**Jacqueline Peltier**

# American Landscapes in John Cowper Powys's Letters to His Brother Llewelyn[1]

> But taking my life as a whole and hovering with the flight of a hawk over its variegated landscape, I believe I detect certain quite definite 'streams of tendency' moving towards the unknown future. (*Autobiography*, 1932, p. 449)

In critical writings devoted to John Cowper Powys very little attention has been given to his long residence in the United States. Kenneth Hopkins is among the few to regret that Powys did not use his extensive knowledge in some great American novel on the scale of *Glastonbury,* with a full cast of the extraordinary people he writes of in *Autobiography.*[2] Most critics emphasize the English or Welsh landscape as the only suitable background for the "Old-Earth Man", the "Solitary Giant".

Even R. P. Graves, in his otherwise well-documented biography, *The Powys Brothers,* takes John Cowper's American environment for granted and does not linger on the importance of this self-chosen exile for his future career as a writer. A. Thomas Southwick, in his study of the letters J. C. Powys wrote to his sister Marian while he was in America, acknowledges the fact that they throw light on "one of the most crucial and yet least documented periods of his life".[3] Peter Easingwood seems to me to have been among the few to give searching and thorough attention to this problem[4] and I fully agree with him when he says that "this participation in the American scene determined the strength of *Autobiography* and of the other main writings which flow from the same creative effort."

There is no doubt that the thirty years in America were important for Powys's development and have still to be carefully studied and assessed. The crusading nomadism which bore John Cowper to all except two States, preaching 'after his fashion' up and down the country, was of tremendous importance in many ways. In the course of attempting to weigh the delicate problem of the relationship between J. C. Powys and America, I have given particular attention to the manner in which he apprehended and described the environment which was his from 1904-5 to 1934, when he left for good.

The study which follows bears mostly on his *Letters to Llewelyn* because they are strikingly distinctive. Our chief 'documents' about John Cowper's judgments on America are first and foremost the last three chapters of *Autobiography* where we are given a dazzling picture, mostly positive, as befits John Cowper's determinate standpoint of "lavishing praise and praise only" as he tells Llewelyn.[5] The same, I think, may be said of a long article he wrote in 1935, 'Farewell to America'[6] which is a sparkling summing-up of his long residence, with the sincere and inspired voice of the lecturer:

> And it was in these eternal walks about the towns of half a hemisphere, that I acquired the mental habits of isolating myself as a perambulating skeleton-shape moving betwixt zenith and nadir.[7]

*An Englishman Upstate,* published in 1966, is a little piece mostly centred around his life in Columbia County and probably written around 1931-32. It is of a lighter vintage and rather Arcadian in mood. It is important to keep in mind that all were written towards the end of his thirty years exile; they are all 'farewells' in different keys.

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[1] This is the revised version of a paper published in *The Powys Review*, n°18, 1986.

[2] *The Powys Brothers*, (1967), Warren House Press, 1972, p. 94. At the time of Hopkins's biography, Powys's novel which deals with America, *After My Fashion*, was not known, or published. I surmise from J. C. Powys's letter to Llewelyn that it was written during 1918-20, but there is no hint from him that he considered it a success, and the book had no title.

[3] 'John Cowper Powys in America: The Letters to Marian', *The Powys Review*, no. 14, 1984, p. 17.

[4] *The Powys Review*, no. 6, 1979/80, pp. 7-15.

[5] *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, ed. M. Elwin, 2 Vols., Village Press, 1975, 24 July 1933. Dates in parentheses within my text refer to these volumes.

[6] 'Farewell to America', *Scribner's Magazine,* XCVII (April 1935), repr. *The Powys Review*, no.6, 1979/80, pp. 54-63.

[7] Ibid., p. 200.

Quite different is the impression we gather as we follow John Cowper along the trail of *Letters to Llewelyn,* written from 1902 to 1939**,** and which cover in detail that part of his life, the years 1906-1933 which gave birth to *Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance, Weymouth Sands,* to name only the major works of fiction, and to *Autobiography*. These letters, apart from the Diaries which will, we hope, soon be published, are among the most important and probably *the* most important of all the collections of his letters to close relatives and friends so far published.

Since those two volumes of the *Letters*, edited and published by Malcolm Elwin, are only a selection, it is difficult for anyone who has not had access to the originals to make an estimate of their number. But they are in their published form already quite impressive in bulk and length. The average rhythm seems to be one letter a week, but in times of crises they follow closely[8] and are nearly always full of information. John would write from all sorts of places, hotels, trains, coffee-shops, railway stations, or his own lodgings, in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and would confide to his brother freely, whatever his moods, entertain him with the little scenes of his daily life, especially the people he happened to meet, or noticed from the corner of his eye, and sometimes he would express the impressions he received from strange and quaint or squalid places he discovered during his long and—to him so indispensable—walks.

These letters have a tone of their own in which we seem almost to hear John Cowper's voice; they record day after day his innermost thoughts and reactions, and, through them, we watch a certain landscape emerge slowly from the thousands of miles accumulated along those years. They were really meant to be private and had no literary ambition. But Llewelyn was well aware of their immense value and prized them very highly.[9]

We wrongly assume that John Cowper, because of the aura of his lecturing career and the length of his stay in America, was very happy to live there. This impression is probably based on the cheerful and positive atmosphere of the last chapters of *Autobiography.* The *Letters* give a very different picture. There was passion but there was also much despair and misery, and even, at times, a strong-worded hate. It was not an easy-going affair, and we shall see that the peaceful landscape which eventually emerges does not come into existence until the last five years in America, when Powys slowly comes to terms with the world within him.

