and industrialist; he also exhibits the dilettantish interest in art and literature. He also exerts power over his family and acquaintances, arranging their lives according to his own whims. His decision to secure Ralph Dangelis, an American artist, as a perspective husband for his daughter Gladys is a basic plot – catalyst as his persecution of Lacrima Traffio and Maurice Quincunx, both of whom are almost entirely dependent on him for their sustenance.

Of other characters involved, the Anderson brothers, James and Luke who are self – educated and stone – cutters (in whom it is easy to detect elements of the characters of both John Cowper and Theoder Powys). They rise above Romer's designs by totally disregarding them. As a result, they stand for the balancing – force throughout the novel-James's rather abstract concerns and Luke's rich sensuality opposing the industrialist, economics power-structure⁽¹¹⁾. Their other function in the novel is to play as mediators between the upper levels of the community and the lower villagers.

John Cowper Powys has been described as a successful nature painter. His use of landscape in the novel is twofold. In the first place it underlines the themes of the novel and serves a symbolic functions. It is here that the book is most indebted to the influence of Hardy⁽¹²⁾. The images of wood and stone which control the presentation of the opposing forces of power and the will of sacrifice and love are related to the two hills which dominate the Montacute scene – Montacute Tor itself and Ham Hill. The latter is called Loe's Hill, and its quarries,

owned by Romer, are symbolic of capitalist power where the unhinged James Anderson meets his death. We see here how Powys manages to use landscape to point his themes. But the use to which he puts Leo's Hill is rather laboured; more effective is his account under the name 'Nevilton Hill' of Montacute Tor the traditional burial place of a fragment of the True Cross. From it James observes on one side the nun – like Vennie seldom pacing to and fro in a white dress in a field for below; on the other he watches two young lovers closer at hand embracing. The nature of voyeurism was of great interest to Powys; but in this scene with its intensely realized physical actuality and masterly juxtaposition of images he fuses psychological insight with physical intimations of an unusual kind⁽¹³⁾. This scene in *Wood and Stone* foreshadows another scene in *Wolf Solent* (1929) Powys's most successful novel. In that novel we see wolf is constantly watching others, or watching himself watching others. *Wolf Solent* offers what may be the quintessential voyeuristic experience the voyeur peeping at, and through, himself⁽¹⁴⁾.

Powys has been described as a great master of scene painting, and we find in his novels passages which might be called objectively descriptive, though detailed pictures of weather and cloud effects persist until the end. We find him at his best writing:

The afternoon was very hot, though there was no sun. The wind blew in threatening gusts, and the quarry-owner noticed that the distant Quantock Moors were overhung with a dark bank of lowering clouds. It was one of those sinister days that here the power of taking all colour and all interest out of the earth's surface. The time of the

year lent itself gloomily to this sombre unmasking. The furze bushes looked like dead things. Many of them had actually been burnt in some wanton conflagrations; and their branches carried warped and blighted seeds.... . All the trees seemed to have something of this dull, whitish glare, which did not prevent them from remaining the recesses of their foliage, as drearily as the dark dull soil beneath them. The grass of the field had a look congruous with the rest of the scene; a look as if it had been one larger velvety pall, drawn over the whole valley. (pp.370-1)

Moreover, Powys pictures the heavy soil of Somerset in a sinister way, images of death and decay recur⁽¹⁵⁾. In one passage the very landscape becomes an expression of Lacrima's plight, caught between the tormenting attentions of Gladys and the more brutal advances of the farmer, Goring:

As she ascended the shadow lane with its crumbling banks of sandy soil and its overhanging trees, she felt once again how persistently this heavy luxuriant landscape dragged the earthwards and clogged the wings of her spirit. The tall grasses growing thick by the way-side enlaced themselves with by the elder-bushes and dog-wood, which in their turn blended indissolubly with lower branches of the elms. The lane itself seemed to pour, in a tidal wave of suffocating fertility, over the whole valley... In a curious way it seemed as if this Nevilton scenery offered her no escape from the insidious sensuality she fled. (pp.294-5)

At times the author seems to allude to the existence of a collusion between nature and the forces of evil; but in the last

resort he remains sceptical if a shade ambiguous as to the reality of spiritual forces. Powys recognizes the awareness of the supernatural as aspects of man's awareness of nature; but he never isolates it from its context⁽¹⁶⁾.

The novel is rich with water and sun images. The most impressive handling of sun and water images is in chapter XXII. Visiting Weymouth, Luke wanders through the trees enjoying the “smell of sea-weed, the sound of the waves on the beach, the sun-bathed atmosphere” and the “salt-burdened sun-filled the air”. His eventual decision to swim in the sea is the natural culmination of his desire to integrate himself as fully as possible with his surroundings.

Luke hurriedly undressed, and standing for a moment, a slim golden figure in the horizontal sunlight, swung himself lightly down over the rock's edge and struck out boldly for the open sea.

With vigorous strokes he wrestled with the inflowing tide wave splashed against his face. Pieces of floating sea-weed and wisps of surf clung to his arms and hair. But he held resolutely on, breathing deep of liberty and exultation and drinking in, as if from a vast wide-brimmed cup, the thrilling spaciousness of air and sky.