These two volumes of *Letters*, among their many other fascinating ingredients, make us aware of the metamorphosis which took place within Powys during those thirty years or so, and how, after the Twenties, we witness the emergence within him of a stronger mind, open to the objective world and discerning the possibilities of this 'New World' with the features of a very old world, its rocks, stones and trees, and on which it is possible to pray to the "Earth Spirit under her ancient names of Demeter and Cybele".[10]

Although John Cowper started his lecture tours in the Autumn of 1904-5, no letters from that time have been published by Malcolm Elwin. It is not, therefore, possible to know what were John's very first reactions to his new environment and we have to believe his somewhat startling declaration that he could remember nothing of his first impression of the New York skyscrapers.[11] A close study of the letters shows that there are few interesting descriptions until around 1920, where they gained in weight and awareness for reasons that we will give later. There is one noteworthy exception to what has just been said in the very first American letter of Volume 1. This letter John Cowper wrote from Philadelphia early in 1908, relating his impressions on the lecture on Thomas Hardy he had just delivered, in Newburgh, N.Y., a little town north of New York:

> That if you please was on the Hudson River, a noble Hiawatha-like water—granite cliffs and Pan-puk-keewis—on the shores of Gitchee Gumee in the land of the Ponemak where the heron the Sku-shu-gah dives and shoots and plays the devil—and the place was called Newbug, and the absurd newspaper reporter said under the heading "A Dandy Stunt", "DR POWYS DELIGHTS THE

[8] Cf. Vol. 1, pp. 197-200 and pp. 316-329.

[9] Cf. Vol. 1, p. 362.

[10] *Autobiography*, The Bodley Head, 1932, p. 650

[11] Ibid., p. 461.

> NEWBUGGERS. Dr Powys oratorised in the quaint dialect familiar to us of the late Dan Daly. He fixed up Richard Harding as right away weird. The Newbuggers showed they could make difference between good and bad talk".[12]

This fascinating little piece of writing calls for particular attention. There is on the whole a tone of mischieviousness and amusement. He makes a deliberate and obvious pun on the name of the town which reminds us of Dylan Thomas's "Llaregubb" in *Under Milk Wood.* Although we cannot be sure of the existence of the "newspaper reporter", the few lines attributed to him sound true in their American journalese style so well rendered. More important still, we already find here, even though it is done through H. W. Longfellow's 'Song of Hiawatha', a genuine interest in and even fascination for the Indian theme which will come back in force in Columbia county. The poem was a favourite of Powys's and is mentioned twice in *Autobiography.*[13] He also indicates his keen interest in the Red Indians of the East, an attraction examined in 'Farewell to America':

> As I thus wave my farewell to America I cannot help recording what seems, at least to some deep vein of superstition in me, to be a definite occult influence exercised upon my nature by the psychic aura, diffused through that whole vast land, from the life of the aboriginal Indians.[14]

Lastly we notice that even in this mock-parody of a classic poem there are three elements which are present in all of John Cowper's works and which we find in the *Letters*: stone, mud and water. There seems to exist a great affinity between Powys and another great writer, Henry David Thoreau. There is a certain 'Powysian' flavour in *Walden,* such as this use of landscape elements as metaphor:

> Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudices, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place . . .[15]

This passage brings to mind the magnificent comparison John Cowper makes between the human soul and a fountain, at the beginning of *Autobiography:*

> But I sometimes feel as I survey my turbulent life that a human soul resembles a fountain whose native spring is choked up by every kind of rubble and constantly invaded by a tidal estuary from the salt sea. Not until the fountain has banked itself up with great stones against this dead-sea invasion, not until it has pushed the sticks and leaves and gravel and roots and funguses and mud and cattle dung out of its way, can it draw upon the deep granite wells of its predestined flow.[16]

In the letters written in America we follow the course of that strong current fighting its way through all sorts of obstacles to the freedom of the open sea.

Many of the letters until the Twenties are mostly centred around John Cowper's psychological reactions to his environment; there are hardly any descriptions of landscape or people:

> You will be glad to hear that I have now recovered from my temporary alienation and am back again in the condition of resisting those perilous calls of the lower lord which lead to so bleached and jaded a landscape.[17]

It is well worth noticing that this is the only letter where the word "landscape" is used, and characteristically enough, only to describe his state of mind. "Bleached" makes one think of desert and scorching sun, and "jaded" comes from the Spanish word "ijada", colic stone; it is a word also used for a vicious horse! It is indeed an abstract, a Satanic world, which irresistibly evokes Dante's *Inferno,* the beginning of which is quoted—with some inaccuracy—in the very next letter.[18] It is the world of sexual misery and sordid lewdness which he describes in *Autobiography* in terms

[12] *Letters to Llewelyn,* Vol. I, p. 38.

[13] *Autobiography,* pp. 284 and 548.

[14] 'Farewell to America', p. 59.

[15] *Walden or Life in the Woods,* ed. G. Landré-Augier; Aubier—Editions Montaigne, Paris, 1967, p. 204.

[16] *Autobiography,* p. 39.

[17] *Letters to Llewelyn,* Vol. I, p. 38.

[18] Ibid., p. 41.

evoking Hell in all its aspects.[19] The letters are quite explicit:

> These American cities are the very devil for opportunities. Boston worst of all (...) Do you ever know that dreadful depression of spirits when all paths seem to lead to dust heaps?[20]

The outer world such as can be glimpsed from the particulars revealed to Llewelyn is grim, sordid, made of Burlesque shows, "wretched little periodicals" and "naughty puppets".[21] The letters of that time give us the picture of a feverish man, blindly groping for ways and means to assuage his mad pursuit of erotic emotions, to the exclusion of any external descriptions. Apart from the "opportunities" mentioned, all we can visualize is the ludicrous picture of him and Louis Wilkinson singing hymns with their landlady on Sunday nights! No attention is paid to his surroundings, not even Philadelphia, "one of [his] favourite cities", not even Boston which he loathed and is saved from total abhorrence only because of the hospitable library of the Hotel Touraine.[22] I think it is possible to say that the landscape is purely mental, it is indeed "una selva oscura", and John Cowper is groping for "some open gate"[23] in the dark forest of his complicated meanderings, not for a 'landscape' in fact, but for an escape.

The Frances Gregg epoch, around 1912, did not bring any release from anguish, on the contrary, and America, after she had left with Louis Wilkinson for England, became the Land of the Dead:

> O impenetrable and merciless Future, I am ready to suffer deep and cruel scratches from Sphinx claws, but I cannot endure to leave my Egyptian desert, my Jungle of the Great Dangers, for cold obedience among Hyperborean corpses.[24]

The years 1913-1918 were probably the worst in John Cowper's life and when he wrote "Really one longs for some overwhelming earthquake or catastrophe to bring about some change"[25] he might have had some premonition of what was lying ahead. Soon there was War, death, physical and moral suffering which culminated in that terrible year of 1916 when, as he said himself, he was on the verge of madness.[26]

But these years, years of misery, loneliness and anxiety, are of tremendous importance for another reason: they witness the emergence of his true status as a writer, slowly but with an increasing force:

> But I must write—something—anything. Enormous visions stir the waters of my mind—huge, wavering, obscure. I would give pounds to be now permitted by Fate to retire with you to some place (even if it weren't sunny) and to write rapidly, feverishly—such amazing things![27]

Then again in October 1915:

> Writing's my obsession and my heart hardens itself in its loneliness.[28]

Nevertheless, parallel with this impetuous but fertile undercurrent, his obsession with writing, there was in John Cowper's mind at that time a very strong tide of hate, especially towards American people and the country at large:

> Only the greyness and dreariness of these present days of my existence are beyond words and my hatred for America grows daily, though they are good-natured enough and free from spitefulness—these staggering illiterates. (12 January 1916)
>
> . . . When I am free from these unspeakable people and hideous streets and dreadful hotels—I may be able to do something. Here's a demon by me wagging his legs, in spats, to the tune of some vulgar American dance. They all jerk and jab and chatter and shove themselves about like galvanised puppets. They are not human (...) I feel as I should willingly give my soul for one single

[19] *Autobiography*, pp. 471-77, for instance.

[20] *Letters to Llewelyn*, Vol. I, p. 40.

[21] *Autobiography*, p. 469.

[22] Ibid., p. 598.

[23] *Letters to Llewelyn*, Vol. I, p. 41.

[24] Ibid., p. 107.

[25] Ibid., p. 114 (8 December 1912).

[26] The *Letters to Llewelyn*, Vol. I pp. 200-10, give an absolute proof that John Cowper was mistaken when in *Autobiography* (pp. 593-4) he ascribed his depression to 1917.

[27] *Letters to Llewelyn*, Vol. I, p. 135.

[28] *Wood and Stone* was published in November 1915 and was followed in 1916 by no less than five books.

> day where there is a hill or a road where there have been celandines and sheep for a thousand years and where real trees have real roots in earthmould and real people utter intelligible words. (20 January 1917)

This letter is particularly saddening and dispirited and distressing to read. The pain, that never left him now, made him unfair to America and he had the impression that he was trapped in "an undignified life". His only salvation lay in writing.

However, in spite of this depression due in great part to his ailing body, there is a passage at that time about New Orleans which offers a striking contrast, in its colourful and lively lines:

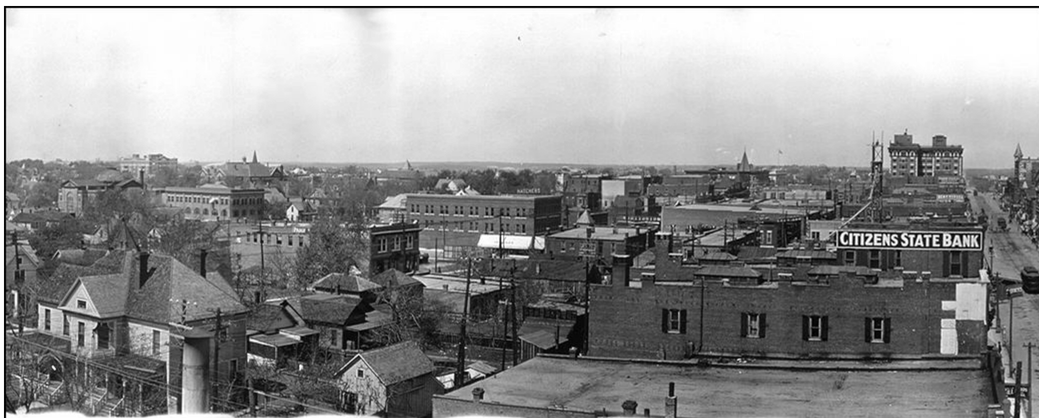
> I came here through Arizona and Texas from New Orleans. Ha! New Orleans is a place; but wicked, languishing, indolent, lotus-scented, an exotic dreamy ghostly drugged sort of a city, with lichen on the ilexes as if the whole thing had been under deep seas for years. 'I have pulled down the moss as I saw it hanging from a live-oak in Louisiana'. It was, I think, in New Orleans that Walt Whitman kept his favourite girl—and well he might. I went into old Creole houses and was cursed by queer old women for picking roses in courtyards that might have been in Algiers. (San Francisco, 21 April 1917)