Girls, love-making, marriage, — the whole complication of the cloying erotic world, fell away from him, like the too-soft petals of some great stifling velvet – bosomed flower; and naked of desire, as he was naked of human clothes, he gave himself up to the free, pure elements.... . (P.589)

Powys in the above – mentioned passage recalls D. H. Lawrence at his best prose style. Like Lawrence, he connects

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the attitude or characteristics of one the characters with some natural phenomenon. The characters can be understood through their interpretation of the natural world. Both writers refer to the deading effects of modern industrial capitalist society and repressive religious beliefs; so they plunge their characters into the loving nature to heal their maimed spiritual injuries.

There is a hint in *Wood and Stone* to the macabre as the Anderson brothers make love to different women in the tombstones. This slightly odd interpretation of what is so called “the normal” is responsible for much of the merit of the novel. There is reference in the novel to James Anderson's belief in the power of stone. He is convinced that a special rapport has developed between himself and the material with which he has worked for so many years, that its soul has passed into his own soul, and that “like lovers, they respond to each other” (P.440). When examined in this light, his subsequent death in the quarries appears a fitting fulfillment and justification of his life⁽¹⁷⁾.

Time in *Wood and Stone* seems to be depicted as both chronological and psychological. Events which are carefully documented with description of seasonal change have little specific reference to their natural contexts and occur almost entirely within the larger, psychological frame work of the novel. In the treatment of place, the concrete settings, whether towns, villages, or lakes are rarely particularized according to spatial dimensions; instead they take their shapes from the informing attitude of one or more of the characters – or from Powys's own comments⁽¹⁸⁾.

Wood and Stone is, in fact, an interesting novel for certain reasons; one of them is the number of characters and events are memorable; certain nature – descriptions are forceful. The narrative technique which is built around the two major symbols in the book Power and Sacrifice is convincing – yet the book is a collection of fragments, of lyrical prose, of philosophical speculation of entertaining characterization. Being the first novel of Powys, it lacks vision and direction. The spatial and temporal dimensions are inadequately correlated. Nevertheless, the book still stands in its own right as a part of a total corpus and not simply as a prentice work. G. Wilson Knight considered Powys next to Shakespeare or as he mentions equal to him when he says “that only Shakespeare has left us a literature of so vast and intricate a comprehension”, finding *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933) “probably the greatest imaginative work of our time”⁽¹⁹⁾ and questioning the modern “crossword mentality” which prizes Joyce's verbal puzzles at the expense of Powys's “profundities”⁽²⁰⁾.

NOTES

1. R. C. Churchill, *The Powys Brothers, Writers and Their Work*, (London: Longman, 1962), p.7.
2. Ibid, p.10.
3. George Blake, 'The Eccentricity of John Cowper Powys', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 22. No. 21, 1976, p.202.
4. George Steiner, *Language and Science: Essays on Language, literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p.236.
5. Lynn Altenbernd and Lesile L. Lewis, *A Hand Book for the Study of Fiction*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p.71.
6. Ibid, p.72
7. Paul Goring et, al *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion*, (London: Arnold, 2001), p.295.
8. John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (New York: Macdonald, 1967), pp.14-15.
9. John Cowper Powys, *Wood and Stone* (London: Arnold Shaw, 1915), p.28. Further references to this edition will be cited in the text.
10. John A. Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels* (London: Macdonald, 1973), p.9.
11. Ibid, p.7
12. Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (Oxford: Clardon Press, 1973), p.22.
13. Brebner, p.8.
14. Cavaliero, p.24.
15. Blake, p.26.

16. Brebner, p.8.

17. *The Powys Brothers*, Writers and Their Work, (London: Longman, p.24.

18. Brebner, p.12.

19. G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), p.122.

20. G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1960), p.317.

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شعرية المكان في رواية جون كوبر باوز الخشب والحجر

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المستخلص

إن هذا البحث محاولة لاستكشاف شعرية المكان في رواية باوز الأولى الخشب والحجر (1915) ويمكن تعريف المكان وتجديده بصورة مشوشة ويتوصيفات عرضية فحسب، مع ذلك فإن الرواية الواقعية لاسيما في الكتابات الطبيعية فإن البيئة تصور قوة حاسمة في حياة الشخصيات. ويمكن أن يكون وصف المكان بصورة تفصيلية لإضفاء مسحة واقعية للحياة أو لتجسيد موقع والذي يُعد جزء أساسي في الحديث. وبطريقة أو أخرى يمكن للمكان أن يتقدم على المغزى كما سيتضح في رواية الخشب والحجر، أو ربما تسبق المغزى إما عن طريق توفير أجواء مناسبة أي عن طريق انعكاس العلاقات الرمزية في الحديث أو الحكمة.

إنَّ استخدام المكان كعالم مُصغر والذي يمكن وصفه "عالم مصغر" خيالي يمكن تلخيصه بأنه ملموس من العلاقات التي يدعي الكاتب بأنها قائمة في العالم الأكثر تعقيداً عالمنا الحقيقي.

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