By the end of 1917 John Cowper wisely decided to risk an important operation. Although it was a success, for a long time he was prostrate and weak. It was a difficult time for lecturing, and he came to dim conclusions:

> I have lived, really, an easy and protected sort of life, and somehow this sensation of being out of work is curiously agitating to me. I can only forget it by falling into a sort of drowsy coma. This very talking about 'a job' is pain and grief to me. I am an artist, not a shrewd fellow—and if my particular kind of art is not wanted, where the devil can I go? I am sick of travelling, I want to lecture in one fixed place and write a book worth writing and this I shall do—you will see! (8 January 1918)

But very soon he was on the road again. From now on we hear much more about these lecture tours, and through the letters we come to realize the strain these "mean jumps" represented:

> I am in the middle of a month's tour in the middle west—if you can call it a tour when at most I have only two lectures a week—but I have colossal journeys between, so I am saved a sense of idleness. For instance I have now come seven hundred miles from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Joplin, Missouri—and I go straight back to St. Paul—700 miles—1,400 miles for one lecture. (23 January 1918)




Joplin, Missouri, c.1910 [29]
*Library of Congress* *PAN US GEOG - MISSOURI #8*

> (From St. Louis:) ... I am waiting, for the New York train. It will be two nights journey—and an upper berth. I was delayed twelve hours by floods in Southern Missouri—but there it is. I've just been walking, walking thro' melancholy squalid slums and now this great clean luxurious gaudy hotel is as unlovely in its vulgar modernness as the streets were sinister and evil and menacing. (1 November 1919)

[29] In 1921 JCP gave a lecture at Joplin and met Phyllis Playter who was visiting her parents. She had left for Kansas City when she was 18 because "she felt her life had no purpose there [in Joplin]." ( R.P.Graves, *The Brothers Powys,* p.151)

> (From Springfield, Missouri:) The raw bleak and characterless melancholy of the "country" over here passes imagination. Can it be the same planet and can this be the moon I have seen from Chanctonbury Rings and Lufton and Laon? Bricks over here don't seem bricks, trees don't seem trees; mud is not mud but some kind of dreary chemistry and the automata who nod and talk and get in and out of cars, kind and modest and well-washed as they, seem hardly to have those skulls and cross-bones within them that used to belong to the human race. (January 1920)

These excerpts selected from the *Letters* of that period show an obvious change in the tone, and the matter-of-fact particulars he gives Llewelyn are most valuable, since they point to a growing awareness of the outer world, including the political atmosphere of these post-war years, which were "an era of conformity and of intolerance with non-conformity".[30] Powys remarked on it:

> The anti-radical wave of reactionary suppression is very depressing. There is a feeling of angry panic in the air which makes it difficult to refer to anything but the very narrowest literary topics without exciting violent hostility—though now and then one has an opportunity of a protest which has some good effect. (Chicago, 11 January 1920)

There was a definite change of vision towards a much finer apprehension of the Res Americana. It was a bewildering, shockingly crude and at times ugly but also stimulating country, and he came to recognize the benefit Llewelyn might gain by coming to the States:

> But it does rather begin to look to me as if you did require the invigorating effect of this dry hard chaotic brilliant aggressive atmosphere to rouse you from the humiliating inhibition of this misty coma. (New York, 26 February 1920)

Was he aware that this diagnostic applied to him too? At about the same time he was intent on writing *After My Fashion.* In this book we can read this challenging statement made about the main character, Richard Storm who, like John Cowper, lives in the Village in New York:

> Like some great wedge of iron this tremendous new world bored its way through the thick sensuousness of his nature and laid his deeper instincts bare. It was a process of spiritual surgery, painful but liberating.[31]

There is no denying the cheerfulness and intensity of this newly-born Salute to the world around him. Significantly it is as a man set out of bondage and feeling the first effects of unlimited freedom that he hails his brother thus:

> I am like one who from the top of a tower—I don't mean my own existence is anything like a tower, I speak figuratively for the nonce—watches a wayfarer crossing a marsh towards firm land. The onlooker can see how firm and secure that land is, with what a firm white road it rises over the hills, but the one in the marsh, brother Christian, can see nothing of this—can only feel his ankles mud-deep in abominable morass... Drink up every drop of the situation and be fully aware of every shade and ripple of it. Put writing for a time out of your thoughts and absorb the stream of existence. (36 February 1920)

By 1921 the time of trials was almost over. The presence of Phyllis Playter was going to shed its beneficient influence over John Cowper's life and writing. In one of the first letters mentioning her, we find the metaphorical use of "mud" and "heat" but, here, we are far from the satanic lands of the beginning:

> I've had as lovely a time as possible in this awful heat, this scorching sun—bathing every day in the river or wading through tropical marshes the very mud of which was hot and the water that covered it hot too . . . but I looked at Cassiopaea calmly enough and saw about five separate dawns. (Kansas City, Missouri, 3 September 1922)

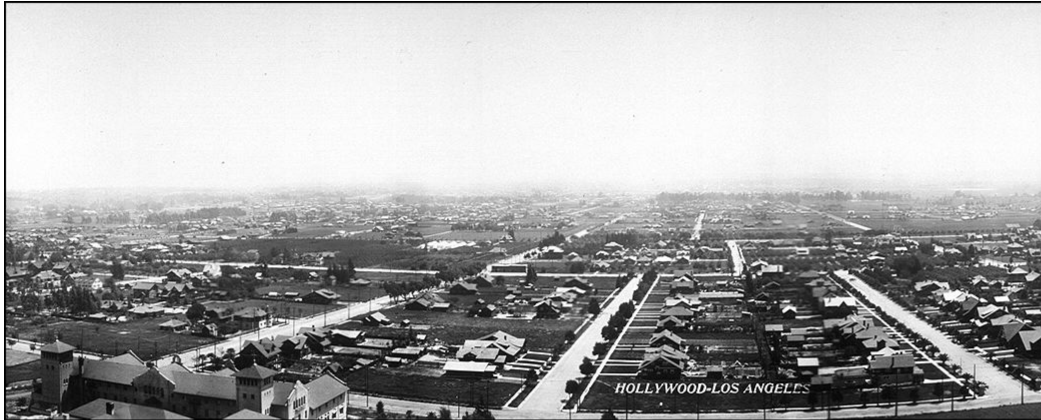
The last ordeal was nevertheless awaiting him in the guise of the long year he had to spend in California, from September 1922 to the summer of 1923. He had already shown his strong dislike for the place in several letters in 1916 and in 1917. There is probably no scenery in the States so averse to John Cowper's sensibility than the Pacific Coast and his feelings were exacerbated by his loneliness and the continual bickerings he had with his new manager, over his finances and badly organised lectures.

[30] A. Nevins & H. S. Commager, *A Pocket History of the United States,* New York: Washington Square Press, 1962.

[31] *After My Fashion,* Picador, 1980, p. 172.

Wretchedly he confesses:

> I hate this damned place, for I so long for the country—for real trees, for real falling leaves, for real mud, for real grass. Invented! All California is invented, I say invented! I took the car to the Beach—it was more awful than words can say! I thought can this be sand and are those real waves, made of salt-water older than cities, and is that red thing actually the setting sun? I tell you all the old newspapers that there are in America hung about those shitten posts and stumps! And things that were not trees but something else, scrapers for the privy of Proserpine, stretched away from the sham sea towards the sham land! (San Francisco, 7 November 1922)




Hollywood, c.1912
Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-109285

He repeatedly comes back to the "unreality" of California. He was not the only one to feel this deep uneasiness on the West Coast. William Faulkner was to confide some thirty years later: "This is a nice town (L.A.) full of very rich middle-class people who have not yet discovered the cerebrum or at best the soul".[32] But in his frantic efforts to find decent walks, John Cowper managed to uncover a different and almost bucolic reality hidden in these—at first—unpromising surroundings, and this comes as a startingly refreshing surprise:

> But I helped an old woman drive heifers thro' a fence out there, and heard ducks quacking in a backyard, and saw a couple of hawks, and a rainbow opposite a sunset, and the straight line of the ocean, like a purple tightrope between hills. And I met lots of separate groups of drifting children in that outlying district going for milk to a great white-washed dairy farm. (San Francisco, 3 December 1922)

That Llewelyn eventually came to New York, in the summer of 1920, was momentous, both for himself and for John Cowper. He brought with him something of their common childhood, of Montacute, of other places which they had visited together and his sunny presence certainly helped John in his recovery during that year 1920-21, which was such a turning-point in his life. In ***The Verdict of Bridlegoose,*** Llewelyn offers an interesting, first-hand view of their life together, in California and New York.

Of all the cities John Cowper came to know with the close understanding that came from his prolonged walks—Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, among others—the only one of which we get more than glimpses is New York. It seems interesting here to compare the two brothers' style by setting side by side their reminiscences. Here is what Llewelyn wrote:

> We left for the East some time in the beginning of October. How magnetic is the appeal of New York at this season of the year, when, like rooks returning to their king rookery, everybody comes crowding into the great city, into this perpendicular modern Babylon, with its proud, hard, dog-tooth outlines! . . . I could never find it in my heart to curse this town, which, like some vast battery, is capable of recharging with eager electricity the most inert brains, the most

[32] Letter to Joan Williams, *4* March ***1951, Selected Letters of W. Faulkner***, ed. J. Blower, New York: Random House, 1977.

weary thighs and ankles.[33]

Eight years later, John Cowper would devote a long passage to—in his words—"the proud city of New York, that air-hung, sea-washed, weather-white Megalopolis", celebrating 'her' in lyrical tones:

> But as I kiss my hand in everlasting farewell to this dazzling wave-washed, marble-frocked cosmopolitan baggage, 'kept' by these industrious rogues, this irridescent harlot of the nations, to whom all the mountebanks and all the peddlers of the world flock with their antics and their wares, this tireless courtezan with her white skin, her cold eyes, her dazzling tiara, her trailing unwashed skirts . . . [34]

In that huge city, almost a 'persona propria', if we judge by the bulk of the reference to it in the Index of *Autobiography,* Greenwich Village was certainly the area he knew best. He had been living there, on and off, ever since the beginning of his lecturing in America. But the one important place of all was 4 Patchin Place, where Llewelyn and Alyse Gregory let John and Phyllis have "the upper room" in the early summer of 1923. Many allusions or fairly lengthy descriptions of his immediate surroundings begin to appear in his letters at about that time, mentioning walks along the docks with Phyllis,[35] the sparrows "acting like longtailed tits might do",[36] and the Ailanthus boughs, which "float over / The houses and the roofs, a wild-goose throng",[37] and through these passages we begin to glimpse and hear a more familiar—to us—John Cowper:

> Monsieur Henri the barber I often talk to outside the Brevoort where they are taking away that flight of entrance steps ... But think of those steps disappearing, up which Frances and Louis went and up which I went carrying the manuscripts of Theodore's first book for Arnold to type before he left that Music Office to become a Manager ... But those steps of the Brevoort—what partings, what encounters they must have known . . . (25 September 1925)

Woolworth and Singer Towers from the south, c.1908
Library of Congress, LC-D418-78130

> They've gone and put up iron gates at the entrance to Patchin Place—in the middle of the entrance—leaving the little openings by the new brick posts free. And they've pulled down the Prison—but so far not the Clock Tower. In the foundations of this fallen Bastille from where of so many Sundays we heard the imprisoned Baggages sing about heaven, is an iron clutcher with a dragonish dew-lap scooping earth and hissing with a steamy vibrant roar. I am deaf of one ear—but the noise is very strident. But do you know we can now see the Woolworth tower and also the Singer Tower from the entrance of Patchin Place—think of that! and a great sign "Personene's Italian medicines" with a tossing ship on murky waves—Medicines for what? (. . .) No mandragora can ever medicine any quiet old people in this quarter to sweet sleep unless they've learnt as I have to be deaf as an adder when I choose. (14 November 1929)

At the time of this last letter they were about to leave "the upper room" for a little house in Columbia County, but the mention of the "quiet old people" reminds one of the short story he wrote, perhaps at that time, called *The Duck, The Owl, and—Miss Rowe! Miss Rowe!*[38] which, without doubt, is set in Patchin Place.

Because New York, to my mind, has held such an important place in his life that it is almost one of the characters of *After My Fashion, I* would like to quote this passage, taken out of his one and only American novel:

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[33] *The Verdict of Bridlegoose*, J. Cape, 1927, p.58.
[34] 'Farewell to America', p. 55.
[35] *Letters to Llewelyn*, Vol. I, p. 359.
[36] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 52.
[37] 'The Ailanthus', a poem, *The Dial*, New York, February 1926.
[38] Village Press, 1975.

> As he swung down Varick Street brandishing his stick—a stick bought under the shadow of Selshurst Cathedral—he actually exulted in all the sights around him. He exulted in the rawness of the iron frameworks, in the great torn-out gaps, like bleeding flesh, that were being laid bare in the sides of the old Dutch houses, in the subterranean thunder and the whirling puffs of air and dust that came up through the subway's gratings. He exulted in the huge grotesqueness of the gigantic advertisements, in the yells of the truck drivers, in the flapping clothes lines, in the piled-up garbage, in the hideous tenements and vociferous children. He suddenly became aware that in all this chaotic litter and in all this reckless, gay, aggressive crowd, there was an immense outpouring of youthful energy, an unconquerable vitality, a ferocious joyousness and daring.[39]

This passage offers a striking vision, that of a vigorous and buoyant man waving his weapon (a stick) in the face of a huge, defiant organism, throbbing with life and blood, New York. We feel a definite atmosphere of 'war', or at least a challenge between the Man and the City. It reminds one of Powys's avowals, regarding New York:

> I regard it . . . as a terrifying chaos in which by the use of a certain crafty sagacity and a few magic tricks you can build a transient nest . . .[40]

But at the time he was writing *After My Fashion, Powys* was not thinking of building a nest.

Before J. C. Powys could finally give up lecturing and settle in the country in order to write, as it had been his wish for a long time, there were a few more years of "mean jumps" across the States with a new manager. This renewed series of lectures is for us the occasion to get extraordinarily vivid descriptions of rural customs, especially from the Middle West, which are fascinating in themselves. This time John Cowper was not engrossed in his own thoughts and sensations; he had his attention whole and his curiosity is aroused as well as his sympathy. It may have been these vignettes which attracted Kenneth Hopkins's eye and made him deplore the fact that there was no American equivalent to the great Wessex romances.

Peoria, Illinois, June 1911
Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-73079

> I am off to Shreveport, Louisiana, on Thursday and from there, with five days at my disposal, towards Palm Beach. There's a 'Convention' in this Hotel of what do you suppose? Of Firework-Men, organisers of 'Open Air Amusements and Attractions' . . . I was glad to see Peoria again, the home-town of Edgar Lee Masters. I walked along the edge of the Illinois river and watched a couple of ramshackle Huckleberry Finns get a boat out into the open water through melting blocks of ice. (Chicago, 18 February 1925)

In this important letter he confides to Llewelyn that he has started a new novel, "less smooth and with a greater number of characters" than *Ducdame,* and cannot refrain from mentioning "a beggar with what Theodore would call a 'shocking face' ". Thus do we have the first lineaments of *Wolf Solent.*

A few days later he is in New Orleans, a place which had already thrown a spell on his imagination:

> The swamps thro' which the train passed were extraordinary—black mud that looked as if it went down thousands of fathoms to some level where

[39] *After My Fashion,* p. 185.
[40] *Autobiography*, p. 573.

plesiosauruses and diplodocuses and dinosaurs and ichthyosauruses might still grope and gurgle and wallow and butt against each other and have each other, in pre-historic antedeluvian slime—and this funny grey lichen hanging down from dead trees like the withered grey hair of superannuated Cybeles, this lichen which they so absurdly call “moss” as though it had any connection at all with the moss under the beech trees at Batemoor or Park Cover! ... I have

Mrs. Runyon and son, New Orleans, 1913
*The Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, image # 04815, courtesy of The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin*

always known that Louisiana was of all places on earth, and New Orleans especially, prolific of queer and even traditional devilries. It's a growth started from the spawn of some African Lake Elmenteita conveyed to these kindred estuaries and groves of devils by some crippled vulture caught in the top-mizzen rig of some old pirate-brig-stick white mist. (New Orleans, 22 February 1925)

This is the queerest place—the Colorado Chautauqua[41]—and today there's a great picnic here of all the Colorado farmers from miles round addressed by the Governor and the Senator. (Boulder, Colorado, 24 July 1925)

But I think once I head for the South (not that I adore it, for I always fear Lynchings), which will be on the 30th or on the 1st February, this dyspepsia will clear off. But the papers said 'twas sixteen below Zero yesterday in Chicago and the whole country is heavily covered with thick white snow—in the towns a queer greyish tint it is, like the flakes of the flesh of a vast sea-kraken. (Peoria, Illinois, 19 January 1930)

Five years later, John Cowper in ‘Farewell to America’ would give due and tender praise to that Middle West which for him was the symbol and hope of the best America could offer to the world in the future: “the equality of all souls”, and goes on to say:

the rich drawling accents of their speech even, not melodious with the full-throated languor of the South, yet not in the least 'Yankee', remain, though my ear could never really catch the exact tone of those broad prairie-sounds, full of a heart-to-heart insouciance, a nonchalant affability, which, like the sunbaked door-yards of those ramshackle dwellings, levels human consciousness to a certain homely acceptance of the common lot that gathers dignity from its mere simplicity, and solemnity from the mere presence of its vast-stretching background.[42]

[41] This word is an Indian name and means a “circuit” which brought culture to the rural areas in the 1900s.

[42] ‘Farewell to America’, p. 57.

On 10 May 1929 John Cowper had exciting news to communicate:

Phudd Bottom
*courtesy Kate Kavanagh*

> Arthur Ficke has lent us no less than two thousand dollars and with this has purchased for us, to be paid for during the next couple of years at our convenience, a clean tidy oldish small house, about fifteen miles from Edna's farm—clean and ready to be entered, with a piece of rough hillside and a rapid stream and a miniature orchard and an old lilac bush and one round flower-bed—six acres unless I am mistaken in all.[43]

Less than a year later, they were settled there and Powys had started *A Glastonbury Romance.* By that time he had decided to give up lecturing and to live on his royalties. This was a courageous move, for John had known—and was to continue having—severe financial problems and his choice meant a very simple life, with just enough to survive. But it was the beginning of a new era, made up of long walks, the writing of some of the most important of his books culminating in *Autobiography,* continual contact with a land old enough to nourish his imagination and where he re-named places and put in practice his exacting rites. The *Letters* abound in precise and evocative particulars of his everyday life in Phudd Bottom, and we begin to see the emergence of the John Cowper of the last chapter of *Autobiography*:

> I have saved four trout from death by transporting them from my pool in the drying up river. It's a lovely grotto—a regular 'Numen-quest' sort of place, of sleep and liquid rest, and I like going there. (4 August 1930)
>
> I do love carrying that stick you gave me, but I fear to hurt the feelings of my other sticks, so I try to take them all out every day. I take yours before breakfast, the Miss Rowe one at noon, and my old Hickory one before tea . . . (6 August 1931)
>
> All human contacts are full of ricochets and shocks and undercurrents and agitation. It's ever so much better to go along as I do and call various stumps and posts and stones and dead trees and thorn-bushes and hillocks and valleys and escarpments by particular names, and I have named every stone and post and hedge and stream and spring around here. Old Wordsworth himself didn't name so many! (23 March 1932)
>
> I started my walk today at nearly five. It was nearly dark, but I go up that sloping field to the south of Phudd over Mr Stein's hill southward, southward, till I reach a hill where I can look down on the river and far away. (30 November 1932)

From now on, all the elements are in place and the pattern of his life is more or less what it will be in a few years, back on the Old Continent: a little house from where he can escape towards the hills, walks, work, and the "Rites". These were going to become one of the main features of his "philosophy", as he makes it clear in *Obstinate Cymric.*[44]

Professor Gresset, in his penetrating analysis of John Cowper Powys's rites and humour is right, I think, when he points out that for Powys "the only possible salvation lies in de-civilization, in the reconquest, by the cult of the minutest sensations, of the primitive state of complete surrender to the natural world" and the fish, for instance, is a complex symbol in Powys's thought, linked not only to primitive Christianity, but also to life before birth and after death.[45] The ritual salvation of fish has a penitential connotation, "invested with a sort of mythological solemnity".[46]

A few years later, John Cowper, in Corwen, was going to take up this point and

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[43] *Letters to Llewelyn,* Vol. 2, p. 100. Arthur Ficke, American poet, is described at length in *Autobiography,* pp. 608-612. Edna: the poet Edna St Vincent Millay.

[44] *Obstinate Cymric,* Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1947. Cf. the chapter, 'My Philosophy Up to Date', p. 137.

[45] 'John Cowper Powys, Les rites et l'humour', *Granit,* no. 1/2, November 1973, pp. 166-67.

[46] *Autobiography,* p. 633.

attempt to make it clear to his readers:

> What my "philosophy" is struggling gropingly and obstinately towards is a ***mysticism of Nature*** quite as ***awe-struck*** and perhaps not less ***ecstatic*** sometimes, and almost always as ***enjoyable,*** as the sort that makes us feel we have especially "elevated" feelings, above the reach of "the average sensual man", when we drag in God.[47]

So, in 1933, John Cowper has come back full circle, since as he describes at some length in *Autobiography*, the landscape of this district of Upper New York reminds him of his native Derbyshire.[48] And by August 1933 he was contemplating new vistas in his imagination, where an "enchanted land" combined with ideal feats of writing:

> Yes, I have thought of selling this house if possible—advertising it as to be sold just as it is with all books and furniture and bric à brac in it; and then going to live for the rest of my days in Wales at some place on the Welsh sea—or Irish sea is it?—like St David's, and there compose my real Masterpiece in the form of a really thrilling and powerful Romance, with all the Welsh Enchantments behind it! (29 August 1933)

And less than a month later he concluded thus:

> My feeling is that now at sixty having finished, or at sixty-one having finished, my Autobiography, as I shall by then I hope have done, I shall only set sail from these shores for the last time. I mean if I go, I shan't come back. (20 September 1933)

John Cowper's awareness of the arresting quality of American landscape—a beauty sui generis—came rather late in his life and was made possible by the fact that, at long last, he had achieved his deep-rooted aspiration to retire to the country, that upstate country which had significance for him because of its close association with the past and the dead, "that poetic sense of ***human continuity"*** he speaks of in the last chapter of his *Autobiography.* His private landscape was pacified, he had come to terms with himself and felt that through his reminiscences—"emotions recollected in tranquility"—he had almost returned home.

He strikes us, here, on the eve of his departure, as poised in a fairly delicate balance as he carefully evaluates his appreciation of America. On the one hand he has accumulated in his memory a long vista of intolerable urban ugliness, the "American horror" of Babbit-like existence, exacerbated by the hellish sun of the Pacific Coast, the evils of modernity and the abyssal violence detected in the South. It is quite characteristic of him that he was perfectly conscious of the strong resemblances that existed between himself and some of the "feverish", "the fantastical writers from the South" (a group that necessarily included Faulkner) but these are links he repudiates because such bold experiments came from the South, "where the mere presence of the wicked lynching spirit seems to evoke a sadistic magnetism all its own".[49] On the other hand, he is clearly fascinated by the possibilities evoked through the large expanses of the Middle West, that "majestic monotony" which would bring out "a certain bare drab dusty primordial human grandeur".[50]

The influence of Spengler on John Cowper is not to be neglected. Powys often mentions him in *Autobiography* and again refers to him in an article which he wrote in 1929, ***a propos*** of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, where he draws an extraordinary and science-fictional picture of the Future which is awaiting us:

> But the particular epoch of a 'Winter' Civilization (all iron and stone and machinery) in which it is our present fate to live is not, we may be thankful to learn, destined to survive more than a couple of hundred years (a mere bagatelle in the vast aeons at the disposal of the forces of life) and is to be followed, according to this 'physiognomic morphology' by an epoch corresponding to the Theodorics, Attilas, Caesars, Odoacers; when the invisible power of money *will* be broken by the arbitrary will of conflicting conquerors; when the hordes of ordinary men and women *will* subside into a 'fellaheen' state of international endurance; when we shall wander amid grass-grown cities that have lost their wealth, amid remnants of scientific mechanisms that have lost their inventive secret; and human existence, returning, for thousands of

[47] *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 164.

[48] *Autobiography*, p. 617 (and see pp. 616-621).

[49] 'Farewell to America', p. 57.

[50] Ibid.

> years, to a patient, historyless monotony of a natural struggle with the elements, will attain the mystic wisdom of the Second Religiousness![51]

America has, through its interminable horizons and scorching suns, elevated John Cowper to a cosmic awareness, where he has gained enough strength and distance to think in terms of elements, stars, planets. Like Dreiser, that great Middle-Western writer to whom he felt so closely allied, he deals with cosmic powers, as befits the Magician he dreamed, in his boyhood, of becoming. Thus he came to be able to declare:

> This is the surface of the earth upon which I, an anonymous individual, am walking in time surrounded by space.[52]

Ready to launch into *Maiden Castle,* where we follow him, under his guise as Dud-No-Man, in the haunted Iron-Age earthworks, he is already making plans for his escape to remoter and remoter worlds and, like Owain Glyndwr, Prince of Wales, his flight from our earthly residence, “Up and Out”, to other planetary landscapes.

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[51] *The Lantern,* Boston, Jan/Feb. 1929, repr. *The Powys Review,* no. 9, pp. 37-38.

[52] ‘Farewell to America’, p. 61.